

# Chapter 1

Mark pressed the remote button, the car's lights flashed, and the door locks thumped shut. He turned to head for his room when he heard sobbing, deep tearing cries that wrenched at his heart.

He stopped. Though the hotel grounds were well lit, the profusion of shrubs and trees made it impossible to see where the woman was, which meant he could either pretend he hadn't heard and walk away or go looking. Only this was California, USA, not safe solid Canada, and he didn't fancy getting himself killed like all the other poor beggars he heard about on each night's newscast.

The sobbing seemed louder. Mark grimaced and headed around a large flowering bush that blocked his view. She was sitting hunched over, on an ornamental stone wall, face in hands, oblivious to his approach.

"Can I help?" Mark asked.

The young woman sprang to her feet, her wet eyes and cheeks glittering in the pale light.

"Fuck off," she snarled.

Even with her face contorted with distress, her skin blotched and pale, her eyes dark shadows, and her blond hair disheveled, she was attractive. Mark could see that. However, it didn't prevent him taking a step backwards to safety.

She was quite right, he reasoned to himself. He had no business intruding on her private grief. But he couldn't leave. She was too young, twenty at most, and clearly in need of assistance, though he doubted any knight-errant had ever met such a rude welcome from a distressed damsel.

"I'm staying at the hotel," Mark said. "Maybe you'd like to come inside. I could get you a coffee, or a taxi, or something."

"I don't need anything from any man," the girl said bitterly "You're all bastards."

"Can't argue with you there," Mark said. "I don't think much of men either. Still, I think you should get inside, it's a cool night and you aren't dressed for the weather."

"What's it to you how I dress?"

“Nothing at all,” Mark said hurriedly, “but when you’re in bed all week with a cold, you’ll find it has a lot to do with you.”

“Jeez! You sound just like my mother.”

Mark was about to reply when he heard the police siren, and a moment later a squad car screeched to a halt in the hotel gateway.

Mark and the girl watched two burly police officers walk purposefully toward them. Mark inwardly cursed his stupidity. They’d think he was to blame for the girl’s distress. He’d be lucky to escape with a beating, this being Los Angeles.

“Is this man bothering you?” one of the officers asked.

Mark held his breath. She had only to say yes and his pleasant, quiet life would dissolve into chaos.

Mark felt the girl looking at him, but he kept his gaze firmly on the police officers. No way did he want them thinking he was influencing her answer.

“No,” she said after the longest pause in Mark’s life. “He was offering to help. Only I don’t need any. I’m all right now.”

“Then we can give you ride home.”

“Thanks, but I’ve already accepted this guy’s offer of a ride,” the girl said and walked to Mark’s side as though she would find protection there.

“Then I suggest the two of you get moving,” the officer said, making it very clear they weren’t wanted in a nice hotel’s grounds, upsetting the customers. “And, sir, we’ll follow —just to be sure this young lady really is in good hands.”

Mark drove out onto the highway following the girl’s directions. In the mirror, he watched the police cruiser pull out of the hotel driveway about quarter of a mile behind him. It stayed there as he drove farther into the city and into increasingly poorer neighborhoods.

Apart from giving directions, the girl was silent. She sat slumped against the door, her eyes brimming with tears, staring into infinity.

“What’s your name?” Mark asked when she seemed about to start sobbing again. He couldn’t stand that. His recently departed and longtime girlfriend, Julia, would never have behaved like this. She was cool, collected and—he missed her a lot.

“Piece of shit,” the girl replied and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Mark reached out to clasp her hand, but she flinched away from him as though he'd been going to strike her. He prayed the police in the car behind hadn't noticed that.

"I'm Mark," he said and held out his hand. She didn't take it. "If you don't trust me," Mark said in exasperation, "why didn't you let the police drive you home?"

"I trust them less," the girl managed to say through her hands covering her face. "You hear stories about them and single girls at night."

Another triumph for Hollywood, Mark thought sourly. Her fear of her own country's police force underlined the growing unease he felt about his own role in this small drama and, incidentally, in the movie they were making of his book. It was all a part of the same worry. Why had he let his agent persuade him into this? Canada was where he belonged, not California. He glanced in the mirror and saw the police car still following.

"Left at the next lights," the girl said suddenly, then added, "and my name's Tori."

Mark was too busy turning the car to acknowledge this small thaw in her frosty attitude. The street was even darker than any others they'd been on and the old houses and duplexes more rundown. Mark decided he wasn't leaving the car here. She could get out and he'd watch her to the door, no more.

"It's the apartment block on the left," Tori said.

Mark knew it would be. It was probably the cheapest looking place about. He drew up at the door.

"Come in, please," Tori said. "I need some company. Just for a while."

"Will he be there?"

"Who?"

"Whoever turned you into this wreck," Mark said. He watched the police car park at the end of the street.

"No. There'll be no one there," she replied. She was quieter now, but sadder, and Mark knew he couldn't refuse.

"Where do I park?" he asked.

She directed him to a barely lit space at the side of the building. They left the car and walked side by side to the apartment building's shabby entrance. Mark noticed the police cruiser drawn up on the farther side of the street and the officers watching them enter the building. The elevator smelled strongly of urine, which made Mark thankful she lived only one floor up.

Her apartment was chaotic, with clothes strewn everywhere and unwashed dishes on the table and in the sink. Mark's fastidious nature rebelled at the mess. Why hadn't he walked right by her to his clean hotel room?

"Sorry about the mess," she said, glancing at him, sensing his distaste. "I-I left in a hurry this morning." She began crying again and rushed from the living room into her bedroom.

"You splash some water on your face," Mark called, "and I'll make you some coffee." Surely there would be some coffee in this grim tip she called home—someplace. The sooner he could get out of here, the better he'd like it.

He found instant coffee, a dirty mug and a kettle, which he filled and placed on the greasy stove top. He cleaned up the mug and then realized he'd have to have one too or she'd be offended so he found and washed another mug. The milk in the fridge was okay because, as he'd guessed from the bowls in the sink, she evidently lived on breakfast cereal.

"The dishwasher broke," she said, returning to the living room, bundled up in a thick robe.

Mark decided against a cutting remark on her housekeeping skills, nodded, and asked, "Better now?"

She certainly looked better. As a disheveled mess, she'd been attractive. With her hair combed and mascara streaks removed, she was stunning.

"I'm sorry I dragged you into this," she said, "but thanks for everything."

"No problem," Mark replied. "Here," he handed her a mug, "drink this. A hot drink will finish your recovery." He'd feel better leaving if she were sufficiently recovered. The thought of the two police officers sitting outside was like a lump of ice in his stomach. He saw such horrific videos of the US police on TV and the web and he wanted nothing to do with them. He could just about understand why Tori would prefer a ride home with an unknown man than have their assistance.

"Thanks," she said, taking the mug and curling up on the couch before tucking her robe under her feet.

Mark sat in the armchair opposite. Now that she was calmer, he didn't know what to say. To ask about her problems would lead to renewed weeping, which he had to avoid, yet he knew almost nothing about her.

"It's late," he said at last. "I guess you'll need to be up early for work."

She shook her head. “I’m waiting tables this week,” she said, “and I don’t start till eleven.”

Mark had only been in Hollywood a month, but he’d heard the words in so many different ways he knew what she meant.

“Acting seems to be a tough profession,” he said.

“I’m doing okay,” the girl replied defensively.

Mark nodded and sipped his coffee.

“What do you do?” she asked. “You’re not from around here.”

“I’m a writer,” he said. It still felt strange saying it. Sometimes he thought he’d wake up and find the last year had all been a dream.

“A screenwriter?”

“At the moment,” Mark said, though he was having doubts about his success at this new line of work.

“What are you working on?”

The transformation in her was incredible. From howling distress to listless apathy to eyes shining with excitement in less than thirty minutes. Even for an actor that was quite a feat. His mind jumped back a year to Julia. She’d always been in control of herself—and tidy. Mark looked about again with a barely repressed shudder.

“*Overachiever, Underachievement,*” Mark said, not expecting her to have heard of it.

“I read that,” the girl said. “Hey,” she exclaimed suddenly, “you’re the author! Your picture is on the back.” She scrambled to her feet, spilling coffee on her robe. “Wait,” she said and rushed into the bedroom.

Mark heard things crashing about the bedroom. He couldn’t imagine what the room had looked like before but he felt sure it would be worse before she found his book.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Mark called.

“It’s here somewhere,” the girl said in a voice somewhat muffled, as though she was under the bed or in a closet. “You can sign it for me.”

Mark hated book signings, but he’d done enough when the publishers realized they had a winner on their hands to accept her demand. Actually, it wasn’t a bad idea. It would be a final scene, closing this whole sorry evening with a flourish.

The girl burst out of her bedroom and rushed to an old wooden sideboard. She opened a door and movie magazines spilled out onto the floor.

“Look for it another time,” Mark said in dismay. What was left of the apartment would be wrecked if she didn’t stop soon. “I’m here till the movie’s finished.”

“I can’t have lost it,” the girl said sadly. All the excitement had drained from her. She knelt amid the growing pile of glossy photos of the stars, her shoulders sagging, her head bowed. “I’m never going to be a star now,” she whispered so faintly Mark could only just hear.

“Why not?” Mark asked.

“They’ll sell the film to the papers and TV.”

“What film?”

“The one I did this weekend. I needed the money. My friend Kat said to do it. She had and it was okay. Bit of a joke, really. They said my face wouldn’t be seen on the web. But if I become a famous movie star—” her voice trailed away in despair. She didn’t add she had thought it would be a laugh too because she quite liked having her bottom smacked, or used to. She was sure she never would again.

“It wasn’t a bit of a joke then?” Mark asked. He felt an overpowering urge to comfort her, her distress was so apparent.

The girl shook her head. Mark crossed the room and knelt by her side. He put his arms around her shoulders and hugged her to his chest, feeling her softly crush against him.

“They called me names,” she whispered. “They told me before they would. It was in the script, calling me names. The buyers for those kinds of films like that. I thought I could do it and I did at first, but they went on and on, take after take, until I couldn’t stand it anymore. It made me cry.”

Mark cradled her head between his hand and shoulder. She was trembling, and tiny sobs were struggling to escape from inside her slim frame.

“It’s okay now,” he said. “You don’t need to think about it ever again.”

“I’ll never stop thinking about it,” the girl cried.

“Okay, okay,” Mark said quickly, as she seemed on the verge of breaking down again. “Take deep breaths. It’ll help.”

The girl tried breathing in, swelling her chest, but then dissolved into sobbing, covering her face with her hands.

“Stop it,” Mark said sharply. He needed her to get control because this distress couldn’t go on. He couldn’t stand it. “Or I’ll give you something to cry about.” The words jumped out of his mouth unbidden, unforgettable memories of Julia and how she’d laugh when he acted masterfully, momentarily overpowering his better judgment.

The effect on the girl was instantaneous. She stared at him in horror: a horror that was quickly replaced with fury.

“You bastard,” she screamed, thrusting him away. “You’re the same as them. You’re all the same. Get out! Get out!” She whipped her hand against Mark’s cheek with enough force to rattle his teeth.

Mark needed no further encouragement. He sprang to his feet and headed for the door.

“I was kidding,” he said over his shoulder.

“Get out!”

Mark hesitated. Should he really leave when she was in this state? But he wasn’t making her state better, unless it was possible to consider fury an improvement on misery.

“You’re right,” he said. “It’s best you have some time to yourself.”

He closed the apartment door with a sense of unhappy relief. The elevator doors slid open the moment he pressed the button. He stepped inside.

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By the time the meaning of the apartment door closing registered in her brain, Tori could hear the elevator whining its way to the ground. She scrambled to her feet with an anguished cry of, “Don’t leave me,” but she heard the elevator stop on the ground floor and knew she was too late.

“Don’t leave me,” she whimpered softly, all her energy spent and waves of weary despair taking its place.

She looked at the glossy magazines on the floor with the starlets’ teeth shining whitely, like fangs in the light. She was never going to be a star now. Those bastards would sell the film she’d made with them to the highest bidder and every major studio would shun her. Her gaze took in the discarded bra and skirt on the back of the couch, the unwashed plates under her TV chair, the panties drying over the radiator, and she remembered that last fight with her mom before she left her safe boring home.

Her mom had told her to clean up her room, but Tori had asked why she should bother.

Mom had said, "Because if someone visits, they'll think you're a pig."

Tori had yelled back, "If someone visits, I'll clean up before they come."

Mom had said, "What if you don't have any warning? What if someone important just drops by?"

And Tori had said bitterly, "When was the last time anybody important just dropped in here? Christ, Mom, no one important knows where this town is, let alone where my bedroom is."

But Mom had been right. Someone important had dropped in, and his first impression hadn't been good. Now he'd gone away, believing she was a lazy pig. She shivered. It was nothing to compare with what he'd think if he ever saw what she'd done with those two bastards and their camcorder.

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It was just another sex movie, they'd said, when she met them and signed up. Everybody does them when they're starting out, they'd told her. And maybe they did, even well brought up country girls like her from nowhere important. She'd been nervous. Mom would have killed her if she'd learned what she was planning to be part of.

The guys had been sweet, when she signed up and even the first day had been okay. Only later she saw they'd just been softening her up, letting her feel she was the star, the one whose kinky exploits would light up the screen, and make the film a best seller on the web. Only she wasn't the star, not in the way she thought she was going to be anyhow, and the spanking scene was where it started to go wrong.

"Okay, Tori," the taller one said, "in this scene, you've been a bad girl. I'm going to spank you. Then you're going to give me a very, very sexy blowjob. Think you can do that?"

Of course she could, she could do anything with him and he could do anything with her. He was hot. Since she'd kicked out her last boyfriend, Carl, she'd missed male company and she hoped this guy would ask her out after the shoot.

The camera rolled. The guy grabbed her arm and hauled her to a chair, with Tori struggling all the way.

"I'm too old for a spanking," she pouted for the camera.

"Do the crime, do the time," he crowed, wrestling her across his thighs.

"You can't do this," Tori yelled as his hand stung her tightly clad rear.



The smaller man was down on his knees at her head, thrusting the camera in her face. She pouted some more, then yelled when another stinging slap exploded in the center of her fanny.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the camera but it was already moving away and she knew why. The taller man was pulling her skirt up her legs and over her butt.

Tori shrieked as his hand stung the back of her thigh. “That’s not my ass,” she cried.

“Legs, ass, what does it matter,” the man replied. “You’re getting a whupping.” He finished shuffling her skirt over her hips and tugged her panties into a wedgie.

“It matters to me,” Tori managed to say before his hand flattened her right cheek, sending a wave of pain shooting through her body.

“I’m the director,” the man said as he spanked each cheek in turn, “and I decide what gets filmed.”

Tori wished she’d said no to this scene. Spankings were fun, spankings were childish, spankings were sexy, spankings were—everything this was not.

She yelled and kicked, wriggled and fought, but his heavy hand paddled her behind thoroughly until she thought she couldn’t bear it any longer. Then he stopped.

Tori lay trembling over his lap like a wet rag. She could see the cameraman’s feet between her own. No doubt he was lovingly capturing her blistered butt on film back there.

She felt the tall one’s hands on her panties and him yanking them down. ‘Lovingly’ wasn’t the idea that came to mind any more, he was practically ripping them from her body.

“Hey,” Tori cried. “You’ll buy new ones if they’re torn.”

“Cut!” he said. He grabbed her hair and hauled her head around to face him. “Listen, sweetheart, this isn’t a romance, okay? Our buyers want force, they want brutality, and they don’t care about buying you new ones. Stick to the script.”

“Okay,” Tori said, “sorry.”

He pulled her panties back into the crevice between her cheeks.

“We’ll start from the spanking,” he said and whapped his hand down onto her tush.

“Ow,” Tori cried, “I’m sorry.”

He stopped and tore her panties off, while the cameraman fidgeted between her feet, filming her private parts.

Tori wished she'd never agreed to any of this. She must have been mad. So what if it would cover the rent for two months. It wasn't what she wanted to do. She doubted Julia Roberts started this way.

"Look," she said, twisting round to face them again, "I've changed my mind."

"Cut!" yelled the taller man. He glared at her, then, seeing she was serious, continued in a softer voice, "You're half way done. After this scene, we're stopping. Tomorrow is much the same. You've come this far, you may as well finish and get your paycheck."

Put like that, it sounded stupid to stop and Tori nodded sheepishly. "Sorry," she said. "I'm new at this."

"You're doing okay," the man said. "Just stick to the script. Keep your mind on that. You're not you now, you're an actress."

"Actor," Tori muttered. Didn't these bozos know anything about modern movies? She shifted uncomfortably on his lap as his hands pulled her legs wider open and she could almost feel the lens thrusting toward the hinge of her thighs.

"The script," the man said, pinching her flesh savagely.

"Ow," Tori squeaked. "All right."

"It's not all right," the man said, punctuating each word with a sound slap on the inside of her thigh. "When will you get it right?"

"I'll be good," Tori cried, returning at last to the few lines she was supposed to use.

"Damn right you will be," he replied, fiddling with the buckle of his belt.

"Please," Tori begged. The clinking of the buckle and swooshing of the leather as it slipped out of the loops sent her insides wildly fluttering. "Please don't."

She felt tears prickling her eyes as she watched him wrap the leather around his fist; its intricately-woven braided design gave it a sinister appearance that looked like it would hurt. She was only dimly aware of the camera catching her apprehensive expression. Her only thought now was for her poor, already tender, bare butt.

"You said spanking," Tori said.

"It'll be over as soon as it's begun," he replied, wrapping his left arm around her middle and pulling her tight against his stomach. "Then you get to do the bit you like. There's something for everybody in this film. Now quit crying till I've given you something to cry about."

Tori rolled back to face the floor. Like he said, she just had to get through it. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth when she heard the leather whistling through the air and howled when it landed heavily across her upturned cheeks.

“Jesus!” she shrieked. “That hurts.”

“It’s supposed to hurt,” the man intoned.

The belt whistled through the air again, giving Tori time to grasp the chair legs, before landing just below the still stinging previous welt. Tori kicked and cursed, fighting to escape, but she was held too tightly to get away and she was in tears before he let her slide off his lap to her knees, clutching her scorched backside.

The camera whirred constantly as she rubbed and wept. Yes, the first day of shooting was okay and the second one would be, too. She’d gotten through the worse.

“Now show me you’re truly sorry,” the man said, spreading his knees either side of her tear-stained face.

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Tori came back to the present with a jolt when a car roared down the street outside, its tires screeching on the blacktop.

“Just kidding,” Mark had said as he’d left. “Just kidding.”

Life was having a laugh with her, it seemed. She’d done the shoot because her friend Kat said it would be a bit of a joke. Even she’d thought it would be fun. And she’d finally had that important visitor Mom prophesied would someday show up before she’d cleaned up her mess. That was one of life’s little jokes too. The whole weekend, in fact, had been one big joke, yet she wasn’t laughing.

She jammed the chair under the apartment door handle as she’d done very night since Carl left two months ago. She’d dumped him because he spent all his time drinking with his buddies and not contributing a cent. As it turned out, she’d been wrong about quite a bit of that. It soon became clear when she had trouble affording both the rent and the groceries and when long, lonely weekend hours told her Carl had been around more than she knew, filling up her time with boisterous nonsense. It seemed that was also a joke on her.

Maybe dumping Carl was where it began to go wrong, Tori thought, as she slid under her bedcovers. Maybe she needed someone to give her direction? One thing was for sure, she’d

never have done that vile video if Carl had been here sharing the grocery bill and rent. She switched out the light and fell, exhausted, into a fretful nightmarish sleep.