

Monika's boss had been very understanding about her drastic oversleep from Friday, and was actually relieved to learn that she was okay. But Monika had trouble concentrating on her work. The previous days' events still had her distracted. She knew that Power Rangers were just action heroes on a television show, and moreover, she knew full well that SHE wasn't one. But she simply had no explanation as to where the strength and the courage came from for her to fight that purse snatcher. She was familiar with stories of people who were able to perform super human feats under pressure from adrenaline. Women had been known to lift cars off their children and men to fight off wild animals, so the explanation was plausible. But Monika could not explain how she was able to rearrange the very molecules in her body and disappear to escape her would be assailant and then the police. She didn't have the time to think about it then, but in hindsight, it was kind of eerie. The actual disappearance didn't hurt or anything, but the thought that she could control other people's visual perception of her was both fantastic and scary. She wondered if anyone could look at her and tell she possessed these special abilities.

She doodled absentmindedly on the sticky note where she'd jotted down her voice mail messages. She had been relieved to hear Prize's voice on the other end of the phone asking for a rain check for their date. Something had come up at the shelter and he wouldn't be able to get away. It was nice to know that she hadn't blown the opportunity. However, another message she received troubled her. Hillary Madsen, one of her clients, was among the growing homeless female population in the city. She'd sounded desperate. She had had an appointment with Monika on Friday, but elected not to see another social worker when she found out Monika was not there to keep her appointment. Hillary didn't trust anyone else. On the message, she accused Monika of lying and being in cahoots with the government to kill her. She said she was in danger and if anything happened to her, it would be Monika's fault.

It bothered Monika that as a social worker, she was limited to the services she was able to

provide through the Department of Veteran's Affairs because those services never seemed to be enough. Veterans were a demographic all their own. And most of the time, they had a unique set of issues that required more resources and care than the government was able to provide. Hillary had been in the specialized unit with Monika in the Middle East. She was actually one of the soldiers trained in the experimental training unit. And, from what Monika gleaned from the coherent sessions she had with her, they had many of the same physical ailments. However, Hillary suffered from a severe psychological component. In addition to PTSD, Hillary had also been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. She had hallucinations of masked men chasing after her and was constantly under the impression that there was a contract on her life. As far as accommodating her for housing, her delusions made her hard to place. Hillary's infractions in each facility ranged from disruptive behavior to unauthorized rearranging of furniture. She had created quite a reputation among the area shelters and was running out of options for a place to live. But she had trusted Monika right away. Remembering her from the old unit, Hillary saw her as a friendly face, an ally and wouldn't open up to anyone else.

Hillary had a host of wild, off-the-wall stories about things that happened while she trained in the Middle East. She alleged the women troops had been continuously injected with some type of enhanced steroids. She even claimed some of the other women could fly. Monika had never given Hillary's stories any credence before. But after the week she'd had, she wasn't quite convinced that those delusions didn't have merit.

She trudged through the rest of her Monday like a zombie and made a few attempts to contact Hillary throughout the day with no success. So she decided to hang around the office in case Hillary showed up. Around two o'clock that afternoon, the ringing noise started in her ears again. This time, instead of a ringing, the sound was more of a high-pitched whine. And it seemed to come from an external source rather than inside her head. She felt like a poodle being annoyed by a dog whistle. The noise wasn't constant. She'd hear it and then it would stop for an hour or so. After a while, the noise

became more frequent. Driving home from work that evening, Monika reached a certain point in her commute and the racket that had been in her ears of and on all day became clearer. It was the distinct sound of a woman's scream.

*What a Prize*, Monika thought as she gazed attentively into the eyes of the gorgeous dreamboat who sat across from her explaining why he believed newschool hip-hop artists had a major role in the regression of black culture. Prize was as intelligent as he was handsome, and Monika wished there was some way she could freeze time so she could linger in this cozy café comparing favorite rappers, swapping stories about their upbringing, and discussing current events with him. His skin was like the finest of deep milk chocolate, although not as dark as hers, and flawless. He had chiseled features, as if crafted by a world-class sculptor, and his gaze was reminiscent of a proud lion watching over his kingdom with keen regard. He hadn't jumped on the beard bandwagon and didn't yet appear to be losing his hair. His wide nose and ample lips spoke and breathed Sub-Saharan descent, although he said he had been born and raised in Chicago. And his smile made you believe it was only meant for you.

She took her eyes off him for a moment to make sure the rest of the world was watching. She needed other folks to see her with this man. They had been out on a few dates and things really seemed to be going well. It had been so long since Monika had met anyone she felt compatible with, and she and Prize had a lot in common. They both worked in service to others. They both loved old school hip-hop, jazz, and 80's pop music, and they both liked to read. She was excited about having a male companion to trade books with. Most of her girlfriends didn't even like to read. Prize was a dream come true, and she wanted to make sure she wasn't dreaming and people could actually see them together.

Monika's thoughts were interrupted by a gentle squeeze to her hand. She turned her attention back to her date. "I'm sorry. What did you say?" Embarrassed to be caught scanning the room for

attention.

“I asked you if you had ever spent any time overseas while you were in the service,” Prize repeated.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just thinking about one of my clients,” she fibbed, nodding her head. “I spent two years in Germany and nine months in Afghanistan right before I got out.”

“Afghanistan,” he said, thoughtfully. “Wow! That must’ve been crazy. What did you do there?”

She smiled. People always assumed if you were in the Middle East during your military service, it automatically meant you saw some type of combat. She almost hated to tell them she was actually just a file clerk. Most people seemed to be disappointed that she didn’t have any war stories. She, on the other hand, was thrilled.

“Not really. It was just hot. I actually had a real office and living quarters. Nothing spectacular, but I never had to sleep in the dirt. Honestly, my job was pushing paper. Piece of cake.” She sat back casually in her chair, curling her fingers into her palm. She blew on her fingernails and rubbed them against her chest, evoking a round of laughter from both of them.

“I’m glad to see you got off easy. There are so many people coming back from over there in such bad shape, mentally and physically,” he said with genuine concern. “It seems like most of the people coming into the shelter lately are veterans. And you are so committed to them. That’s the second thing that attracted me to you.” He leaned across the table and touched her chin, smiling seductively.

She thought she would implode right there and melt out of her seat onto the floor. *Keep calm and carry on*, she thought to herself, as she returned his smile with a sultry gaze of her own. “What was the first?”

“Your striking natural beauty. You are the most beautiful woman I think I have ever seen.” He

paused, as if to take her all in. "You know, I'm not much for weave, but normally, I'm drawn to women with a little more hair than yours. No offense." He smiled politely.

"None taken," she laughed, absentmindedly rubbing her perfectly round head.

"But seriously, your lack of hair drew my attention straight to your face. You are stunning," He quipped looking seriously mesmerized.

Inside, Monika squealed like a giddy fourteen year-old. Outside, she tried to appear unfazed that she was being complimented by a man with looks equivalent to Tyrese Gibson or Idris Elba. "Well, coming from the real Mr. Good Bar, I'll take that as a compliment," she said coolly.

On the ride home from her date, Prize drove through the neighborhood where the non-profit he worked for had bought another transitional home. He slowed down in front of the house, proudly heralding this as the fourth property they had converted since he became the director and extending an invitation to her for the ribbon cutting ceremony scheduled for the following month. It was a renovated four bedroom home with cheerful curb appeal. Monika was just as excited about her clients having even more affordable housing options as she was being given a special invitation to the ribbon-cutting by the director; her new guy. Or at least she hoped it would eventually work out that way.

Suddenly, she realized she felt funny. The noise was back in her ears again. She grimaced, grabbing her temples. It was really loud and constant. Prize put the car in park and gently touched her shoulder. "Hey. You okay? You don't look so hot."

She brushed him away. "I'll be fine. Just got a headache, all of sudden."

He looked worried. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thanks. I probably just need to go home and lie down for a while."

He put the car back in gear and started in the direction of her house. "Okay. Let's get you home."

By the time they reached her house, the noise had subsided. But she couldn't shake the funny feeling she had from the transitional house.

"You sure you're okay? Do you want me to come in with you and help you get settled? I can fix you some tea or something."

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"No thank you. You've already done more than enough. I'll call you," Monika said, getting out of the car.

"You better," Prize winked at her and pulled off as she went into the house.

Access has always been a problem in the VA healthcare system, but the shortage of doctors, coupled with the influx of combat veterans in recent years from the lingering war in the Middle East, put the system in the forefront of the news. Monika had begun receiving her care at the VA facility a couple years earlier, after her regional vet representative encouraged her to file a disability claim for all the physical ailments she'd developed after leaving active duty. But the primary care doctor she had originally been assigned to left the hospital for private practice. After months without a doctor, she finally received a letter stating that she had been given a new physician and scheduled an appointment the following week.

Monika was relieved for the opportunity to discuss her increasing medical issues. She had been keeping a journal of all of her pain and symptoms, as well as a list of questions and concerns she had about her health. But she took care to leave out her recent discoveries of being able to lift a grown man twice her size and toss him around like a rag doll, as well as her newfound talent of being able to dissolve and reappear wherever she chose. She thought it best to keep that info to herself for the time being. She had her journal in hand when she walked up to the automatic check-in kiosk in the Prime Clinic.

She tapped her foot nervously on the carpet as she waited. *See you in twenty, my foot*, Monika thought to herself, glancing at the sign urging veterans to alert staff if they found themselves waiting longer than twenty minutes past their scheduled appointment time. She rolled her eyes at the thought of having to go to the desk to tell the nasty receptionist she'd heard snapping at other patients that she had waited longer than twenty minutes. The hospital police might have to be called to escort Monika off the campus without ever even meeting her new doctor. The VA was an excellent resource for veterans and provided exceptional care, but like most organizations, it was not without its own set of problems.

"Ms. Rock?"

Monika looked up when she heard her name called. A lady in a pair of pink scrubs led her into the back office to an examination room. After taking her height and weight, she sat Monika down on the table to take her blood pressure. The nurse frowned and began pumping the sphygmomanometer a second time.

"Hmm...I've never seen anyone with blood pressure this low be able to walk around. Do you feel okay, Ms. Rock?"

"Yeah. Other than the usual stuff, I feel fine," Monika responded, puzzled.

"Well, this can't be right," the nurse said. "There's gotta be something wrong with this blood pressure cuff. I'll let the doctor know. He'll be with you soon." She left the room abruptly.

A few moments later, a tall, caramel skinned gentleman in a white lab coat entered the room. He extended his hand warmly.

"Hi, Moe-neeka, is it?"

Smiling, Monika nodded and thought, *If I keep lucking up to be in the company of all these good-looking men, I might need to stop and buy me a lottery ticket on the way home.*

"I'm Dr. Benjamin Spain. It's nice to meet you."

"Same here," she answered, shyly.

"The nurse said she was having a hard time getting an accurate reading on your blood pressure. Let's have a look."

He wrapped the cuff he brought in with him around her arm and placed the stethoscope in his ears, concentrating. Like the nurse, he frowned and took the reading again. He went to the computer and began to type furiously. Monika sat mute, watching him, quizzically.

“Ms. Rock, when were you in Afghanistan?”

“2010,” she stated, matter-of-factly.

“How long were you there?”

“Nine months.”

“What was your job?”

“Administrative officer for the Women’s Strike Team Exploration.” She had the handsome doctor’s full attention. She wondered what all this had to do with her blood pressure. He couldn’t just been making small talk.

“So you never trained at all with those other soldiers there?”

“No.”

Dr. Spain shook his head, incredulously. “Well, I’ll be damned.”