

14

Dylan and Sam stood in the wide, hushed hallway as they observed the interrogation room through the one-way mirror. Inside was a metal table in the center of the room with empty chairs on one side. Against the far wall was a counter that ran the length of the room, comprised of a sink and cabinets above and below the stainless steel countertop.

But it was the single chair on one side of the table, the side closest to Dylan and Sam that riveted their attention. The metal chair was arranged so they viewed the occupant from the side. The ankles were cuffed to the slat at the bottom of the chair while each wrist was cuffed to the chair arms. As the head slumped forward, a young man tapped her chin, preventing the person from falling asleep. Thick copper hair hung in waves that reached to the person's waist and obscured the face.

"That's a woman," Dylan said.

"Very observant," Sam replied.

They stood for a moment in silence as they watched her.

"Women cry," Dylan said.

Sam crossed his arms in front of him. "Not this one. She's been in there for just about thirty-six hours. Almost constant interrogation. She's not even close to breaking. Now all we're trying to do is keep her sleep-deprived until the next team gets here."

“What’s ‘er name?”

“Brenda Carnegie.”

“Ah, a Scottish name.”

“American. Born in the District of Columbia. Raised not too far from here.”

“What is it you want me to do with ‘er?”

“Keep her awake, for starters.” He glanced at him. “It should be good practice for you. Use some of those interrogation techniques they taught you.” He pointed toward the corners of the room. “Everything you do is caught on tape, from every angle. Microphones throughout. Afterward, you can watch the tape while you’re critiqued. Just like last time.”

Dylan nodded as he continued to observe her. “So. You care how I go about it, then?”

Sam shrugged. “She’s all yours.”

They stood for another moment. Then Dylan said, “She’s got blood on ‘er.”

“Yeah.”

“You got a medical bag, do you?”

“I’m sure we can round one up.”

“What is it you want to know?”

“Who she works for,” Sam said as he picked up a handset beside the one-way mirror.

Less than ten minutes later, Dylan opened the door to the interrogation room and nodded to the operative seated in the room. As he made his way inside, the other man passed him on the way out, handing him the keys to the cuffs.

Dylan set the keys and the medical bag on the table and turned around to look at the woman.

“Shift change?” she said flippantly.

He opened the medical bag and retrieved a pair of surgical gloves. He took his time putting them on, flexing each finger in clear view of her. Her expression never changed. He expected to see smudges of mascara or makeup around her eyes, a sure sign she had held back tears during the interrogation, but they were completely dry.

One hand was covered in dried blood as it rested atop the chair arm. He combed her hair back from her face with his hand while she watched him.

“I’m a doctor,” he said. “I’m here to treat your injuries.”

“Yeah. Right,” she answered. Her voice was husky and deep.

“You have quite a nasty gash on your head,” he observed.

She didn’t answer but watched him as he rifled through the medical bag. He turned back to her and gently cleansed the wound.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“What do you want it to be?”

He stopped and looked her in the eye. She stared back at him boldly, with neither hatred nor fear. He looked at her copper tresses falling in thick waves around her face and cascading down her back. “I think I’ll call you ‘Red.’”

“How original.”

He returned to cleaning her face. At one point, he noticed her watching him with an amused expression. “You’ve got one cut that’s worse than the others,” he announced. He hesitated and looked at her eyes for a time. Then he said, “I’m goin’ to put a butterfly bandage on it instead o’ stitches.”

“Isn’t that special.”

He retrieved the bandage and squeezed the skin together as best he could while he taped the wound shut. “I’ve only seen eyes like yours once before,” he said as he worked. “They’re a very unusual color.”

She stared at him until he finished working and he looked back at her eyes. “You like ‘em?” she said. She raised one brow flirtatiously.

“I imagine you’ve seduced many a man with those eyes,” he answered. Before she could respond, he turned his attention to her hand. They were petite hands, which was surprising considering her tough demeanor. The nails were immaculately polished. The band of a sapphire ring was broken, the metal cutting her finger. “They did this to you?” he asked without looking up.

“The Americans didn’t. The Argentinians did.”

“That’s where you were picked up, is it? Argentina?”

“Yeah. That’s where I was picked up. Spent two days there before they transferred me here.”

He removed the ring and cleaned the blood from her hand. “How much sleep ‘ave you had in the past four days?”

She tilted her head and watched him bandage her finger. “Five minutes, here or there. I’ve not had anything to eat. Just some water. They want to break me down.”

“Are they succeedin’?”

She glanced pointedly at one of the cameras. “I’ve been through a lot worse than this.”

He finished bandaging her hand and inspected her other hand and her forearms. There were a few cuts but nothing severe. He gathered the bloody gauze he’d used and tossed it into a nearby wastebasket.

“So, you’re really a doctor?” she asked as he began to close the medical bag.

“I can’t give you anythin’ for the pain,” he said. “Rules, you know.”

She chuckled. “I wasn’t going to ask you.”

He noticed a fingernail that appeared to be slightly pulled up and he bent to one knee to inspect it.

“It’s fake,” she said. “You can pull it off.”

He didn’t answer. But as he began to rise again, she said, “Please.”

He stopped moving and looked at her. He’d observed eyes just like hers while in the throes of passion, had seen the amber color almost glowing in abandonment and ecstasy; the black lashes thick and full. His eyes traveled to her lips. They were plump, almost pouty but also cracked and dry.

“Aye?” he said.

“I have a little cut on the inside of my thigh.”

He remained on one knee in front of her, and now he placed one arm across his bent knee and gazed into her eyes. “So what is this little game you wish to play with me now?”

“If you pulled my pants down to look at this cut, my ankles would still be cuffed to this chair,” she said. “And I’d be even less likely to move because my pants would be around my knees or my ankles. Isn’t that right?”

He continued looking at her. "Or I could trigger a bomb that would blow you up and me, too."

She laughed. "You don't think I'd be in custody for four days without them checking me over, do you?"

He leaned back on his haunches.

After a moment, she spread her legs apart. As his eyes moved from her face to her thighs, he was surprised to see her black slacks soaked with blood and the blood pooling on the metal chair beneath her.

"I've been squeezing my legs together," she said hoarsely, "kind of an improvised tourniquet."

He looked back at her face. Her expression was detached but there was the faintest glimmer in her eyes.

"Please?" she asked.

He sat for a moment longer. He knew Sam was still outside the window watching every move, even though from this angle the window appeared to be a mirror. Every movement was caught on tape. And yet there was something sincere about the way the woman looked at him, her eyebrows slightly raised as if to say, "How about it?"

He reached to her waist and felt inside. "Are you wearin' undergarments?"

"Does it matter what my answer is?"

He unbuttoned her slacks and unzipped them to reveal black lace panties. "No," he said. "Just preparin' meself for what I might see."

Her grin was lopsided. "Spoken like a man with experience."

"Raise your bum whilst I slip these down."

"Never heard that line before." Despite her bravado, Dylan noticed she gritted her teeth as she raised herself. When she was high enough off the chair, he slid her pants down to her knees.

"That's good," he said.

"Ah," she said. She lowered herself slowly. "And I was just getting started."

He placed a hand on each knee and pulled her legs apart to reveal a slim, homemade knife holder wrapped around her thigh. Inside the sheath had been a serrated nylon composite knife, but one of the rivets had popped loose, allowing the knife to

come through the sheath. Now he could clearly see nearly two inches of the blade embedded just underneath her skin.

He looked back at her face. She'd grown pale and was watching him.

"You're supposed to wear these just below the knee," he said calmly.

"Pull my pants down a little bit further."

He complied, revealing two empty knife holders, one at the top of each calf.

"They took the knives," she said.

He turned his attention back to the knife embedded in her. "I don't normally see a nylon knife worn like this."

"It won't set off metal detectors."

"How long has it been like this?" he asked.

"Four days."

"And you've been sittin' here like this ever since?"

"Well, not here," she said. Beads of perspiration had popped out across her arched brow.

He looked at the table and then back at her. He glanced toward the door but it didn't open and Sam didn't join him. Finally, he said in a louder voice, "I need permission to transport this young woman to a medical facility."

Instantly the door opened and Sam casually strolled across the room. Dylan watched his face as he walked around in front of the woman. His eyes widened. He immediately looked at her face, which remained completely dispassionate.

"Can you take this out here, *Doctor?*" Sam said pointedly.

"You want me to remove it here, without any anesthesia?"

Sam nodded.

"Are you jokin' me?"

"Can you?"

Dylan stared into Sam's eyes for a full minute before turning back to look at the knife. "I can. It won't be pleasant. But I can certainly do it, if that's what you want done."

"Then do it." With that, he strolled back to the hallway.

Dylan waited until the door clicked shut with a resounding metal clang. Then he turned to the woman. "I'm goin' to cuff you to that table there. You're goin' to lie there and I'm goin' to

pull this thin' out o' you. It's not goin' to be pleasin' and I can't give you anythin' for the pain."

She nodded.

"Think you can handle that?"

"I can handle anything you want to throw my way," she said.

He retrieved the keys and when he returned to her chair, he leaned over her so his face was just inches from hers. "You can't escape this room," he said. "You and I both know there's only one way out." He nodded toward the door. "And we both know we're bein' watched. And once I take these cuffs off your legs, if you try to kick me, I can't help you. And I guarantee the next person through that door won't be helpin' you, either. You'll just make thin's worse for yourself."

She looked at him blankly.

"Are you understandin' me, Woman?"

"Yes."

He slid the chair close enough to the table to uncuff one wrist from the chair and cuff it to the table leg. Within a couple of minutes, he'd uncuffed the other wrist and legs and had lifted her onto the table, where he directed her to lie down.

She complied and he slid the slacks completely off her and left them in a heap on the floor. Then he spread each leg far enough to cuff it to opposite table legs.

"It's a little like sex, isn't it?" she quipped.

"You have sex like this, do you?" he said. As he felt the heat rising in his cheeks, he said, "Seems to me more like medieval torture." He cut the knife sheath from around the blade, untied it from her thigh and tossed it on top of her slacks. He stared for a long time at the serrated blade, the outline clearly visible just beneath the skin. Then he walked to the cabinets and banged around for a minute until he found a flat metal plate. He returned to the table and looked down at her face. "I'm goin' to pull this knife out the same way it went in," he said. "It's goin' to hurt like the dickens. I suggest you bite down on this metal plate. It'll help w' the pain."

"I won't need it."

"You'll wish you had."

"No, I won't."

“I won’t offer it again.”

“Good.”

He placed it on the counter. Then he found two towels and returned to the table. He placed one towel across her thigh just beneath the tip of the blade and laid one hand upon it.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

She nodded.

He flexed his other hand and gripped the knife handle. Then with one quick and powerful thrust, he yanked it backwards. Her leg jerked violently, causing her whole body to come off the table. He immediately plunged the towel on top of the wound. As the knife fell to the floor, he used both hands to lean his entire weight onto her thigh. He looked at her face as her leg continued to shake and the towel became soaked with blood. Her face was pale, her nostrils were flaring but her eyes were open and she was staring at the ceiling. She’d never made a sound.

“If it had gotten your femoral artery, you’d ‘ave been in a world o’ trouble,” he said.

She continued staring above her as if she hadn’t heard.

“What are you here for, anyway?” he whispered hoarsely as he continued to apply pressure.

“Differing political opinion,” she answered. She sounded winded.

“It’s got to be more than that, don’t you think?”

She shrugged.

“You know,” he said, swapping the blood-stained towel in one swift movement for the clean one, “I work w’ these mates here. They’re actually a decent bunch. They ‘ave wives, children, dogs. One has a cat, though he may not admit it to just anyone.”

She chuckled though it sounded strained.

“If you tell ‘em what they want to know, you’ll make thin’s much easier on y’self.”

She didn’t answer immediately. But as her leg stopped trembling under his weight, she said, “Here’s the thing, um, what did you say your name was?”

“What do you want it to be?” he asked.

She smiled. “Here’s the thing, Irish. Today your guys are in power. But with the next election, it might be my guys. In each

of our camps, we have our senators and our congressmen and our supporters. So why would I tell you something today for a lighter prison sentence when tomorrow I might be a hero in another administration?”

He glanced at her wound. The bleeding was slowing. He added the towels to the heap on the floor and retrieved two more. He opened a bottle of antiseptic. “This is goin’ to sting.”
“Bring it on.”

He shook his head and poured the antiseptic over the wound. Again, her leg came clear off the table. He glanced at her face. Her expression remained impassive. He cleaned the wound carefully. “You called this a little cut, did you?” he asked. When she didn’t answer, he said, “You’ve got a gapin’ wound here.”

He returned to the cabinets and banged around for a while before joining her once more at the table. “This is not how I envisioned I’d be spendin’ me mornin’,” he said.

“Hey, I didn’t plan this, either. I was minding my own business when they grabbed me.” She glanced at him. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. You might be in pain for quite a while.”

She chuckled. “I can deal with the pain. Don’t you worry about that.”

“I’m not goin’ to put stitches in you,” he said. “I’m just goin’ to tape this thin’ shut.” He grew silent as he used two large bandages across the wound, pulling it as tight as possible to close the gaping hole. “I imagine this is goin’ to leave a nasty scar.”

“It’ll give me a new line. ‘Do you want to see my scar?’” She laughed quietly.

He cut a large swath of duct tape and secured the bandages with it as he pulled it tight across her thigh. “That’ll hold,” he said. “But I wouldn’t try removin’ the duct tape any time soon.”

“Let’s just hope the next guy they send in doesn’t,” she answered.

“Anythin’ you want to tell me before I leave? You could be doin’ yourself a big favor.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You’ve got a great bedside manner.”

He gathered the medical kit and contents and placed it on the counter, followed by the knife he'd pulled out of her. The bloody clothes and towels were left on the floor.

"Good luck to you, Red," he said as he left her on the table, cuffed to the four corners.

"See you around, Irish. Oh," she said as an afterthought.

He stopped and looked back at her.

"And, Irish, I could've made a bomb with the same type of material. Same size. Next time, be a little more careful?"

He looked at her for a long moment before turning back toward the door.

Once it clicked shut behind him, he breathed a massive sigh. Four men were now standing at the window. From their expressions, it was obvious they'd watched the entire ordeal.

"That is the toughest broad I've ever seen in my life," Sam said.

"I can't believe you 'ad me take that knife out o' 'er," Dylan said. "I can't believe you did that."

"You did great."

"I could've put 'er through immense pain."

Sam chuckled. "Yeah. If it had been me, I'd have been crying. She didn't break a sweat."

Dylan stared through the window at her, lying still on the cold metal table. "I didn't find out who 'er boss is," he said quietly.

"That's okay. You kept her awake. You found a knife *that was missed*," he emphasized to the other men, who avoided his glaring eyes, "and you left her in a hell of a position for the next interrogator." He turned back to Dylan. "Good job."

Vicki bolted upright. In front of her was tank after tank of angelfish, serenely going about the business of laying and caring for their eggs. But their images blurred as a pain seared through her leg. Her head pounded and she was so parched she thought she wouldn't survive without water and plenty of it.

Then just as quickly as the symptoms emerged, they disappeared.

As she stared into the tank in front of her without really seeing the inhabitants, she said aloud, "Annie's in trouble."