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Fire alarms sang through the skyscraper, piercing and relentless. Under the din people poured across the marble lobby toward the doors, dodging fallen ceiling plaster and broken glass. Outside, Montgomery Street crackled with the lights of emergency vehicles. A police officer fought upstream to get inside. The blonde was ten feet behind, struggling through the crowd.

The man in the corner paced, head down, needing her to hurry.

People rushed by him, jumpy. “Everything crashed off the bookshelves. I thought for sure it was the Big One.”

The man turned, shoulders shifting. The Big One? Hardly. This earthquake had just been San Francisco’s regular kick in the butt. But it was bad enough. On the street, steam geysered from manholes. And he could smell gas. Pipes had ruptured under the building. The quake was Hell saying, *Don’t forget I’m down here—you fall, I’m waiting for you.*

He checked his watch. Come on, girl, faster. They had ten minutes before this building shut down.

A fire captain glanced at him. He was tall and young and moved like the athlete he was, but nothing clicked in the fire captain’s eyes, no suspicion, no *Is that who I think it is?* Out of uniform he looked ordinary, a plain vanilla all-American.

The blonde neared the doors. She stood out from the crowd: platinum-sleek hair cinched into a tight French twist, body cinched into a tighter black suit. A cop stuck out an arm like he was going to clothesline her. She flashed an ID and slid around him.

He smiled. Right under their noses.

She pushed through the doors and walked up, giving him a hard blue stare. “Here? Now?”

“It’s the ultimate test. Secrets are hardest to keep in broad day-

light.”

“I smell gas, and that steam pipe sounds like a volcano erupting. If a valve blows and causes a spark—”

“You dared me. Do it in public, and get proof.” He wiped his palms on his jeans. “This is as public as it gets. You’ll supply my proof.”

Her hands clenched, but her eyes shone. “Where?”

His heart beat faster. “Top floor. My lawyer’s office.”

Upstairs, they strode out of the express elevator to find the law firm abandoned. The fire alarm was shrieking. At the receptionist’s desk, a computer was streaming a television news feed.

“—minor damage, but we’re getting reports of a ruptured gas line in the Financial District . . .”

The blonde looked around. “Security cameras?”

“Only in the stairwells. It’s bad business for a law firm to videotape its clients.”

She nodded at a wall of windows. The October sunset was fading to dusk, downtown ablaze with light. “You plan to do this stunt against the glass?”

He crossed the lobby. “This way. The building’s going to shut down in”—he looked at a red digital clock on the wall—“six minutes.”

“What?”

“Emergency procedure. If there’s a gas leak the building evacuates, they shut down the elevators and seal the fire doors. We have to be out by then.”

“You’re joking.”

The wall clock counted down to 5:59. He started a timer on his watch.

“Yeah. I was meeting with my lawyers when the quake hit. It limits damage from any gas explosion.” He pulled her toward a hallway. “I can’t believe you’re scared of getting caught with me. Not Hardgirl.”

“What part of *secret* do you not you understand?”

“If we’re caught, they’ll ask what we’re doing here, not what we’re hiding in our pasts.”

“Fair point.” She hurried alongside him, eyes bright. “Were you waiting for an earthquake before you did this?”

Good guess—this was the third minor quake in the past month. “I got lucky. I’ve been looking for the perfect opportunity for weeks. Chaos, downtown—it was karma. I figured seize the day.”

He rounded a corner. A glass-fronted display case along the wall had cracked, spilling sports memorabilia on the floor.

She rushed past. “Is that a Joe Montana jersey?”

His stopwatch beeped. “Five minutes.”

He opened a mahogany door. Across a conference room the red embers of sunset caught them in the eyes. The hills of San Francisco rose in front of him, electric with light and packed to the rafters, like a stadium.

He shrugged off his coat, took a camera from the pocket and handed it to her. “When I tell you, point and click.”

He crossed the room and opened the doors to a rooftop terrace. Kicking off his shoes, he strode outside.

“You complained I was using the club as a confessional. You told me I was seeking expiation for my sins, but said you couldn’t give me absolution,” he said.

Deep below them, the building groaned. She walked outside, breathing hard.

“Damn, Scott, this is dangerous—”

“Your dare was—and I quote—for me ‘to offer a public display of penitence, and for christsake get proof.’ ”

He pulled his polo shirt over his head. Her gaze seared its way down his chest.

Now, he thought. Before his courage and exhilaration evaporated. He unzipped and dropped his jeans.

She gaped.

He backed toward the waist-high brick wall at the edge of the terrace. “Turn on the camera.”

“You came commando-style to a meeting with your lawyers?”

Naked, he climbed onto the brick ledge and stood up, facing her. Her lips parted. Thrilled to his fingertips, he turned to face Montgomery Street.

A salt breeze licked his bare skin. Two hundred feet below, fire and police lights flickered through steam boiling from the ruptured pipe, turning the scene an eerie red.

He spread his arms. “Shoot.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“Take the photo. Hurry.”

“That’s not penitent.”

He glanced over his shoulder. She was shaking her head.

“*Bad?* You tattooed *Bad* on your tailbone?”

His watch beeped. “Four minutes. Do it.”

“You’re a badass?” She put her fists on her hips. “You get all torn up about a nasty thing you did in college, and want to unload it on us—fine. But you can’t tattoo some preening jock statement on your butt and call it repentance. That’s not remorse. Hell, it’s not even close to being dirty.”

Frowning, she stormed inside.

He turned around. “Hey!”

Was she leaving? No, everything depended on her getting the photo—

She ran back out, holding a piece of sports memorabilia from the display case.

It was a jockey’s riding crop. He swallowed.

She whipped it against a potted plant with a wicked crack. “Somebody needs to take you down a notch.”

He nearly whimpered. She wanted points, too. This was even better.

Snapping the crop against her thigh, she crossed the terrace. Evaluating the ledge, she unzipped her ass-hugging skirt, wriggled it

down, and stepped out of it.

“It’s time to make your act of contrition,” she said.

In the tight-fitting black jacket, she looked martial. The stilettos could have put out his eyes. The black stockings ran all the way to the top of her thighs. All the way to—

“What’s that garter belt made from?”

“Iguana hide.”

“Jesus, help me.”

“I have a drawer full. I got them in the divorce.” She held out her hand. “Don’t let me fall.”

“I won’t. I have perfect balance.” He felt crazed and desperate and *God*, he needed to get her up here now. “I get paid four million dollars a year to catch things and never let them drop.”

A wisp of her blond hair had escaped. It softened her. He wanted her to put it back in place. He wanted her to put on leather gloves and maybe an eye patch. He pulled her up on the ledge beside him.

She gripped his hand. Her smooth stocking brushed his leg.

He could barely speak. “This is penance?”

“Pain is just one step from paradise.”

She looked down. Her voice dropped. “Christ. This is asking for a heart attack.”

“Don’t joke.”

She looked up. “No—I didn’t mean it as a crack about David.”

But if David hadn’t dropped facedown with a coronary, they wouldn’t be here. The doctor’s death had created an opening, and Scott wanted to fill it. This was his chance to prove himself and gain admission to the top level of the club.

The breeze kicked up. In the lighted windows of the skyscraper across the street, people gazed down at the fire trucks. Nobody was looking at them.

“Right under their noses,” he said. “Bonus points for both of us.”

“Not yet.” She handed him the camera. “Set it so we’re both in the frame.”

He set the auto timer to take a five-shot series and posed the camera on the ledge. His stopwatch beeped. Three minutes.

She planted her feet wide for balance. “What happens to guilty people?”

Blinking, he turned around and carefully knelt down on all fours. “I’ve been bad. Spank me.”

She slapped the crop against her palm. “What’s the magic word?”

Relief and desire rushed through him. “Hard.”

The camera flashed. She brought the crop down.

The pain was a stripe of fire along his backside. He gasped and grabbed the ledge.

“Harder,” he said.

She whipped the crop down. The camera flashed.

He clawed the bricks. “Mea culpa. I’ve been very, very bad. *More.*”

She didn’t hit him. He looked up. Her chest was heaving, her hair spilling from the French twist.

“My God, you actually want to be punished, don’t you?” she said.

“Do it.”

She swung the crop. It slashed him so hard he shouted in pain. She wanted to dish out punishment, all right, but not to him. She would use this to send a message to somebody else. The watch beeped.

“Christ, two minutes,” she said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

His eyes were watering. “Not yet. Nobody’s looking.”

“*Looking?* You’re nuts. If there’s an aftershock I’ll lose my balance. We—”

A thumping sound echoed off skyscraper walls. A helicopter swooped over the top of the building.

It turned and hovered above Montgomery Street, rotors blaring. Everything on the terrace blew into the air. Dust, leaves, their clothes. The camera tipped over. Scott grabbed for it, but it fell off the ledge.

She yelled, “No, the evidence—”

The camera dropped, hit the building, and sprang apart. He let out a cry. His penance, his memories—

The terrace was lit with a blinding white searchlight.

“Oh, no—it’s a news chopper,” she said.

She leaped from the ledge to the terrace. Landed like a gazelle on her stilettos. He scrambled after her, buttocks stinging. They grabbed their clothes and ran for the door. The chopper rotated in the air, searchlight sweeping after them.

She looked back, her eyes brimming with joy and fury. The searchlight lit her hair like a halo.

“Turn around,” he shouted. “You want them to get a close-up?”

“The city knows your face, not mine.”

“But it’s about to know your glorious ass.”

He ran into the conference room, stopped and wrangled his left leg into his jeans. The spotlight caught them. He bumbled for the door.

Fumbling her way into her skirt, she sprinted into the hallway. “It’s chasing us like those things from the damned *War of the Worlds*.”

He urged her forward. “Take the service elevator. The lobby downstairs is full of cops.”

She ran beside him, agile in the heels. His watch beeped.

“Oh, crap. No time.”

In the lobby, the fire alarm wailed a high-pitched tone. The digital clock flashed red: :58, :57. The TV news was showing pictures from the chopper’s camera.

“Two people are trapped on the roof,” shouted the reporter. “A woman was signaling for help. If we swing around . . .”

The alarm rose in pitch.

“How long to get down?” she said.

They ran to the service elevator and she pounded on the button. The searchlight panned along the windows. Like a white flare, it caught them in the eyes.

“I see them. They’re attempting to escape from this deadly tower. . . .”

She whacked the elevator button with the riding crop. “*Open.*”

With a *ping*, the elevator arrived. She dropped the crop and they lunged inside.

On the ground floor they burst out a back exit into an alley. The asphalt was wet and steaming. Scott clicked his stopwatch.

“Seven seconds. Time to spare.”

“Maniac,” she said.

They dashed through puddles toward the end of the alley. On the street a police car blew past, lights flashing. The helicopter thumped overhead, searchlight pinned on the roof.

Scott nodded at it. “They got it on tape. You have evidence.”

“You’re reckless. I think you actually want to get caught.”

“I carried out the dare. Did I make the cut?”

She fought with her zipper. “We’ll put it to a vote. No promises.”

They rushed out of the alley. The street, lined with banks and swanky stores, was being cleared by the police. They slowed to a walk, trying to look normal. He buttoned his jacket. She smoothed down her hair.

Elation flooded him.

“Admit it—that was awesome.”

“It was outrageous.” She pointed at him. “And do not tell me it ended with a flourish.”

“Really?” He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a baseball.

“What’s that?”

He tossed it to her. She caught it.

“A Willie Mays autographed ball?” She looked up, surprised. “From the law firm’s memorabilia collection? You stole it?”

“On our way out. And it’s not just any baseball. It’s *the* ball—from the 1954 World Series. The greatest catch of all time.”

She gawped. “It’s got to be worth—”

“Hundred thousand.” He smiled broadly. “Right under *your* nose.”

Anger flashed across her face. She shoved the ball back into his hands. “Okay, bonus points for chutzpah.”

He laughed and tossed the baseball in his hand. “Fear not, it’ll be returned. That’s the next challenge.”

“How? The building’s locked down. And your fingerprints are all over it.”

“So? I’m a star client. My lawyer let me hold it. It doesn’t matter that my fingerprints are on it.” He glanced at the police car down the block, and back at her. “How will you explain that yours are?”

She stopped dead on the sidewalk.

He held the ball up. “Return it without getting prosecuted. I dare you.”

He turned, faced the jewelry store they were passing, and hurled the ball straight through its front window. Glass crashed. An alarm shrieked. He spun back around.

“Have fun, Hardgirl.”

He took off down the street.