



Prescience

The ghost of the wound itched and burned from deep within my side. It burned with greater intensity as I climbed the stairs to the Marynith branch of Savings and Equity. Marble and steel ushered me inside, where I met the long line to the teller. I pocketed my mobile phone with a sigh and took my place in the queue behind a broad man in a grey suit. My side throbbed.

Two more circles of pain burned in my chest—one close to my right shoulder, the other hovering over my heart. They were different to the pain in my side, just heat under the skin. They didn't belong to me, but I felt them anyway.

I smoothed my blouse and soon caught sight of the security guard. He was young and nervous-eyed, with a Brylcreem part. I left my place in the line to approach him. George, the name badge said, just as it should. My sneakers squeaked on the marble floor with each step towards him.

He tensed up at my approach, his shoulder a knotted ball of muscle as I lightly laid a hand on it. He took my whispered words with good grace, nodding not once but twice, before unholstering his pistol. A Smith and Wesson, just as it should be. I wondered then, as I did in my dreams, if they still made revolvers like his anymore.

I reached into my pocket just as the masked gunman stormed through the glass doors.

“Get down!” His scream was muffled by an over-tight balaclava. He shoved the man in the grey suit to the ground—he crashed like a felled walrus, taking an elderly couple down in his sprawl.

George stepped forward with both hands wrapped around his Smith and Wesson, his legs splayed wide. A classic pose of

authority for a classic weapon. "Freeze," he yelled, playing it by the numbers.

My side radiated heat, the irritation and pain tunnelling right through me.

The gunman swivelled and fired. No warning, just a blast louder than thunder and deadlier by far. The gauze pad in my pocket was in my grasp and I wasn't letting go.

When the bullet struck, I don't know whether my side burst open to meet it or it made its own hole, as it should. In that moment, as the bullet tore through my soft insides, I knew why I'd had my appendix removed as a girl. Gunshots create all sorts of complications if you aren't prepared for them.

A potted hibiscus broke my fall, bruising my hip in the bargain. My hand worked on its own, trained by countless dreams of this moment in the weeks before. With the gauze pressed tight over the wound, I tilted my head to watch the gunman go down.

He seemed to drop simultaneously as two booms rocked the foyer. Good boy, George. Plumes of blood sprayed from the gunman's shoulder and chest. The phantom pains in my chest, overshadowed by the very real pain from the hole in my side, subsided as the would-be robber crashed to the floor.

I didn't need to take a closer look to know the man was dead. George's second shot had exploded his heart, just as it should have.

Everyone was huddled in clumps on the floor, still too afraid to rise. Most kept their eyes to the floor, with only furtive glances spared for me or the fallen gunman.

"George," I stammered, although it took two tries to get the name out right. The metallic tang of blood was already on my tongue. Not a good sign.

George was still frozen in his stand-off pose, the Smith and Wesson smoking from doing its duty. At the sound of his name, he holstered his gun and rushed to my side.

"You alright, Miss?" His words were as stammered as mine.

"No, George, I've been shot." This came out clear enough.

He pulled up my blouse to inspect the wound, careful to remove my hand, and the gauze pad, while doing so. The blood surged when the pad was taken away. He pressed his hand over mine as we reapplied the gauze to my side. Blood swallowed both sets of fingers and pooled along the floor. It soon encircled his shiny black shoe, just as it should.

“Sorry about the mess,” I said, then choked back a cough.

“Where’d you get all these scars, Miss?” George was transfixed on the naked skin beneath my bra.

“Shootings, stabbings, that one’s a cattle prod,” I traced an ugly scar along my ribs with a limp finger. “I’m drawn to these things. A moth to a flame.”

“What?” George’s brow creased in concentration.

“I’m a sucker for punishment. Empathy and prescience. It’s a sacrifice thing. Don’t sweat it, you wouldn’t get it anyway.” I coughed again, much harder than before. The heat from the wound was subsiding. A chill was steadily creeping into my limbs.

“Don’t worry, Miss—”

“Verity.”

“Verity, then. Don’t worry, we’ll get an ambulance here pronto.”

“I called one a few minutes ago.”

George was puzzled but said nothing.

I closed my eyes, waiting for the wail of the ambulance to fill the silence. Responses were slow this time of year. I concentrated on the ebbing blood and George’s fingers entwined with mine.

The warmth was reassuring as new phantom pains emerged to nag at my neck and left arm. Knife wounds, most likely. The tingle went deep enough.

The pain—the real and the imagined—was also reassuring. More work and more days left ahead. More sacrifices.

Just as it should be.

