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THE HEART IS A STRANGE MUSCLE

BY LAURA BROWDER

Church Hill

Rachel's beeper went off just as her back began growing numb, jammed against the pieces of broken and discarded furniture in the storage room. A second later, Bobby's went off too. She unwrapped her legs from around his sweaty back, pulled herself up to a sitting position, and groped through the jumble of clothing and guns.

Six squads, Church Hill, multiple gunshots.

"They're at it again, huh?" Bobby was already shoving his wilting erection into frayed boxers, reaching for his trousers. "No respect for a man's lunch hour."

Part of her training, Rachel could get into full battle rattle in two minutes flat. She slipped out the door while Bobby was still strapping on his holster, past the hedge of boxwoods that Vaughn loved for their evocative fragrance. To her they just smelled of cat piss.

She had moved to Richmond with Vaughn four years ago, his dream more than hers. He loved the Civil War, the relics, the history. They had spent hours together wandering the pretty streets up in Church Hill, the whole area looking like a nineteenth-century theme park with its gas lamps, wrought iron, and carefully restored brick houses. It was lovely, but for her money they could have stayed in Rochester.

She could say this for him: Vaughn always knew how to

make anything sound good. Even when she was in the same place with him, sharing the same moment, he could make her see it differently. Strolling with him through Chimborazo Park, through the alleys where small crape myrtles wilted and the bright claws of someone's abandoned steamed-crab lunch reeked in the August heat, Rachel could let herself relax into his descriptions of how things had been a hundred-plus years ago: thousands of wounded soldiers stretched out on the lawn under tents, surviving horrible injuries in the world's largest hospital. Now, thinking it over, Rachel couldn't imagine why he found the idea of all those festering wounds so romantic. But back then, she probably did too.

Romantic now meant late-night drives down by the river with Bobby. The kind of guy, actually, she'd had the good sense not to hook up with that whole year at Al Asad, though not for lack of opportunities. He was a big guy, knew how to carry himself, brown eyes, tight ass. Not super talkative, good guy to have around when things got rough, not given to whining, flirtatious.

Now she was actually sleeping with her partner, what Vaughn would have called fouling her own nest and Bobby would have called shitting where she lived. Except that he wouldn't: they both felt right now that they were exceptions to this excellent general rule.

Riding down Broad Street with him, their sirens wailing, Coke turning warm and slushy in her crumpling paper cup, she asked, "Where we headed, anyway? Gilpin Court?"

He cut her a look sideways, slowing down just a little for the light on 25th before blasting on through. "Nah, it's Libby Terrace."

"They didn't say who." Before she could stop herself. There was one door she had thought about putting a few bul-

lets through herself during one of her unauthorized midnight drives—past Vaughn’s new place, a renovated carriage house with a view of the old Libby Prison, where they used to starve the dysenteric Union POWs in filthy, overcrowded cells. Supposedly, Mr. Libby had built the giant corner house to give him a good view of what was happening there, and at a second, filthier prison down on Belle Isle. What he had hoped to see with his spyglass trained on the prison in the middle of the river, Rachel couldn’t begin to imagine. On the other hand, she pretty much knew what she was looking for on her late-night drive-bys.

She had gotten the “Dear Jane” letter her third month at Al Asad, when deployment no longer seemed like some kind of sick joke but before she was completely used to it. She had joined the Reserves for the college education because her mom didn’t have the money to help her out. It had seemed like a great idea at the time, but then there they were, sweating away in the 130-degree heat, on the base everyone called Camp Cupcake because it had a Burger King and a nice gym and KBR lobster tails and T-bone steaks once a week. Well, yeah, lobster tails, but they were also getting mortared just about every night that February she got the letter.

When the incoming began at night she would put on her Kevlar, roll under her cot with a flashlight, and read the letter again: *Dear Rachel, These are the hardest words I have ever had to write.* Like hell they were. The mortars kept coming. If they landed too close, they could jar your organs. You didn’t even need to get hit with shrapnel to sustain permanent damage. When she got to the phrase she hated most—*the human heart is a strange muscle*—what the hell did he mean by that? Had he plagiarized it from somewhere?—Rachel didn’t care how close the mortars hit.

Her sergeant had taken her over to JAG, where it seemed like even the air-conditioning worked better. Miserable-looking soldiers waited their turns to see the lawyers; Sergeant Mackey had stood with his hand on her shoulder, steady pressure, while the JAG lawyer—bland, smooth-faced, young—helped her fill out all the paperwork, professional, like everyone in that office, but bored like she had seen it a thousand times before, which she no doubt had.

Rachel's friends moved all of her stuff out of the row house she and Vaughn had shared in the Fan, leaving behind the carved Victorian sofa with the apricot velvet upholstery, the Queen Anne end table from his grandmother, the framed engravings depicting scenes from the war—not her war. When she had arrived home last fall, she'd had to MapQuest the new Northside apartment she'd rented.

Another ambulance screamed by them, then another, jolting her out of her memories. They were already way up Broad Street. The car was stuffy, the seat sticky against her legs. Early afternoon in May and it felt like summer was already getting started. Rachel could feel the familiar adrenaline rush building, better than sex, really, though sex with Bobby was pretty good. She loved the familiar pressure of her Glock against her rib cage, loved the way details seemed to jump out at her from the street rushing by: coffee shop sign, dressed-up toddler throwing herself facedown in a tantrum on the sidewalk outside, the blur of summer annuals in riotous colors.

"Jesus, that's a lot of action," Bobby commented.

"Hang a right here," she said as they got to the light on 29th.

"You been here before, huh?"

"Why you giving me that look?"

Bobby smirked at her. "We used to get calls from the

neighbors, complaining about some chick's bare feet pressed up against a car window."

"Wasn't me," Rachel replied.

"Can't beat the view," Bobby said. "We should take a lunch break here some time."

"What kind of a break do you have in mind?" Jesus, she was starting to sound like an idiot. So . . . high school.

He looked at her and reached out to tuck a stray piece of dark hair back behind her ear. He had great skin, freckled and translucent, a broad, slightly curved nose that she loved to trace with her fingers, brown hair that looked redder in the sun.

Behind the median filled with garish crape myrtles in bloom, Wehmeyer and Carlson were smoking a cigarette. Had they noticed? She'd be fucked if she kept it together for a year in Iraq, gave no one any reason for gossip, only to blow it now. Cops were worse than soldiers when it came to the rumor mill, and that was saying a lot. And once the rumors started, life would be no fun anymore.

"Nice place to eat a sandwich, talk."

"Sure, Bobby."

"Whaddya think, some rich drunk cleaning his antique guns?"

"Some loss," Rachel said, and looked out the window again.

Bobby pulled to a halt on Libby Terrace, behind a couple of other cop cars. She could feel him looking at her, but she didn't turn her head. "You ever gonna tell me what happened over there?"

"I always liked that you never asked," Rachel said, unbuckling her seat belt and swinging herself out the door. She stood for a minute peering out at the glittering river, listening

to Bobby slam his door, then turned back to face him.

“Rach, I been thinking,” Bobby began. In the harsh sunlight she could see his crow’s feet as he squinted at her. “It’s been what, six months, for Christ’s sake.”

“Yeah. Store rooms, lovers’ lanes.”

“Christ, Rachel, you could have me over for dinner. I could have you over for dinner. It doesn’t have to be this way. See a movie, for crying out loud. Whatever normal people do.”

“Cops aren’t normal people. Didn’t you tell me that the first day in?” Her chest was tightening. Maybe Vaughn was right, the heart was a strange muscle. She imagined hers as a tangle of veins leading nowhere.

“Is there a reason, something you aren’t saying?”

Around them, the static of radios. To her left, Vaughn’s carriage house with its linen drapes in the floor-to-ceiling windows upstairs. Usually he kept them closed, but once, late at night, she had seen him silhouetted there, a drink in hand, looking out over the dark river and the twinkling lights of the city. Behind him, was that someone moving in the back of the room?

Rachel glanced around, trying not to be too conspicuous. His car wasn’t here, a good thing, otherwise the excitement would surely bring him out onto the street. She tried not to think about where he might be. When she was getting ready to head over there, during those four interminable weeks at Fort Drum, there was a second lieutenant always talking to them about SA—situational awareness. When you’re outside the wire, he would say, and you’re thinking about getting to the end of the day, a cold shower and a trip to the chow hall, it means you aren’t noticing the dead dog on the side of the road, the one with an IED hidden inside it that’s gonna blow you up as you’re driving past. Not that

any of them needed to be reminded of that once they got to Iraq. But now: Bobby leaning against the car, popping his knuckles methodically, the faces of two little girls pressed to the window above them, a little white dog lying inert on the sidewalk. She felt her palms start to sweat, her heart thudding in her chest. Relax, she told herself, it's hot. The dog's just sleeping. Jesus.

If Vaughn saw her from the window, maybe he would think she was just another civil servant keeping him safe from late-night adulterers and drunks in the park. He probably didn't know where her money came from these days.

With his little trust fund he'd never really had to work that much—maybe his problem, but at the time very convenient. Because if he didn't have to work, she didn't either. She could have fought harder for support from him, but that wasn't really going to happen, not with a JAG lawyer. They were mainly there for the paperwork, and she couldn't stand the thought of waiting and coming home to a mess—to Vaughn's explanations and soulful looks, to tearful discussions over who got the Velvet Underground CDs and the Indian cookbooks. Besides, Vaughn's mother had made her sign a prenup, which she and Vaughn had laughed about, back in the days when they were so smugly sure that they would never need it.

She'd taken the check that Vaughn sent her out of guilt, mailed it off to the bank, and tried to forget about it. She wasn't going to be one of those fools pissing away her bonus on a Corvette. On the plane home from Iraq she had all these visions of flowers, grass, strolls in the park, drinks out with old friends. After two weeks sitting inside her darkened apartment, her staff sergeant—whose brother was a Richmond cop—called her about an opening on the force.

"Come on, Gallagher. Get over here, Barstow." They walked, shoulders nearly touching, over to where the other cops were clustered. Sergeant Harris—dark-skinned, neat mustache that would have been in style twenty years ago, gray around the temples—gave her a look, then Bobby. She stared right back at him.

"Any casualties?"

"Just a couple of stray bullets from Sugar Bottom. One of them went through a guy's door down on short 30th." At the end of the street, a few neighbors, coffee cups in hand, peered over the hill. "Can you get them the hell away from there, Barstow?"

Pristine restored row houses lined one side of short 30th. A tricycle in a yard, pink and green chalk flowers on the sidewalk out in front. On the other side, a tangle of brambles, weed trees. Bobby caught up to her.

"Is that all you want, a quickie in the supply room?"

"Let's just get these jokers out of here." She walked fast, already starting to bark out orders, her uniform feeling too tight, the air heating up, the damp cloth under her arms starting to chafe. Her voice mechanical: "Clear the site, please. Until we have determined that the danger is contained, we'll take any statements over by the park."

A middle-aged guy with a short white beard. Two girls in their twenties who could have been students. An older lady, shoulder-length hair, big glasses.

Through the tangle of honeysuckle and weed trees three cinder-block sheds were visible, one with torn plastic replacing the windows. Sergeant Harris came up behind her. "Shot went through this guy's door about ten minutes ago." He nodded his head back to where a splintery hole interrupted the varnished dark surface of the wood. "Then another one heard

a few minutes after that. We got the guys down there searching the area.”

One of the girls, cute, long blond ponytail, said to the sergeant, “I only wish you all were here as much during the day as you are at night. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s GREAT to have you by the park, but then this happens.”

Rachel stared at the girl, inscrutable-cop look on her face, mainly so she wouldn’t have to feel Bobby watching her. She didn’t think she was here all that much, anyway. But it was still too much.

“We do what we can to protect the citizens, ma’am,” Bobby told her, and Sergeant Harris, weary, shot him a dirty look. “It’s not safe right now,” he told the girl. “Go inside.”

A bullet pinged against a tree on the hill and Rachel felt that familiar energy surging through her veins, time slowing, colors brightening. Head down, she ran in a low crouch to take cover behind a red minivan, gravel crunching under her feet, Bobby breathing hard behind her.

“You come here at night to see him, don’t you?” he said. “You still sleeping with him?”

From down the hill, a single cry, and then a burst of fire. She could smell Bobby, his sweat an acrid mix of sex and fear, next to her.

“If you know so much—” she started to say.

“Where’s the fucking SWAT team?” someone yelled behind her. From down the hill, silence.

“You’ve been following me,” she said. A woodpecker drilling the tree above them, the whirring of wings.

“Nah, I just wanted to know where he lived. In case he gave you any trouble.”

“What were you planning to do, pay him a visit?”

“Something like that.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Bobby: yeah, good in bed, quick with a joke, but what else? All the hours spent together bored on stakeouts, riding around the city, busting poor jerks for running stop signs. Had she been paying attention to anything these last months? She had spent all those hours looking out the window, letting the sights of the city entertain her like it was TV. *I’ve got your back*, he was always telling her. Whatever that meant.

Bobby peered behind the van’s rear bumper. “That blond girl? She’s the one he’s fucking.”

“Like I’m supposed to care.” Squabbles: high school again. Nothing from the bottom of the hill, then the sound of cop cars squealing to a halt down there. “Can’t we talk about this later?” Smelling herself now, that familiar sharp odor stronger than any of the spring flowers and damp earth. Who the hell was she kidding?

She looked past the splattered bumper of the van. On the left, quick low motion through the leaves. She turned fast, weapon at the ready: a black cat.

Bobby saying, “Surprised you didn’t know that, all the time you been spending here.” Sweating, urgent. In the side mirror of the van was a face framed in a glass transom, staring out, too dim to see. Rachel kept looking, hearing the rustling of a squirrel rushing through thick leaves and up a tree, her eyes adjusting. It was the girl with the blond ponytail, staring out through her door. Behind the girl, a man approaching. Vaughn. So why hadn’t his car been on the street? Was the Mercedes in the shop again? Situational awareness. It meant being right here, right now, the daily noise of life stripped away. Rachel wanted Vaughn to open the door, just so she could scream at him to get the fuck down, enjoy the startled expression on his face.

The window of the minivan shattered, and a shower of glittering fragments fell to the street. Absurdly, Rachel thought of her wedding day, holding hands with Vaughn, ducking their heads and laughing as they ran beneath a cascade of rice. In the mirror, she could see Vaughn staring out. She wanted him to stay there, forever stuck behind glass, watching. She wanted to be away from him, not caring. From the bottom of the hill, another gunshot exploded.

“I’m going down there.” Already on her belly, inching forward.

“Rachel, they’re drug dealers, who cares, the guys’ve got it covered.” She could picture the dark shapes moving through the cinder-block buildings down there, shadows. Picture herself closer now, uniform ripping on the thorny underbrush, her own breathing quiet, feeling alive, time slowed to that single moment. All those nights wasted up here, peering out at the lights of the city. Hip bones grinding against Bobby’s, his rough neck against her face, their muffled exclamations. That wasn’t wasted. She glanced back at him leaning toward her, looking hurt. She had liked it that he never asked, but now he was going to start. And there was so much, really, she just didn’t want to talk about. In the morning, she knew, she would call her recruiter.

“Jesus, Rachel, get back here.” His hand gripping her arm, a surge of feeling coming through her body. For a moment she paused, hesitated. She couldn’t afford to look back.

Then she pulled away and was moving again, already half-way across the street, her knees scraping against the gravel, heading for the impenetrable tangle of weeds ahead.