

Excerpt – Without Mercy

Ice chilled China's blood. "Who is this? The police?"

"I am not police. They must not be called. No one must. You will come here right away. Alone."

"I don't understand. Who are you? You're at my house? I just left there."

"Emma and I arrived only moments ago."

Panic threatened to choke off her words, but she took in a deep breath and said again, "Who is this?"

"Everything will be explained."

"Is Emma okay? You haven't hurt her? Please don't hurt her."

"She is well. No more questions. You must come quickly, but do not exceed the speed limit. You must not encounter police. Goodbye."

"Wait—" But he was gone. China stared at the phone, her mind spinning with disbelief. What the hell was happening?

The blare of a horn made her snap her attention back to the road. A large tree loomed in front of the windshield, and she jerked the wheel back until the car was once more in its lane.

Good God, she'd forgotten she was driving.

She sucked in a deep breath and gripped the steering wheel, attempting to keep an eye on the speedometer. In spite of the desire to rush home to Emma, she knew it was urgent—critical—that she follow his instructions to the letter. The man hadn't been kidding around. He had her child. Her baby.

"Oh, God. Emma," she whispered. "Please be okay. Please, baby. Hold on. Mommy's coming."

Staying under the speed limit took every ounce of will power she could muster as she made the seemingly unending drive home. The world around her turned surreal, like she was an observer rather than a participant. Cars whizzed by, people meandered along the sidewalks. The stores, gas stations, businesses she passed. All were pieces of something she was no longer a part of. They were from the old world, the one that existed before an unseen danger had decimated her life.

She turned onto her street, her gaze immediately going to her tree-shrouded house at the end of the road. Funny. It looked normal. But a stranger—a deadly one—was inside with her baby, and this whole mess was far from normal.

Barely able to draw a full breath into her constricted lungs, she whipped into the driveway. Slamming the car into park, she flew out of the car and rushed to the front door.

“Emma!” she screamed, flinging the door open and running through the foyer into the living room.

Emma sat on the couch watching *Sponge Bob Square Pants*. Her startled gaze flew to China.

“Momma. What’s wrong?”

A man stood at the opposite end of the couch, too close, *much* too close, to Emma.

“Emma,” she whispered, relief sweeping through her. *Emma was alive*. Everything would be okay.

Emma scrambled from the couch and flew into her arms. “I missed you.”

“Oh, baby.” China clung to her and squeezed. “Are you okay?”

“Unh-huh. I’m okay.”

China pulled back. Her eyes drank in the sight of her daughter. Strands of Emma’s brown, curly hair clung to her chubby cheeks. Big, round dark eyes—so like her father’s—seemed even larger behind the magnified lenses of her glasses.

“What took you so long to get here?” Emma’s small face scrunched into a frown.

“I had...uhm...a little...trouble. At work. A problem came up.” Sophie’s bullet riddled body flashed through her mind, and she pushed the image aside. “How’s your breathing?”

“It’s good now. Miss Sally got me calm by singing.” Emma glanced at the stranger, then back to China and lowered her voice. “I know I’m not supposed to go with strangers, but Aunt Lucy said he was a police and I should go. Am I in trouble?”

“No, sweetie.” China hugged her again. “No. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Emma pulled back and touched the tears on China’s cheeks. “Why are you crying?”

China quickly brushed them away. “It’s been a stressful day. Grown up things, honey. Momma’s okay.”

She looked up at the intruder. A blond man, wide-shouldered and as tall as an oak. One side of his face was movie star handsome with a chiseled jaw and eyes as blue as the sky. The other

side was marred by an eggplant-colored scar that went from the corner of his eye to his jawbone, like beauty and the beast all in one face.

It was bizarre, having this strange, scary man in her home. Crazy to be comforting her daughter when she had no idea herself what was happening. Telling Emma she was okay, when she as far from okay as she could be.