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Cold Revenge

Written by Alex Howard

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ALEX HOWARD

COLD REVENGE



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L'abîme appelle l'abîme

Post hoc ergo propter hoc

CHAPTER ONE

In her student bedsit, Hannah opened her eyes and allowed the fantasy to gently drift away as recommended by *Catching Your Dreams (And Making Them Come True)*, the self-help guide she was studying.

According to the book, visualization was the first step to actualization. There was no point in wanting to be a famous journalist, as Hannah did, until you felt you were a famous journalist, at least in your own head. If you don't believe in you, how can anyone else? That was the message of the chapter she was reading.

In the private theatre of her mind, with herself as appreciative audience, Hannah had just graciously received a BAFTA for journalism. She held the award aloft and waved to her adoring public. Soon she'd have her own TV series. She'd get to meet celebrities, no, she'd be a celebrity. She'd, well, the possibilities were practically endless. She now allowed the dream to disperse. Reality took hold.

She sighed, stretched and shifted her weight on her narrow, cramped bed in the small, dilapidated room off Gower Street in Bloomsbury, central London, that was her temporary home. The walls were marked by small circles where a succession of students had Blu-tacked posters of their idols. Their ghostly residue defied repainting.

Traffic rumbled by outside. She looked at her Facebook page open on her laptop. On her wall she had written, *Am seeing sexy married man tonight ;)* and added, after a moment's thought, *But that's not all ;D have decided to explore my inner chick feelings with some girl on girl (well, this girl on one married lady, why do these people bother to get hitched!) action! Will let you know how it's going later ;) Don't forget to check my blog! :D.*

That'll get tongues wagging, she thought. More to the point, that'll get people reading. Sex sells, or so they say. No point writing without an audience. That'd be the sound of one hand clapping.

She was pleased with the Zen allusion. It was classy.

She repeated to herself, 'I am classy, I am a success,' three times, aloud. It was important to raise your self-esteem, the book said.

She closed her eyes for a minute and settled down to allow herself another brief, momentary fantasy of fame.

Her phone beeped and she checked it. One of her two lovers was on their way round. Hannah felt a surge of sexual anticipation coupled with professional, journalistic excitement. She had spent hours tracking people down to check a theory she had about the relationship of one of her lovers with Dr Fuller; tonight she would have it confirmed.

Hannah was no fool. She knew wishful thinking alone, no matter how directed, would not get her a job on *The Huffington Post* or the *Sunday Times* or the BBC. Exposing a famous (well, semi-well-known) academic as a serious philanderer, abusing his position of trust as well as potentially killing one of his lovers, and writing about her investigative work online, now that just might. At least it was a start. And Hannah was prepared to do whatever it took to realize her ambitions. Whatever it took.

She typed her revelation about her lover into her blog. It had a disappointingly low number of readers at the moment, but that would soon change. Very few people had heard of her, but lots of people knew Dr Fuller. Soon they'd all have to log in to get the lurid details. Later she'd think of a suitable headline.

She heard the entry-phone buzzer. Her partner had arrived. She pressed the button to open the door downstairs, opened her own door a crack and then lay face down submissively on her bed, as she'd been instructed to do.

'Don't look at me tonight,' he'd ordered.

Hannah slipped the black velvet hood over her head. Her lover liked her blindfolded, passive and quiescent.

She heard footsteps in her room and the door closed. All her senses were heightened now in the velvet darkness of the hood. Sound was magnified. Sensations were amplified. The click of the door as it shut had an ominous finality.

She could hear his breathing, the traffic noise in the street outside, someone's TV down the hall. She heard the faint noise of an iPod being attached to her docking station and old-fashioned dance music filled the room. Hannah's pulse quickened when she felt the mattress on the bed move as her lover sat beside her and started stroking her head through the material of the hood.

She felt her skirt being pulled up and then she heard her lover say softly, 'I thought I told you. White underwear, not black.' There was a pause and then he murmured, 'Now I'll have to punish you.'

'I'm sorry, Teacher!' she said. Her lover insisted on her using the title. Not to do so was to be punished. At the start of their relationship he'd made her write a contract out, detailing her slave duties. Everything they did together was rigorously,

relentlessly planned and choreographed. There was a script written by him that she had to follow. Nothing was left to chance. Everything was controlled, even down to the music playing in the background.

Especially down to the music in the background. He was insistent upon it. Always dance music. She guessed that it meant more to him than simply a soundtrack or just something to drown out the noise of their lovemaking. The intensity of his expression was sometimes frightening.

'Sorry doesn't cut it,' the voice said.

'I'll do anything you say,' she said, her voice muffled by the material of the hood.

'Yes, you will, won't you,' said the voice, calm and in control. Always in control. 'Arms behind your back.'

She did as she was told. Now her wrists were secured behind her back with handcuffs, depriving her of the use of her arms. She felt her underwear being pulled down and then a searing pain across her buttocks as the riding crop swished down. She bit her lip in pleasure at the stinging sensation. Her laptop pinged as someone emailed her; she felt a twinge of irritation that she'd forgotten to log off. Bloody thing.

She felt the weight of the other leaning across her body momentarily. Was he reading the blog? Surely it had moved to screen save?

She felt the familiar, strong fingers close around her throat. She arced her neck upwards submissively to allow him a better grip, the index finger against her jawbone. She felt the pressure closing, tightening, then her airways constricting as she heard the voice whispering, 'Who's been a naughty girl then?'

The artist changed on the iPod and the music shifted up a gear. A voice from way back when, a voice from long before she was born, Donna Summer's voice, ethereal and urgent,

sang how she felt love, over and over again, floating above the robotic, synthesized drums.

The fingers closed around her again, but it was not like it had been before, not gentle, not fun at all, and she bucked beneath the other body, now pressing down on top of hers so she couldn't move, in genuine alarm but to no avail.

They had a code word to use to stop any activity, but she couldn't speak.

This wasn't part of the script.

This wasn't how it should be.

Now her alarm changed to fear, and as the pressure continued, naked terror.

Please God, she prayed, make this stop! She could hear the song in her ears about how it felt good, so good, so good, but it didn't feel good. Not good at all.

She was choking. She couldn't breathe. It was like a nightmare and fear changed to terror. Now she could hear the blood hammering in her ears, as insistent as the music, and wild patches of iridescent colour seemed to explode in the darkness behind the hood. The music swelled to a crescendo and still the iron grip tightened.

Above her, straddling her body that was trying so hard and so ineffectually to buck him off, he hummed along to the music, his head nodding in time with the beat while his grip never slackened.

Gradually he felt her movements slowing and ceasing, and her body relaxed as her life departed.

Her killer rolled off her body and stood momentarily looking down at Hannah with genuine regret, then leaned forward and with gloved fingers delicately deleted the last section of the blog.

CHAPTER TWO

At the central ring in the large, vaulted space of Bob's Gym in Bermondsey the fighters were training in the background; around them, almost centre stage, the multilayered noise of a boxing gym.

The decibel levels were high. There was the thud of gloves on the heavy bags, on bodies and on pads, the grunts of explosive effort as the punches were launched, the swishing of skipping ropes, the *tacketa-tacketa-tacketa* noise of the speed bags, the squeak of training shoes on polished wood and the shouts of instruction or encouragement.

Freddie Laidlaw, the owner and trainer at Bob's Gym, looked at Hanlon speculatively. His eyes ran over her as she stood before him. He was looking for weakness. He could see none. Hanlon's gaze was as steady and imperious as ever.

The last time he'd seen her was when he'd visited her once briefly in hospital, hiding behind the expensive bunch of flowers he had brought with him like a shield.

Hanlon had been in bed, her head and arm bandaged, the springs of her thick, dark hair emphasizing the pallor of her skin. His heart had felt heavy at the sight of her vulnerability.

Then with her eyes still closed, she'd said, 'Put the flowers on the table, Freddie.'

'How did you know it was me?'

She opened her grey eyes and looked at him sardonically. 'White lilies are for funerals, Freddie,' she said. 'I could smell them coming down the corridor.'

'Oh,' he said lamely.

'I'm not dead yet, Freddie, but when I am, I'll be sure to let you know.'

He smiled at her. 'You do that, Hanlon.'

She propped herself up on one elbow. It hurt, but she took care not to let the pain show; she even refused her eyes permission to narrow.

'I'm a hard woman to kill,' she told him.

That evening was Hanlon's first time back in the gym since her fight with Conquest on the island. Laidlaw had watched her earlier, jumping rope with effortless ease. As she skipped, following up with basic jumps, shuffles and side swings, Hanlon was graceful and fluid in motion, her body concealed by a baggy old tracksuit. Laidlaw noticed several of the other boxers stealing surreptitious glances at her movements. She was the only female boxer in the gym. Hanlon usually worked out and sparred with the handful of professionals and semi-pros who trained at the gym on the evenings when it was closed to amateurs. This was the first time most of them had ever seen her.

Aware of the attention and just for the hell of it, she finished off her half-hour workout with some showy rope tricks, cross-overs, double-unders and double cross-overs, the rope a blur of movement, haloing her slim body. She moved so fast the rope audibly swished through the air and cracked whip-like against the floor.

Beat that, she thought triumphantly.

Laidlaw went over to her, noticing the faint sheen of sweat shining on her skin. She pushed her unruly hair back from her forehead. Laidlaw saw lines that he was sure hadn't existed

before her struggle to the death with Conquest. He guessed it had cost her more than she would ever admit.

'Ready?' he asked. She nodded and held her hands out, fingers splayed. With speed born of decades of practice, Laidlaw taped her long, strong fingers. She flexed them, nodded in satisfaction and Laidlaw slipped on her boxing gloves.

He had agreed with Hanlon on just one three-minute sparring round with one of the other boxers. Laidlaw had chosen Jay. He was a good, promising middleweight. At eleven and a half stone he was a stone and a half heavier than she was, so a challenge but not a mismatch.

Hanlon hadn't been in the ring for nearly two months. She was keen to check her fitness levels and the extent to which her arm had recovered. Laidlaw knew too that she would be desperate to release some of the aggression that had built up inside her. Hanlon was one of those boxers who need to release their aggression and she knew it. It was one of the reasons why she did triathlons. She wasn't competing just against a clock; she wanted to smash her rivals.

Eight weeks of inaction were bottled up inside her.

The trainer got into the ring after her and motioned to Jay, who followed suit. His black skin looked as though it had been carefully painted over an anatomically perfect body.

Laidlaw waved them together to the centre of the ring. Jay had a broad sceptical grin on his face. For a start, as well as being a woman, Hanlon was almost twice his age, though little was visible of her beneath her headguard and baggy tracksuit. They tapped gloves. Jay's smile froze and vanished as he saw Hanlon's eyes, hard and watchful. Until now he'd thought the whole thing might be some practical joke. He'd made a mental note not to hit her too hard, to go easy on her. Not now. Not after that look. The two of them circled each other and then Jay moved in.

Three minutes sounds like no time at all, the length of a song on the radio or the time it takes to clean your teeth. Three minutes.

Now, consider this.

Try leaning against someone the same weight as you. Put your head on the other person's shoulder, neck bent so the top of your head is pressing just above their collarbone and you're staring at the floor. Let them do the same. Interlink the fingers of each hand with your partner's and take it in turns to push. When the other person pushes forward with their arms, resist as hard as you can, with all your strength. Then it's your turn to push, theirs to resist. Like pistons working against a heavy mass. Use your legs as well to drive yourself forward, as does your opponent. Do this for three minutes without a break, as hard and as fast as you can, without a pause to draw breath. That's one round.

That gives some idea of the physical effort inside the ring. Now, imagine too, the other person is trying to hit you in the face and body as hard as they possibly can, as viciously as they can, and they are strong and quick and practised.

All there is, is the ring. That is the world.

You can't turn away, there's nowhere to hide; you just have to face them until the round is over. Your eyes fill with sweat, occasionally tears, sometimes blood. You can't hear anything except your own laboured breathing, sometimes not even the bell.

All there is, is the ring. All there is, is the pain. All there is, is the effort.

You're unaware of the crowd, unaware of your surroundings. It's just you and your opponent and those gloves coming at you. And there's no respite, no let-up, no remorse.

Time seems endless.

Hanlon loved boxing. She was made for it. Being back in the ring just felt so good, like slipping into the sea when she swam, gloriously right.

Her reflexes were as sharp as ever. She let Jay do the work, jerking her head out of the way of his fast jab, which was accurate but not quick enough to catch her. He favoured a sharp right-cross, Hanlon used her fast footwork and ring-craft to circle him. Occasionally she flicked out a lightning-fast left of her own. Jay hadn't expected this vicious jab and the first one caught him under his right eye, which within seconds had started to swell. Not only did he begin losing all-round vision, but it affected his calculation of distance.

He shook his head in baffled surprise. I'm losing, he thought incredulously.

He dropped his guard slightly and that was enough for Hanlon. Another punch rode over the protective gloves in front of Jay's face, catching him off balance, and then as his feet moved awkwardly to restore his equilibrium, Hanlon was on him, sending what would have been rib-breaking body shots into his lower body, if she hadn't pulled the power of the punches.

'Break,' said Laidlaw, moving between them, pushing them aside with his hands. He covered his mouth to hide his grin of delight. The old Hanlon was back. Lean and mean, he thought, lean and mean.

Hanlon moved over to a corner and rested against the ropes. She listened critically to her body. She was pleased, her breathing was perfect, her legs felt like steel. Jay came up to her pulling his headguard off and they sportingly touched gloves. She could smell his short, cropped hair and youthful perspiration. He grinned at her, taking his mouthguard out as he did so, his teeth startlingly white against his black face. Hanlon thought, he's ridiculously good-looking.

'Respect,' he said. Hanlon smiled at him. Good boxers are, paradoxically, usually gentlemen. Jay nodded and rejoined his companions.

Hanlon took her gum shield out and rinsed and spat into the bucket that Laidlaw was holding. The water was tinged pink with her blood where one of Jay's head shots had damaged her mouth. Perspiration soaked through the faded grey fabric of her baggy, sleeveless top and Laidlaw could smell a hint of scent through her sweat.

'Are you wearing perfume?' he asked. He'd never known her to do that. Hanlon's unfriendly gaze met his.

'I was seeing someone I know earlier,' she said. 'A friend.' Her expression dared him to ask another question. Laidlaw had plenty of experience of reading hostility in faces and body posture; he wasn't going to make that mistake. He knew the high price she put on her privacy.

He watched Hanlon's back, her head held high, as she walked back across the gym. Several of the other fighters touched her shoulder gently as she passed. Laidlaw shook his head with rueful affection and sighed. She was back.

As she left, a figure in the shadows of the viewing gallery above the ring, who had been watching the fight unobserved from the darkness under the roof eaves, quietly got to his feet and slipped away towards the exit.

Hanlon showered in Laidlaw's personal bathroom and pulled her clothes on. She felt elated. She had won; he had lost. The best of feelings.

She winced as she dressed. She studied her half-naked body in the mirror and could see the skin around her ribs changing colour, darkening, as she began to bruise. Her left eye, too, was puffy and swollen where Jay had caught it with a punch she couldn't avoid. By the morning it would be black.

Later that night she knew she'd be in considerable discomfort from the beating her body had taken from Jay's gloves, but Hanlon didn't mind that kind of pain. It was there because of what she'd achieved. No pain, no gain. If there's no charge, it's not worth attending the show.

She was pleased overall with her performance. It was the first time she had been in a fight since her struggle with Conquest on the island, which was a couple of months ago. Her arm had healed perfectly and her fitness levels were better than ever.

She walked out of the fire door at the rear of the building, sure-footed and silent on the metal steps of the fire escape. Her sports bag in her left hand was partially unzipped and jutting out from it was the handle of a standard-issue police telescopic baton. Hanlon had made a fair number of enemies in her time and she suspected one of them would come looking for her some day. She also didn't trust the dark streets of Bermondsey at the best of times, no matter how up-and-coming its image. Either way, she was ready.

As she exited the narrow alleyway into the dark, dimly lit street she saw a tall figure step out of the gloom.

With one fluid movement, she drew the carbon-steel baton as a familiar voice said, 'It's me, DI Hanlon. You can put the baton away now, unless you want to be arrested for assaulting a senior officer.'

'Yes, sir,' said Hanlon. Her hand moved away from the comforting metal handle. 'How can I help you?' she asked.

'You can join me for dinner, Detective Inspector,' said the assistant commissioner, stepping into the soft halo of a street light. 'I've got a job offer for you.'