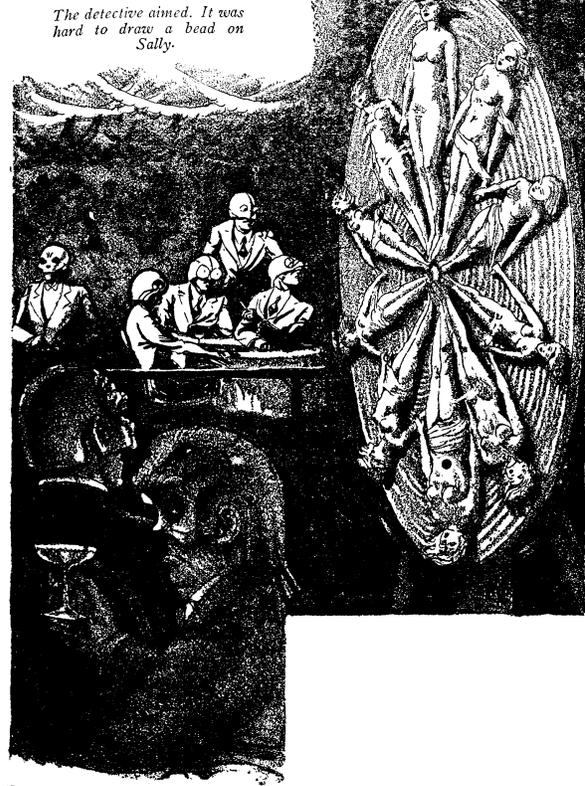


Spicy Detective, October, 1935

# DANCE HALL DOOM

By C. C. SPRUCE

*Girls were the stakes on this great gambling wheel, and for his last night on earth the detective was permitted to try his luck*



THE man known as Victor Le-Blu, wanted for a score of crimes, stepped from his limousine into the path of the approaching girl.

"I beg your pardon," he said in his hoarse, curiously muffled voice. His quick eyes noted the street was deserted.

"What do you want?" She quavered. Then she saw his mask. She started to scream.

Hands clamped over her mouth. She stopped struggling as if paralyzed with fear. Suddenly one of the man's hands swept downward, ripping away the whole front of her dress.

She began to struggle then. Her movements only served to accentuate the beauty of her body. Breasts tumbled from the tatters of her clothing. Even in the murky glow of that dimly lighted street, even in the hideous terror of that moment, it was a body of breath-taking perfection.

LeBlu spoke in his hoarse mutter. "You. It is you I want. I need you for my dance hall." As he spoke, he cupped one rounded breast in a black gloved hand. It rested there like some jewel on the velvet of a

display case.

A man spoke from the dark interior of the car. "The police, master. They are warned."

LeBlu laughed. He whipped cords from his pocket for the girl's wrists, adhesive tape for her mouth. Almost before the sound of his evil laughter had died away he and the girl were in the back seat. The limousine pulled away silently.

Victor LeBlu looked back. A long, powerful car swung around the corner, matching its speed to that of the sedan. He leaned forward and tapped the ape-like shoulder of the driver.

A hairy hand pulled an ear phone from one ear.

"Well?" asked LeBlu.

"It is as you said, master. Detective Horn is in the car following us. The orders are for us to pass to our destination undisturbed.

All roads are closed in case the following car is lost.”

Victor LeBlu nodded. “See that our friend Horn does *not* get lost, Axel.”

THE chauffeur grunted, slipped the ear phone back into position. The car surged forward, keeping to semi-deserted streets on the way out of town.

LeBlu turned his attention again to the girl. Above the cruel strip of adhesive tape her blue eyes stared at him piteously. Her hat had been lost in the scuffle and her blonde hair was tumbled around her face. LeBlu brushed it back with a gloved hand that was deceptively gentle. He turned on another dome light. “The better to see you with, my dear,” came his ingratiating, hoarse whisper.

She tried to writhe so that her body might be more covered. Her bound hands twisted. Her efforts were useless. LeBlu had ripped her garments too well. The rounded, curving stomach, the luscious thighs rippled with the play of muscles beneath clear skin. Her breasts rose and fell with her frantic breathing.

Victor LeBlu’s hand closed on her arm with a force that stopped all her movements.

His hoarse voice carried a snarl of hate. “And as for you, Miss Detective Sally Morgan!” He watched her blue eyes open wide with surprise. “Of course, I know you! I know, too, that you were bait for a police trap. Notice I use the past tense?”

“You are still bait, but the situation is changed! Through you, I will show the meddling police what they may expect from me. From me, Victor LeBlu!”

IN THE pursuing car, Detective Jim Horn hunched over the wheel. His eyes were glued on the red and green tail-lights of the limousine. His ears were filled with half-heard orders from the police radio. From time to time he snapped a few terse words into his transmitter as the first car changed its course.

Jim Horn was worried.

This night marked the fruition of months of planning. Ever since the abduction of the first girl the entire force had been looking for the mysterious kidnapers who chose only dancers for their victims—and never asked for ransom! Fourteen such cases were on record. Fourteen young, beautiful dancers without family, who had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them.

Even the police had to admit they did not know how many others had been unreported. They had to admit they had absolutely no clue. They spoke of LeBlu.

The newspapers scoffed at that, pointing out that every unsolved crime committed during the last few years had been laid to the door of that mysterious and, as they thought, mythical figure.

Desperate, the police had hit upon a desperate plan. Sally Morgan, Follies dancer, had agreed. Jim Horn had objected at the time. He had known Sally nearly all her life, had kept an eye on her when her family died and she had to make her own way in the world. Sally laughed at his fears, had insisted on making the attempt to find her sisters of the foot-lights.

Theoretically, Jim Horn should have been delighted at the success of the scheme so far. In spite of the skeptics at headquarters who had pointed out the number of girls in show business, and the improbability of a certain one being kidnaped, it had happened.

Yet now, as Jim’s high-powered car burrowed through the night, he felt it had been entirely too easy. He couldn’t put his finger on anything very definite, but something was wrong. Things moved too smoothly. It was too simple—this trailing of a car with one red and one green tail-light! The abductor had been almost too brazen, as if he knew the police wanted him to lead them to the spot where the other girls had been taken!

Jim Horn’s lips set. He tried not to think what might have happened to those girls,

tried not to think of the girl who had been bundled into that speeding limousine. He tried to give his whole attention to his duties.

Suddenly he slapped on the brakes. He had just reported his position so he could concentrate on the strange actions of the car ahead.

IT SLOWED, seemed about to come to a complete halt, and then swerved from the main road to the right. Jim started speaking into his transmitter. His receiving set began a discordant buzzing, then broke into blaring jazz. The words of the police announcer could not break through that barrier of sound.

Jim Horn told his position. He knew he was doing that in vain. Someone was broadcasting on the carefully guarded secret wave length the police had decided to use. Jim knew what that meant. The wave length had been changed every day, was not given out until the officers went on duty. It meant that the kidnapers were well informed. It meant—

Jim Horn cursed. It meant a leak somewhere in the department. It might mean death to Sally Morgan. He did not think of himself, he, the only one who knew of this last turn-off!

Jim Horn swung his car from the road. He stopped long enough to toss a few articles from the car, then accelerated in pursuit of the limousine.

For fully an hour the strange chase went on while the police radio emitted nothing but jazz. True, Jim tried many different wave lengths on his transmitter. Someone he knew would catch his signals. Yet there would be a delay—

The car ahead rumbled across a bridge. Now Jim could catch the tang of salt air in his nostrils. He started across the bridge slowly. His foot jammed down hard on the throttle. The car fairly leaped across timbers that were shaking now as if in a high wind. The whole bridge jumped and swayed.

His front wheels hit hard road just as

the structure slipped into the river with a grinding crash of timbers. Rear wheels ground into soft earth, spun—then caught. The car seemed to be clawing for a foothold. Slowly, slowly, it began slipping backward. A patch of gravel gave it impetus. It lurched to the roadbed, stopped in safety.

Jim Horn mopped his forehead. He turned to look back at the wreckage which had so nearly been his grave.

Horn sensed rather than saw the shadowy figures darting toward him from either side. His fingers closed on his service thirty-eight just as a blackjack caught him on the temple.



HORN lay motionless for a while after he recovered consciousness. Hearing no sound, he ventured to open his eyes to slits. A preliminary survey convinced him that he was alone in the small, brilliantly lighted room.

He swung his stocky body to a sitting position. He stifled a groan, fought down nausea. His head was whirling like a top. His teeth sunk into his lip. His grey eyes glared

redly from his face. The pallor of his skin emphasized his heavy beard.

Horn never had laid any claims to beauty. Now the streak of blood down one side of his usually good-natured face gave him an especially villainous look. Still in his middle thirties, his years on the force gave him the appearance of greater age.

There wasn't much in the room to see. The bare walls, ceiling and floor were white. The only article of furniture was the bed on which he had been stretched out. It was clamped in place.

"Humph," Horn muttered. "I'm not even tied. Looks like nobody's much afraid of my getting away." Unconsciously he had spoken aloud.

"Quite right, my friend Detective Horn. Quite right." The hoarse voice seemed so close that Jim jumped.

"Victor LeBlu!" he snapped.

"By my voice—you know me. It is pleasant to be so famous."

"Yeah," snapped Horn. "Some day we'll know you so well you'll take a squat on the hot seat."

"Perhaps," came the unruffled voice. "But you at least will not be present at that unfortunate occurrence."

"You never can tell," Jim retorted. His eyes were flicking around the room, trying to find the source of the voice. His muscles were knotted with his desire to spring on LeBlu.

"You cannot get at me," Victor continued. "You cannot see me, you can only hear. I take the advantage. I know every move you make."

Horn stretched back onto the bed. "All right. Maybe you'd like to sing me a lullaby."

"Before you go to sleep—and it may be a deep, deep sleep, I should warn you that you are in a gas chamber. One push of a button on the control board beside me and you—well, you can guess."

Horn yawned. "I don't like guessing games," he said.

"And your little friend, Miss Morgan? What of her! Will you think of her as you drop off into a last sleep?"

Jim sat up again. "Damn you," he said flatly.

"Exactly," chuckled LeBlu.

Horn thought. "Well—what's on your mind? You aren't keeping me from—from my rest, just to pass the time of day."

"Quite right. Before I go any further I should warn you of one thing. Doubtless you left some word or sign when you turned off the road, just before the radio became so unfortunately blurred.

"Please do not count on that to bring aid here. You remember the bridge that so strangely collapsed? Well, it is properly guarded now by workmen. County employees—at least they look like county employees—with red lanterns and everything. They will report that no car has passed this way.

"You understand? Your friends can cruise around all night without locating this place. It is well hidden. You understand?"

JIM HORN did understand. Police cars approaching the fallen bridge would be turned back. Why should they imagine their quarry had crossed? Probably the one road by which this place could be reached was blocked. "I understand," he said.

"Good! You must die, of course. That is certain. But I am in a liberal mood tonight. You must die, you and Miss Morgan, so that your bodies may be shipped back to headquarters. But I am willing to grant you an evening's entertainment first. Perhaps even with the charming Miss Morgan."

"If what?" Horn wanted to know.

"If you will not create a disturbance among my guests."

Horn stood up. "Sounds easy," he admitted. "What've I got to lose?" He kept all emotion from his face, yet one ray of hope remained to him. "When do we start?"

“Right now,” a guttural voice said.

Horn whirled around to face the ape-like chauffeur.

“You will notice.” LeBlu’s voice continued, “that Axel wears no mask. If the faces of the rest of my guests are covered, do not imagine that it is because I fear your escape. Oh, no. There are other reasons, as you shall see. Now please follow Axel.”

Horn followed the chauffeur through the panel.

He was ready for almost anything but what he saw. A short corridor led from the gas-chamber. It opened on a large, high-ceilinged room softly illuminated by indirect lighting. A modernistic black and chromium bar, blended with tables and chairs, filled one end of the room.

At first glance it was a peaceful, usual scene. Men were leaning against the bar, men occupied some of the tables. They were drinking, smoking, talking, laughing. Everything seemed so usual—until Horn got a glimpse of their faces.

Those faces!

Tough as he was, Jim Horn shuddered. Every head was bald, misshapen, huge. Eyes seemed set too far back in those strange heads. Cheekbones and foreheads protruded or receded horribly.

Horn sucked in a deep breath. He remembered LeBlu’s remarks about masks. These grotesque things were merely coverings fitting over the tops of each man’s head, covering eyes and nose, but leaving the mouth free. Certainly no one could ever be recognized! No wonder they felt free to talk and drink with one another!

Horn walked over to a table, sat down and helped himself to a copious drink from a bottle. He coughed, and had another. He felt better.

“Gentlemen!” That was LeBlu’s voice.

This time Horn could see the amplifier. He stared at it as if he could discover some inkling of LeBlu’s whereabouts.

“Gentlemen,” LeBlu continued. “We have with us this evening a visitor. A detective.” A grumble which had greeted the first announcement rose to a peak. Certainly that sound left Horn in no doubt as to his popularity here. Everyone was glaring at him. The detective returned those glares coolly. He counted seventeen men.

LeBLU demanded silence. “Of course our friend shall not live to see the day. But I thought we might add a spice to our usual entertainment. You see, he is a dear friend of the new addition to our dance hall. I propose we give him a first shot—. Give him a chance to win the right of spending his last hours with his lady. What do you say, gentlemen?”

Apparently the idea appealed to the perverted fancies of those assembled. It all sounded like Greek to Horn, but he was willing to do anything for a chance to see Sally, willing to prolong indefinitely that time when he must—. He shook his head resolutely. No use thinking of that. He wasn’t dead yet.

LeBlu continued. “I take it you agree. Give him a rifle. Let the dancing wheel be lowered!”

Horn couldn’t believe his ears. “Give *him* a rifle?” If they did—! He didn’t have time to speculate. He just stared.

One end of the room was undergoing a transformation. The “wheel” was being lowered. Once again that horrid sense of familiarity came to Horn. This wheel was like those he had seen so often in booths at carnivals. He could almost hear the voices of the barkers, “Step up, gents, and try your luck. Hit the lucky number. Win your prize, gents. Step up and win your prize.”

Jim Horn clenched his hands. Perspiration trickled down inside his collar. This certainly was no carnival.

The huge wheel, measuring at least twelve feet in diameter, was divided into sections. In each section was a woman.

Gay streamers of gauzy material were their only covering. Flimsy drapes that fluttered and moved in some weird breeze. Silken banners that hid, or revealed, each woman's body from time to time.

Jim Horn swore.

Ten nearly nude women were fastened there. He got the impression of gleaming bare skin that matched in texture the revealing streamers. Bare breasts, thighs, shapely limbs. A "fortune" wheel—with women as the prizes!

He saw Sally Morgan.

She, like the rest, was tied spread-eagle in position on the wheel. She, too, was covered only by the ever-moving draperies. The pallor of her face, the sweetness of her body, displayed a fury to Jim Horn that left him cold as ice. When he spoke, his voice seemed to come from a distance.

"And now what!"

LeBlu's voice answered. "You will be given a rifle. When the wheel is revolving, you will fire. You will have as a companion for your last hours on earth, the woman you hit!"

THE enormity of the suggestion nearly drove Horn into a maniacal fury that would not have stopped save with his death. He fought for control. He had to keep cool. He had to save Sally some way! He—he was her only hope. And if there was no hope it was better that she die from a rifle bullet—

The "rifle" was thrust into his hands.

Even though he should have suspected, Horn glared at the toy he held. It was a species of airgun which fired a stick with a vacuum rubber end. It would stick to whatever it hit. It would stick—to some unharmed woman.

Horn ground his teeth and stepped forward to the spot Axel designated. He tried to smile reassuringly at Sally. His hands clenched fiercely on the miniature gun when she smiled bravely in return.

The wheel began to revolve.

At first it moved slowly. Gradually the bodies, heads, limbs, breasts and arms of the women became an indistinct blur of gleaming flesh and gay streamers.

"Shoot!" snapped Axel.

Jim Horn went through the motions of raising the flimsy thing to his shoulder. He aimed, trying to follow the streamers colored like those Sally had been wearing. He pulled the trigger.

The wheel slowed down.

Slowly, slowly, each woman became distinct again. Jim Horn was dizzy with trying to follow its revolutions, trying to see where his missile had gone. He had some little idea of the torture those ten women underwent each time that dancing wheel was spun!

The wheel stopped.

Jim's eager eyes found Sally. His glance swept her from pale face to feet. There was no rubber-tipped stick adhering to her body. "Detective Horn wins number seven," came LeBlu's voice again.

Only then did Horn notice his missile fastened to the skin of a voluptuous black-headed woman.

He snapped a curse. "Sally!" he snarled. "I'm coming for you, Sally! I'm—"

That was as far as he got. The whole world, the planets, and all the constellations seemed to descend on his head.

HE COULDN'T have been out more than a few seconds. He was conscious when they half carried him from that room, back through the corridor. They went far down that long hallway. A door opened.

Jim tried then to make some sort of a fight. He could only stagger limply across the room. He sank down in a luxurious chair. Blackness came again for a few moments.

A persistent voice was calling, "Jim Horn! Detective Jim Horn!"

He struggled to his feet, only half conscious, still trying to find some face to crunch with his balled fist.

"Jim Horn!" the voice repeated.

By its insistence it cleared the detective's head. His eyes, which had been glazed, began to focus again. He made out the figure of the dark-haired woman. She was sitting upright on the bed. Her body was half hidden by the silken coverings.

"Jim Horn," she repeated. Her face was strained, yet she managed to keep that even quality in her voice. A sane, even quality.

Horn grunted, shook his head. "I'm all right now, sister." He didn't waste any more time on her then. He raced around the room looking for some possible exit. There was a narrow slip of a window, and apparently no door at all. Jim stopped before the window. It was heavily barred and too small to permit passage of a human body even if it had not looked down on a sheer rocky cliff that fell into the sea. Heavy surf boiled at its foot.

"It's no use, Jim," the woman said. "You can't get out. The door can be opened only from the outside. It is that third panel." She pointed.

Jim Horn hurled his bulk across the room. The panel gave but did not break. Jim only made the one effort—then. He reeled back and sat down beside the woman.

"You're Vera Travers, aren't you?"

The woman smiled wryly. "I was," she said. "I'm number seven—now. I have been here for several weeks—years—I don't know how long."

"Well, Vera," said Jim, "you may be out tonight!"

She looked at him. She laughed bitterly. "Not a chance," she said. She moved a trifle closer. The coverings slipped down to her waist. She raised her soft arms pleadingly. Her breasts, the tempting warmth of her body and lips were very close and very enticing.

"You haven't a chance, Jim," she said softly. "I know. In a few hours they will come for you. You will die then. Why not spend your last few hours pleasantly? For the first

time I will accept a man—willingly. We—we ten girls talked it over when we learned—what was to happen. We agreed to make your last hours—happy. Come closer to me, Jim. Kiss me—. Forget everything else in the short time you have. Kiss me, Jim—"

One of the man's hands strayed toward the woman as if moving with life of its own. Vera trembled as his fingers caressed her gently.

Yet when Horn spoke his voice was low, unconcerned with everything save his question, "Did—did Sally agree to what you have just said?"

"Yes. Of course. She knew, she wanted you—. What in the world are you doing?"



HORN had jumped to his feet. He ripped off the silk coverings, leaving Vera only a sheer sheet. He pulled the stuffing from the easy chair. He pulled up the grass rugs. In a short time that room looked as if a cyclone had struck it. And all the wreckage was piled

against one wall. A wooden wall!

“What—what are you going to do?” Vera asked. For the first time there was a quaver in her voice.

“Listen, Vera, how long does that shooting usually take downstairs?”

“A long time. You see, the men bid for the right to shoot next. They are all as wealthy as they are depraved. LeBlu must make a fortune from this place. And the new girls—the ones he abducts from time to time—bring the highest prices. You understand?”

Jim nodded grimly. His hands opened and closed. “There were only ten,” he reminded.

Vera nodded. “Some die. Some kill themselves—. You—can— guess—.” She shuddered, hid her face in her hands.

“Where does this Victor LeBlu hide out!”

“I don’t know. One of the girls says there is a little room just above the bar. It is built into the wall.”

“O. K. Now listen. I’m going to set fire to this dump. There are probably a hundred police cars within fifty miles of here. They’ll see the blaze and they’ll investigate.” Horn laughed grimly. “They’ll be glad to have something to look into if I know my coppers. You get the ideal”

“After you set fire to this room, then what? You going to stay in here and roast?”

“No. I can break that door down. Probably we won’t get far, but at least we’ll have a run for our money.”

Vera considered. “We haven’t been up here very long. I doubt if there’s been another shot made yet.” She shrugged her shoulders. “All right. Light your bonfire.”

Horn struck the match. “This place ought to go up like tinder. The walls here are old as time.”

Vera shuddered. “I hope so,” she muttered strangely.

Horn came back and sat down on the bed. “We’ll wait until it really catches before

we break out. We don’t want it put out.” He watched the flames eagerly. They licked up greedily and with surprisingly little smoke. Yet in a few seconds the air in the room was choking.

Horn coughed. “Maybe we’d better go now,” he suggested. “You get up and be ready to run when I break down the door.”

“Good-by,” said Vera calmly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Horn stared at her. “What do you mean?”

She threw back the clinging sheet, with no thought of the allurements such motions disclosed. She pointed. “I’m not going anywhere—because I’m chained here,” she said. “God—!” Horn bent to an examination. Vera had told the truth. Her ankles were shackled to the heavy metal of the bed. “And—and you let me start the fire?”

THE room was insufferably hot. Smoke filled it like some tangible body. And as yet the fire had made small headway.

A cough racked Vera’s lovely body. “Why not? Maybe some—of those girls can be—saved—or at least—fire is a clean death!”

Horn scarcely heard her. He was tearing at the shackles like a madman. He could not budge them. He stopped his useless efforts, bent to examine them for a long moment. He stood up.

“Good-by,” Vera repeated.

Jim hurled himself at the door. It crashed down on his second attempt. There was a guard in the hallway, but that man fled down the corridor screaming, “Fire!”

Jim Horn did not attempt to escape. He went back into that smoke-filled room. He pulled Vera to a sitting position. She looked at him dumbly. He swung a terrific right to her jaw. She slumped back—unconscious.

Jim Horn had to break both her ankles to get her free.

With his limp burden he staggered out into the hall again. The opening of the door

had given the fire a new lease on life. As from a distance came the sound of many voices, yet Horn managed to get the length of the hall before he encountered anyone.

A huge man loomed before him in the smoke—Axel. The chauffeur paid no attention to the man and his burden. He ran heavily toward the fire.

Horn put Vera down on the floor. A group of the masked men were standing together, gesticulating.

“Well—Horn.” It was LeBlu’s voice. “I see you have managed to make things hot for me. But at least—you can die now.” LeBlu was no longer in his hidden room. His tall figure detached itself from the group. Like the others, his face was hidden by a grotesque monstrosity of a mask. In one hand he held a black automatic. It was leveled at Jim Horn.

“And now,” continued LeBlu, “you shall—”

Horn was tensed for his last futile spring when a thunderous pounding sounded on the door. It burst open. Uniformed policemen streamed into the room.

Horn jumped then as LeBlu’s attention wavered.

The automatic spoke as he was in the middle of his leap. Horn felt a stunning blow on the shoulder. It spun him around, sent him to the floor.

LeBlu did not spare him another glance. The man was streaking across the floor toward the bar.

Jim struggled to his feet. He shouted and pointed, but his one voice was not heard above the hubbub, the shots, screams of dying men, and yells of rage.

LeBlu jumped to the bar, poised, and sprang at what seemed to be solid wall. It opened to swallow him.

Horn started to follow—then remembered Sally. “Let him wait, we’ll smoke him out!” he muttered. He dashed to the wheel. With his good hand he released Bally, held her trembling body pressed against his.

“Fire! Fire! Look out—the whole thing’s going up!” The corridor was a mass of flames. Crackling, roaring, that whole end of the building was an inferno. Axel had not returned. He had died there, rather than report failure to his master.

Vera was carried out by gentle hands. Jim Horn entrusted Sally to a blue-coat. He found his chief.

“Probably would have missed you if it hadn’t been for the fire. We got to the bridge and the workmen there tried to send us back. Fortunately we had a state trooper with us who had been over the bridge earlier this evening. He smelt a rat. We decided to come on—and we got here just in time. Where’s LeBlu?”

Horn’s lungs were nearly bursting with the heat and smoke. He pointed toward the bar. “Secret room there. He’s in hiding.”

A cry of warning echoed through the room. “Run! Run! The roof’s going!”

Horn, the chief, and the policemen carrying the rescued girls barely made safety. The flimsy roof fell in with a dull boom. Sparks flew high into the greying heavens. There had been no opportunity to get to LeBlu.

The Dance Hall of Doom was no more.

Some life had returned to Jim’s numbed shoulder, enough so he could draw Sally into the shelter of his arms. He meant to shield her like that always.