

## Best Served Cold

From the public gallery Amber watched the two men laughing and hugging before they left the dock. "Case dismissed!", the judge gutted her with the words that freed them. She raised a hand to her cheek shocked by the hot tears that dampened her fingers. She stood still allowing the numerous reporters passed, eagerly rushing to get that first interview. She waited until the gallery emptied then slowly followed the crowd onto the street.

The two men had paused beneath the portico where a semicircle of hungry reporters shouted out questions and the cameras flashed beneath the storm clouds' shadows. They were lapping up the attention, slapping the sour faced barrister on the back and holding each other's hands above their heads in triumph. Inside her head, Amber screamed "make the most of it, you bastards, it won't last." She stood, unnoticed, at the back of the noisy crowd. Her awareness of the scene interrupted by flashes of memory. Nicole, broken, losing blood and unconscious in A&E. Eventually she had woken and slowly, as her jaw healed, gave a clear statement of what they had done to her. Finally, being allowed to take her home, but the shocking nightmares destroyed any hope of peace for her young sister. Amber had listened while Nicole talked far into the night; detail after violent detail spewing out. The names of the two attackers were carved forever into Amber's heart and mind by each vile act her sister described, Brandon Foster who had held her helpless. Darren Mason who had beaten Nicole until even the surgeons could not restore her original beauty. Months of listening and support dragged on while more questions were asked and the doubts and fears burning in Nicole's mind grew monstrous. That last terrible day Amber had returned home to discover Nicole's lifeless body, her suicide lighting a coldly burning fury in Amber.

No, she would not allow it to end like this. She glanced around ensuring nobody was close enough to see, then reached for her phone. The heavily encrypted email was drafted

already, a request for additional compassionate leave, she tapped send. The reply was immediate: 'approval granted, take care!' Amber made a quick call, "Alex, there's something I need you to do ...."

The caress of the early morning air on her bare flesh made Amber shiver when she left the warmth of her parked car. She looked over the carpark towards the bright lights and noise of the function room. 'Freedom Function' said the flood lit sign above the door. Amber was surprised how many people wanted to celebrate Foster's release but then it was a party with plenty of free booze. She took a deep, slow breath walked towards the door. Inside was unpleasantly warm and damp. The music was still set loud for some rapper wanting to kill his cheating woman. Sweat mingled with the smell of stale beer and spilt drinks. She paused for a moment then strolled confidently through the tired and drunken remains of the party crowd swaying together on the dance floor or making their way towards the exit, until she found her target. He was standing with his back to her, bumping against the bar that kept him upright. Amber forced her mouth into a soft slight smile. She reached the bar and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned, just prevented himself from overbalancing, looked her over automatically from bleary half-closed eyes and, from his expression, liked what he saw.

"I just wanted to say congratulations on your escape. What an awful experience you must have had, all those months waiting for the trial. Thank God for technicalities."

She stroked his arm lightly and glanced up and sideways, through her lashes. The pupils of his eyes expanded. His hand grasped her wrist.

"Do I know you?"

"Do you want to?", she asked in return. Her hand stroked down his sleeve, deliberately breaking his hold. She stepped closer until their bodies touched.

“How about a dance with the hero for a lonely girl?” she murmured leading him onto the dance floor. They swayed together for a while not necessarily in time with the beat until he tripped and his hand fell lightly on her bare shoulder, his fingers tangling in the chain of her necklace.

“Pretty,” he said, as his fingers slipped lower and stroked across the smooth curves exposed by the dress’ low cleavage. His other arm closed tight around her back. Amber smiled pleased with how easy this seduction was going to be.

“Yes, very nice. The necklace I mean!” She gently stroked his face although her instinct was to smash his nose into his brain. “It represents Ma’at, the Egyptian goddess of truth and justice. I think she must have been looking after you today.” She stretched up and whispered into his ear. “Shall we get out of here? My car is outside.”

She waited for his reply forcing herself to breathe normally, then he grinned and his hand squeezed her bottom.

“Oh yeah, whatever you want babe!”

He leaned heavily on her as they swayed their way through the function room and out into the carpark where the cold air intensified the effects of his drinking. She had parked in the dark shadows away from the lights. At last Amber pushed him hard back against her car and Foster chuckled.

“Hey you like playing rough? Me too.”

He tried to grab her but Amber easily avoided his attempt, opening the rear door as Foster stumbled and bent forward. The dart spiked into his neck and emptied, the sedative worked fast and he was instantly out like a light. Handcuffs clicked tight around his wrists and he was tucked onto the back seat. Amber reversed out of the parking space. The sedative was good for two hours and the journey would take thirty minutes, leaving enough time to complete preparations for her other guests.

The headlights intensified the many shadows surrounding the clearing where Foster lay in the centre, awake but still groggy from the combined effects of alcohol and sedative. Amber pulled on the hooded cloak that maintained her anonymity. The noise of car engines disturbed the silence then the headlights of four more cars intensified the illumination. Car doors opened and slammed shut. The cars' occupants formed a semi-circle opposite where Amber stood with one man standing forward of the line.

Amber sighed, she had warned them not to try anything, now heavy-footed rustling, to her right, showed they had ignored that warning. She turned, slightly lifting her right hand and fired. The heavy built figure fell, twitching uncontrollably, out of the bush. She dropped the Taser and turned towards the leader.

"I warned you," she said coldly, "anyone else tries anything I will shoot you first and then them." A bright red spot suddenly appeared over the leader's heart; he became a statue. "Now do you want him or not?"

"Yeah! we want him. You know how bad; he owes us big time."

She stepped close to Foster and caught the expression of terror on his face. He began to struggle against the cuffs.

"You helped Mason rape and mutilate Nicole Lydgate. You and he together are responsible for her death. Now you will pay! In Ancient Egypt, hearts heavy with guilt were given to the Devourer of Souls." She pointed at the eager gang of men. "They will be your soul eaters". She stepped back facing their leader, "hospital or undertaker," she shrugged "Do I care? It's your choice."

The clearing plunged into sudden darkness so that Amber, silent footed, faded into the dense undergrowth to wait until their engine sounds faded into silence. She pulled her phone from the pocket of the concealing cloak as she headed back to her own car. "Gran? Its Amber. Would you like to help me with a dangerous project?"

The elderly woman bent into the strong north-easterly, sliding and slithering along the snow strewn, icy path until she finally reached the door of her cottage. She turned back to see a darker shadow standing beside the gate and smiled.

“He’s taken the bait my dear,” she commented closing the door. “He’s just followed me from the bank after seeing how much I withdrew.” Gran put her coat on its hook and gently stroked the diamond and pearl brooch on the lapel before touching the triple row of pearls around her throat. “Pity we can’t keep these.”

“Thank you for doing this Gran, I owe you large. Call on me anytime if we get through this.” Amber said then shook her head, “and no, you can’t keep the jewellery or the money. How much did you withdraw?”

Gran sighed, pretending to be upset then grinned “Oh, a couple of thousand just to sweeten the pot.” She headed down the hallway to the kitchen. “And no talk of debt, I loved Nicole too. I am just the target this Darren Mason couldn’t resist, a feeble, wealthy, old lady in an isolated cottage.

Amber sat down at the kitchen table enjoying the warmth from the range. Gran went across to the cupboards, pulled out a bottle and two glasses and poured a generous measure in each. “To keep out the cold,” she said handing a glass to Amber then stood up straight and tall for a moment. “For Nicci.”

“Whew!” The whisky burned its way through her system and Amber blinked away tears, putting the empty glass on the table. “I shall certainly sleep tonight.”

Through the next day Amber kept out of sight in the cottage while Gran potted around, sweeping snow from the pathway, breaking ice on the water butt. When it grew dark Gran put the kettle on and at exactly 4.30, a heavy knock at the door heralded Darren Mason’s arrival. The older woman potted slowly towards the door, calling out, “Yes, yes.

Wait a minute”, while Amber retreated into the darkness of the living room, listening intently.

“I thought we could have some tea while we discuss the work I want done. Its nice to have a bit of company now my nephews have finished helping me move in.

Mason’s answer was just a deep rumble as they reached the kitchen. Amber picked up the steel baton and moved silently to the kitchen entrance. Mason stood with his back to the doorway while Gran was at the other side of the table. She poured two large mugs of tea.

“Do sit down,” she said.

“I think I’ll stand,” he replied drawing a long blade from his coat pocket and pointing it towards the old lady. “You sit down and shut your face then I won’t have to use this will I? Understand me?”

“Oh, yes dear, I understand,” Gran said throwing a mug of boiling tea into his face. He shouted in pain, jerking backward directly into a smashing blow from Amber’s baton. He slumped to the floor already unconscious.

Gran abandoned the old lady persona and rounded the table to peer down at their prisoner.

“Hope you didn’t hit him too hard.” A twitching movement of one hand reassured her and she nodded. “Right, let’s get the bugger sorted.” Grainne Pritchard grinned, “makes me feel young again,” she said, pulling a coil of rope from under the table. “I’ll drive you there and wait for you near the end of the runway. No argument, right?”

“Not from me ma’am,” Amber replied setting to work

Amber sat opposite Mason looking at the damage caused by the boiling water. He was not a pretty sight, blisters and patches of reddened skin formed a chessboard effect. A track of dried blood led from his head down his neck and created a large stain on his tee-shirt.

He groaned and blinked to clear blurred vision. She sat silently waiting until pain made him groan again louder. A few minutes saw him focus clearly on her.

“Does it hurt?” Amber asked looking at the cement block encasing his lower legs. “I’m told drying cement causes some nasty chemical burns on human flesh. She shrugged.

“What the fu.....” He was suddenly standing up, struggling to break out of the block. He looked around wildly for something, anything. “You bitch, I’ll kill you slowly when I get free of this.”

Amber shook her head “You won’t get free.” She watched him struggle frantically until, drained by pain and exhaustion, he finally slumped back into the chair, panting for breath.

“Aren’t you wondering why you are sentenced to death in this place?”

He glared at her the first glimmers of fear showing in his eyes. “What did I forget to phone you the next morning after we shagged? Did I post naked pictures of you on the Net? Or did you put it out on offer and I refused to screw you?”

“Have you seen Brandon recently? I heard he was diagnosed brain dead in ICU. His family are switching off the machines today.”

Mason went very still. “It was a gang thing: Brandon had crossed them up.”

She shook her head. “No! it was a rape thing which is why you are here. No technicalities to free you in this place. By your right shoulder there is a pipe with a switch, it contains drinking water.” Amber stood up. “You are in a bunker deep under a top-secret deserted military base. It doesn’t appear on any public map and no-one else knows you’re here. You can drink and die slowly or, not drink and shorten the agony maybe, that is your choice. You destroyed my sister, raped and mutilated her. The results of your evil festered in her mind until she took her own life. You hold most responsibility for her death. Foster has already paid for his part now you too must pay the price.”

She picked up the only lantern and her chair then walked away, her steps echoing into nothing, leaving Mason in thick darkness. His screams followed her along the tunnel and up the stairs until the heavy metal hatch dropped cutting off the sound.

Amber walked along the corridor towards the Director's office at the SIS Building, Vauxhall Cross. She had been summoned. Taking a deep breath, she knocked and entered. "Sir?"

"I thought you should be informed; Darren Mason's body has been found. He must have been killed not long after the trial failed. The killer must have been well trained and very careful because my sources say there is no evidence to link anyone to the crime. Shows a lot of time and planning as far as I can see. Still, the saying goes that vengeance is a dish best served cold"

"Yes sir," she replied.

"Now, if you are ready to return to work, I would like my best intelligence analyst on this case. He handed her a file.