

Tiger Eyes

can a woman change her stripes?



B.L. Wilson

TIGER EYES... can a woman change her stripes?

By
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CHAPTER ONE...Accidents will happen

The woman in white stood on the third-story balcony. She was silhouetted against the moonlit sky.

Sergeant Elaine Riddle studied the woman's profile. She could see the woman from the front seat of her patrol car. She'd stopped at the red light and looked up to see the woman standing there. She wondered what the woman was thinking as she stood looking into the humid night. It was quiet for a Friday night, especially for a holiday weekend. She'd bet the good citizens of Kansas City had already blown all their paychecks the night before since it was the Fourth of July. The Fourth was a day for barbecuing, drinking, and carousing until the sun came up the next morning. Elaine grinned at her thoughts as she continued to watch the woman on the balcony.

A light-colored object came barreling out of nowhere.

"What the hell was that? Oh, shit!" Elaine shouted. "It's coming straight at me!"

After that, everything slowed down for Elaine like she'd hit the pause button on her remote.

Everything ... moved ... in ... slow ... motion but her mind.

Her mind flew into overdrive.

Gun the motor.

Her ... feet ... didn't ... move.

They ... weighed ... 500 ... pounds.

Floor it! her mind screamed.

Where's the gas pedal?

Her ... foot... searched ... the ... floorboard.

There! Found it.

Hurry up!

Press it.

Push it to the floor!

Elaine ... eyed ... the ... speeding ... blur.

It raced closer.

Can't he see I'm in the way?

He's gonna hit me!

O... H ... S... H ...I ...T!

A ... loud ... vibrating ... screech... reached ... Elaine's ... ears.

Metal ... crunched ... into ... metal.

The ... tinkling ... sound ... of ... breaking ... glass ... stayed ... in ... her ... head.

Elaine felt the sudden impact as the car smashed into her.

Her ... head ... bounced ... against ... the ... steering wheel.

The ... shoulder ... strap ... of ... her ... seatbelt ... didn't ... hold.

She heard a ripping sound, then felt sudden pain.

The seatbelt jerked her body backwards violently, then released her as it tore away from the seat.

Pain radiated from her head down to the stem of her neck to the small of her back. The airbag hadn't deployed. "Ooh, my head!" she muttered, closing her eyes in pain. Hands fumbled with the torn seat belt.

* * *

"Oh my God, what's he doing?" the woman on the third floor blurted out in disbelief. She watched in horror as the little white car sped up as it approached the intersection. "He's not going to make it." The sports car slammed headlong into the side of the patrol car as it pulled off when the light turned green. The little car bounced off the side of the patrol car, flipped over onto its roof, and finally skidded to a stop a fifty feet away from the original impact. The impact reminded the woman watching it of a high-speed volleyball bouncing off a goal post and exploding. She quickly dialed the hospital's ER desk to report the accident. She knew the number by heart since she worked there. She scooped up her medical bag and flipped her cell phone shut.

"Come on, come on!" She pressed the elevator button four times, then leaned on it. "Too damn long!" she muttered, racing down the three flights of stairs to the street.

She rushed to the overturned vehicle and squatted down to take the pulse of the bloody hand hanging grotesquely out of the twisted metal. She peered into the twisted wreckage to view the rest of the body. Shining her tiny penlight around the cab, she spotted a crushed skull lolling against a bloody chest. She reached to press fingertips into the driver's neck. She sighed. He was dead. She noted that he smelled distinctly of alcohol. She played with her stethoscope. She shook her head in disapproval. "Only a drunk would try what you just did." She sighed. "I'd better go see how the cop is."

Elaine pushed at her door, but it didn't move. She leaned a shoulder up against it and shoved hard. "Ouch! Shit, that hurts!" She frowned, grabbed her side, and groaned.

"Hey? Officer, are you all right?"

A female voice floated down to Elaine. Her eyes couldn't focus and she squinted through the window. "My head is killing me. I ...can't open the door." She groaned. "I feel funny...." Her voice faded. She felt dizzy.

"Officer?" Strong hands reached inside the car to hold Elaine's shoulders against the back of the seat. "I'm a doctor. I saw the accident from my balcony. You may have a concussion. Lean back against the headrest and try not to move, okay?" She pressed a hand into the side of Elaine's neck, taking her pulse. She found it erratically fast. That was normal under the circumstances. The officer knocked her hand away.

"I gotta get out of here." Elaine issued another unsuccessful shove at the door.

The doctor stared at her in amazement. The officer was still trying to force the door open. It hadn't registered in her mind that she was a victim and not the helping party. "Take it easy, Officer. You hit your head," the doctor explained, noting the blood steadily flowing from a cut hidden in Elaine's hairline.

"Just help me get the door open so I can check the other guy. Okay, Doc?" Elaine pushed hard.

The metal groaned loudly and the door popped open unexpectedly. The doctor sighed when Elaine fell into the street, probably breaking her wrist in the process. She knelt down to look at it. "If that's not a Colles' fracture, I'll eat my hat!" she muttered, placing the broken wrist at Elaine's side. She decided to continue the rest of her examination before the officer regained consciousness. She pulled a fitted light blue shirt out of navy pants and shifted the bulletproof vest as much as she could without removing it. "If you can hear me, I can't see much. I'm gonna open your shirt and vest," she informed the officer, unbuttoning the crisp-looking shirt that was smudged with blood. Once she unfastened the tabs on the vest at the sides and shoulders, she unbuttoned Elaine's shirt and gently probed the reddening area on the officer's left side.

Elaine grunted and bit into her lower lip but didn't open her eyes.

The doctor cleared her throat. "Your ribs are bruised, but nothing's broken. You'll be sore as the dickens for the next six weeks."

Her hands moved over the cop's lower extremities. Everything was unremarkable. The police officer, a sergeant as indicated by the markings on her shirt, looked as healthy as a horse except for the broken wrist and a laceration in her hairline. She'd have a headache for the next few days. She might need surgery, depending upon the damage to her wrist. She'd need film for a proper diagnosis. The doctor moved back up to the sergeant's head to probe the bloody area in her hairline.

Elaine opened her eyes and then struggled to sit up.

"Lie still, please! You were a car accident," the doctor warned, easing Elaine into a prone position on the street. "I'm a doctor—Dr. Sandra Moxely. Call me Sandra." She flashed a bright penlight into Elaine's eyes.

Elaine blinked rapidly and then groaned. "Turn it off! You're giving me a headache with that thing, Doc." She reached up to bat the light away from her face, then grunted when she tried to raise her right hand. "Jesus! That shit hurts, Doc!" she muttered, grimacing as she held her wrist protectively with her other hand.

"Keep your hand still too! It's broken. If you try to move it again, you're gonna do more damage," Sandra scolded loudly. "I called the hospital. An ambulance should be here shortly." She caught the officer's angry glare. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, Sarge. It's been a rough night for me too. I got home in time to see that car run into you."

"How's the other guy?" Elaine tried to sit up. As soon as she did, she felt a sudden wave of nausea wash over her and she settled back against the roadway. "Ooo, I feel dizzy, Doc." She ran her good hand through short, reddish dreadlocks. Hazel eyes studied Sandra, reading the sympathy in her eyes. "The driver's dead, isn't he?" she remarked quietly. It was a statement of

fact rather than a question. The doctor didn't need to say anything because Elaine could read it in her eyes. "Goddamn it!" she muttered.

Sandra patted Elaine's shoulder sympathetically. "It's not your fault, Sarge. I saw the whole thing. The driver ran the red light. Take it easy."

The shrill siren call of the ambulance announcing its arrival prevented her from saying more.

An EMS technician nodded in recognition when he spotted Sandra kneeling next to a female victim. "Hey, Doc Moxely. What's up?"

Sandra nodded, then rose and walked over to her colleagues. She pointed in Elaine's direction. "That one has a mild concussion, a laceration on her forehead, bruised ribs, and a broken wrist. The other one's DOA." She watched one of the technicians apply a plastic see-through splint to Elaine's wrist to hold it in place. He put a plastic collar around Elaine's neck and then slid a board under her. He lowered the gurney so he and his partner could lift the officer onto it. "Are you coming, Doc?" the technician asked, waiting with the door open.

Sandra exhaled. "I just left the hospital two hours ago. I can't believe I'm standing here, considering your offer to go back." She sighed as she stared at Elaine. "Yeah, Mel, I'm coming or what's left of me is coming with you."

"I'd take your leftovers anytime, Kiddo. Half of you is better than a whole lot of doctors I could mention. Hop aboard, Sandy, so we can get this show on the road." Mel chuckled as he tucked a blanket around Elaine, then extended a hand to the weary doctor.

Despite an aching head, Elaine noticed Sandra Moxely was a "looker," as Douglas would say. She looked sleek and long-legged in the knee-length, linen skirt. She probably had a neat waist, but Elaine couldn't see under the lab coat. She was glad the doctor had agreed to ride with her to the hospital. She'd have something nice to look at on the trip there. Hospitals weren't her favorite place to be. She'd much rather be on the street, chasing bad guys.

Every time the ambulance hit a bump, which was often, Sandra watched her patient, the stoic sergeant, bite into her lower lip, determined to tough it out. She wouldn't allow the pain to show on her face. For the second time tonight, the sergeant reminded Sandra how stubborn she was. She knew the pain in her patient's head had to be a number eleven on a scale of one to ten. Her broken wrist had to be kicking her butt too, yet she hadn't uttered one complaint.

The sergeant's pain-filled hazel eyes stared at Sandra. "How bad is my wrist?"

The officer's eyes interested Sandra. They had looked like dark honey under the street lamp fifteen minutes ago. Now they looked like deep gold with flecks of green and yellow in them. Her eyes were unusual, but they perfectly complemented the officer's red-brown hair and cinnamon complexion. They reminded her of semi-precious stones she'd seen in a jeweler's window once. The jeweler made wonderful necklaces out of polished stone. The tiger's eyes and the turquoise stones that he displayed in the window attracted her. She bought one of his creations. It was a tiger's eye necklace and one of her favorite pieces of jewelry. She should have replaced the clasp the minute she knew it was loose, but she didn't, and ended up losing the pretty necklace.

Elaine watched as a dreamy look skittered across the doctor's face and wondered what she

was thinking. She studied the large brown eyes framed with long eyelashes, set in a toffee-colored face. She moved on to stare at the scooped-neck cotton T-shirt peeking through the doctor's lab coat until another wave of pain radiated from her wrist and connected to the throbbing in her head. She stifled a groan of pain. "What about my hand?"

Sandra glanced into Elaine's eyes. A woman could get lost in those eyes. "Sorry; my mind was elsewhere. Could you repeat what you said?"

"My hand; how bad is it? What's gonna happen when we get to the hospital?"

"We won't know for sure until after we take x-rays."

Elaine raised dark eyebrows. "Aw, come on, Doc. We know it's broken. Who do you recommend to set it?"

Mel interrupted after looking at the victim and then Sandra. "If I was you, Sarge, I'd get the best."

"Who's that?" Elaine asked, trying to tilt her head and catch Mel's eye without disturbing the stiff plastic neck brace.

He shrugged and nodded in the doctor's direction. "You're looking at her. The Doc here has one of the best pairs of hands I've seen. You'd be lucky if she decided to fix you." Mel chuckled. "You couldn't have had the accident in a more convenient place."

Sandra tried to signal Melvin Potter to shut up, but he ignored her and kept right on talking. She feared his friendly conversation would remind the sergeant that someone had died on her watch. She cleared her throat when she noted the sergeant's discomfort. "Mel, why don't you check with Roger and find out what our ETA is while I check on our patient?"

"Thanks, Doc," Elaine murmured as her eyes drifted closed.

"Hey, Sarge, don't pass out on me again. Stay with me." Sandra reached over to tap on Elaine's chin. There was no response. She had Mel cut away the bulletproof vest so she could listen to Elaine's heart without difficulty.

Elaine's eyes popped open to glance down at her ruined vest. She glared at Sandra, then rasped hoarsely, "Did you have to cut my vest like that? These things cost four hundred bucks apiece."

"Yes, we had to cut it off. It's better to cut the vest than your chest." Sandra sighed as she glanced at the officer. "It's a funny thing about internal trauma, Sarge. You could be perfectly alert one minute. The next minute, I could be calling a code blue because your heart stopped!" Tired dark eyes stared steadily into hazel ones until Elaine dropped her angry gaze.

Elaine sighed. "You're right. It's just that my boss will have my ass about this. When I turn in a voucher request for a new vest, he'll probably kick what little butt I've got left."

"Oh, I don't know," Sandra remarked as she tried to hide a smile. "I've seen your backside. I think there's plenty left for him or anybody else you have in mind to kick it."

Elaine grunted at the intended humor. "Why did I have to get the only comedian on this route?"

Sandra noticed the beginnings of a dimpled smile. *Score one for the sergeant. If I was in her shoes, don't think that I could be as gracious as she's been.*

“Doc, when we get to the hospital, my department’s gonna send some guys to ask me a bunch of questions. If you could wait on the surgery until they finish, I’d appreciate it. Ouch!” Elaine closed her eyes and winced in pain. “Damn, that last bump hurt.”

Sandra sighed. “Much as I’d like to help you, that wrist can’t wait. As soon as we read the films, I’m prepping you for surgery. If your people get there beforehand, I might consider it. Otherwise, forget it. You belong to me from the minute I examine you until I release you. I decide what’s best for you. Do you understand me, Sarge?” Frank dark eyes stared directly at Elaine.

“Yeah, you’re crystal clear.” Elaine exhaled. “Have you ever thought about a career in the army? Something tells me you’d make an excellent drill sergeant.” Hazel eyes twinkled at Sandra as Elaine struggled to keep a straight face. She couldn’t resist winking at Sandra. Her playful gesture quickly ended when the ambulance hit a large pothole and her face turned ashen. A sharp pain radiated from her wrist. She closed her eyes and bit into her lower lip to keep from crying out. Beads of sweat broke out across her forehead. “Shit, that one got me.”

“Sorry about the bumps, Sarge. The goddamned city oughta fix the road around here better,” the driver muttered loudly from the front seat.

Elaine nodded as she exhaled.

Sandra bent down to listen to Elaine’s heart, then took her blood pressure. Her heart was beating a little fast, but it was strong and steady, while her blood pressure 118 over 78. It was in the normal range. She patted Elaine’s good arm and leaned over her face. “I’m gonna give you something for the pain, Sarge. I wanted to wait until we got to Metro, but I don’t want you hurting any more than you need to. Are you allergic to anything?”

Elaine nodded. “Yeah, Motrin and bee pollen.”

“Okay, good. We’ve got something that should do the trick.” Sandra reached into the overhead cabinet and found the right pain medication. “Have Roger pull over, Mel. I’m giving the sergeant a shot for the pain.” She sighed. “Tell Roger to call the ER and have a portable x-ray waiting for me there. Tell him to we’re gonna need a CT scan of the patient’s head and abdomen too.”

The ambulance pulled over to the bumpy road’s shoulder and stopped.

Elaine felt a cool swipe from a sterile pad against her arm and then a sting as the needle went into her arm. She frowned and then seemed confused. “Doc, I feeling a little strange, kinda weird. Is it supposed to feel like that?”

“Give it a minute to take effect,” Sandra assured her, studying her patient closely as she waited for the injection to work. “In a minute, you’ll start to feel sleepy. Maybe a little giddy too.”

* * *

At the hospital, everything was a vague blur for Elaine. The shot of the Demerol left her floating above all the action. When the radiologist had to move her wrist into an awkward

position to take an x-ray, she didn't feel it. She knew twisting her wrist should hurt, but it didn't. She did remember the cold air blowing over her body when somebody removed the rest of her clothing and draped a sheet over her. The last thing she remembered was seeing Sandra Moxely's concerned eyes above her surgical mask.

A male voice told her to breathe into the mask. The next thing she felt was a cool cloth on her forehead. A disembodied voice from somewhere above called her name several times. "Sergeant? Sergeant Riddle, how do you feel?" The recovery room nurse repeated the question until Elaine opened her eyes.

"Tired, ma'am, I'm real tired." Elaine's eyes closed. "Send the guys from Internal Affairs..." Her voice faded as she fell asleep.

Sandra Moxely was making notes on another chart when she overheard Elaine's request. She walked over in time to see her patient fade into a sound sleep. She smiled. The sergeant was clearly dedicated to her work. She could understand that since she was a workaholic too. She frowned as she considered her patient's request. There was no way anyone should speak with Elaine for the next twenty-four hours. She glanced at the window and noted that it was already approaching dawn. The sergeant would be in the recovery room for another thirty minutes. It gave her time to check the waiting area before she headed to the doctor's lounge.

Three big men rose as she reached the waiting area. One of the men stepped forward and extended a large hand. Sandra had an odd feeling that she'd met the older man before.

"Carl Ferris said you were beautiful. He was right." The older man had a soothing baritone voice.

Sandra wondered if he was an actor or a radio announcer with such a cultured voice. She frowned. "You know Dr. Carlton Ferris?"

The distinguished-looking giant nodded and then smiled. "Yes. We're old fishing buddies."

A second, much younger man who resembled the older man eased up behind him and whispered loudly, "Dad, don't you think you should introduce her to the rest of the family?" Familiar dark honey eyes stared into Sandra's eyes. "Hello, I'm Doug Riddle." The good-looking man held out his hand and then pointed with his other one. "This is my younger brother, Maxwell. Leon, our older brother, Elaine's twin, is back on the ranch."

Maxwell poked Doug playfully in the ribs and grinned at the doctor. "It's nice to meet you. My uncle was right. You are very pretty, Dr. Moxely."

The three big men towered over Sandra and surrounded her. They treated her to the sight of three sets of dimpled grins.

Douglas Riddle winked at Sandra. "How's my sister doing? When can we see her?"

Maxwell Riddle studied Sandra as he waited for her response. *She looks worn out. I wonder if my sister did something to cause the weary look in her eyes.* "Is she being released today?"

Sandra looked from one handsome face to the other and sighed heavily. "Okay, let's see if I got your questions correct. Number one, your sister is fine. Two, she has a broken wrist, a mild concussion, and a couple of bruised ribs. Three, your sister will be under observation for the next twenty-four hours to make sure she doesn't develop other problems from the trauma to her head.

That about covers it, I think.”

“Something like a coma, Doctor? We should so be lucky,” Maxwell interrupted, laughing.

“Not with that hard head of hers,” Douglas added.

“Guys, try to keep the smart-ass remarks to a minimum. Let the doctor finish speaking. I want know more about your sister’s condition,” Bedford Riddle warned. He sighed at his sons’ behavior. He was thankful his daughter’s injuries weren’t serious. He’d heard the other driver died at the scene.

Sandra looked at her patient’s father and said a silent thank you. “Number four, if she follows my orders to the letter, she’ll be out of here tomorrow.”

Maxwell and Douglas looked at each other, rolled their eyes heavenward, shoved each other in the ribs, and then guffawed loudly.

Bedford Riddle glared at his sons and then turned around to apologize to Sandra. “Forgive my sons’ boisterous behavior, Dr. Moxely. They know my daughter doesn’t take orders well. That’s why she became a sergeant, so she could give orders rather than take them.”

Sandra smiled at his simple statement. “Oh, we got that straight from the beginning. I’m the only boss in here.”

Bedford chuckled. “You must be a magician to do that. I’m Laney’s father and I haven’t ordered her around since she was nine, Dr. Moxely.” He grew serious when he noticed how tired Sandra Moxely seemed. “How about I buy you a cup of coffee, Doctor? You look like you could use one.”

Sandra glanced at her watch and frowned. “I don’t think we have time, Mr. Riddle. Your daughter should be waking up from the anesthesia soon. I wanna be in the recovery room to check her vitals when she regains consciousness.”

Bedford smiled and reached over to pat her shoulder. “It’s all right to come with me, Doctor. I arranged for the recovery room to page you.”

Sandra Moxely frowned. Elaine’s father must have some powerful friends in the hospital. She couldn’t resist asking a question. “How did you do that?”

Bedford Riddle issued a knowing grin and offered his elbow. “Come on, Dr. Moxely. Let’s get that cup of coffee before my tigress wakes up and starts raising hell.”

They strolled down the corridor to the cafeteria.

Sandra noticed that the senior staff of the hospital did a double take when they saw the big man walking with her. Several of them turned around to follow her. She wondered who he was. When they arrived at the cafeteria, Elaine’s father excused himself to stroll over to a group of her colleagues. She watched in fascination as a group of nurses and doctors gathered around him. He chatted with them like he was a king holding court. She studied him with a puzzled expression.

Mel and his partner nodded as they passed Sandra carrying coffee cups.

“Why didn’t you tell her the sergeant was Old Man Riddle’s daughter?” Roger muttered as they passed Sandra. “You oughta tell her, Mel.”

Mel shrugged, then raised a hand as they carried their coffee to the door. “Yeah, yeah, Roger, I will. It isn’t big deal anyway. His daughter wasn’t hurt that bad.”

Sandra overheard snippets of the conversation between the techs and decided to follow them. She pointed to Bedford Riddle. “Who is that guy?”

Mel turned around to stare at Sandra. “You don’t know, do you? That’s Dr. Bedford Riddle. He’s one of the town’s millionaires. He made his money practicing medicine, teaching, and writing books.”

Sandra groaned. She recognized the name from one of her textbooks. “He re-wrote the procedures on heart surgery, didn’t he?”

Mel nodded. “Yeah, that’d be him.”

“He didn’t say anything when I called him Mister Riddle,” Sandra fussed. She’d just committed an embarrassing error with a man she admired.

“He never does, Sandy.” Mel smiled. “That’s what’s so cool about him. He’s modest about his accomplishments. He lets them speak for him.”

Sandra Moxely frowned. “Why would his daughter become a cop and not a doctor?”

Mel shrugged. “She had the grades for it and the brains too, I understand. Medicine never appealed to her. One of the brothers followed the father’s example and took up medicine, but not her. Nope, Elaine Riddle would rather be a cop. I think it’s your patient’s twin who’s the other doctor in the family.” He watched Sandra’s eyes narrow suspiciously. He knew what was coming next.

“You knew who she was, didn’t you?” Sandra asked in a sharp tone.

Melvin casually shrugged. “I never had the pleasure of meeting her before today. I thought it might be her. I heard she’s tall, good-looking, and a sergeant.”

Sandra sighed heavily, then spoke to him with a trace of annoyance in her voice. “Mel, the next time you think you know something, tell me. It might keep me from making a fool of myself.”

Mel shrugged. “I’ll try, Sandy.”

Their pagers went off simultaneously.

Sandra saw the code number for the recovery room flash across the tiny screen. “I gotta go to see my patient.”

“Yeah, me too. See ya, Doc.” Mel studied her face before warning her. He was one of a small group of colleagues who knew Sandra was gay. He admired her discretion on the matter. “Don’t worry about Old Man Riddle, Sandy. He’s cool. Worry about his daughter instead. From what I hear, she’s a real piece of work. She loves the ladies for a month or two and then leaves them.”

“You talk too much, Mel,” Sandra joked and watched him leave the cafeteria with his partner. She debated whether to interrupt Dr. Riddle’s conversation to tell him Elaine was conscious or just go see her patient without him. Her patient’s care was more important than anything else was, so she left for the recovery unit. She bumped into one of Elaine’s brothers on the way. She couldn’t remember his name, but his eyes reminded her of Elaine. She took a closer look and realized they were a darker shade of brown—close to the color of maple syrup in the wintertime. “Would you tell Dr. Riddle his daughter is conscious? It’ll be another thirty to forty

minutes before she's settled in a room for the night."

Douglas Riddle grinned as soon as he heard the title "doctor" applied to his father. "So you figured out who he was, didn't you?" He watched a shameful flush creep up Sandra's cheeks, adding color to them. "It's okay, Doc; the old man doesn't like to brag about his identity. My sister never tells people who her father is. She figures everybody's out to clip her for all she's worth. She always does it to them before they do it to her."

"That sounds downright cynical." Sandra frowned.

"Well, that's my sister ... the height of cynicism and practicality all rolled into one." He grinned at Sandra. "Take me, for instance. I'm more of a lover. Anything a beautiful woman like you wanted from me, I'd take immense pleasure in providing." His eyes boldly appraised Sandra slowly from the top of her head to the soles of her wooden clogs.

Oh please! Just what I need; another Mr. Lover-Lover! Sandra Moxely thought as she sighed inwardly. "Don't forget to tell your father. Your sister needs her family's support right now."

Douglas laughed. "You don't know the tigress, do you?" He watched Sandra hustle down the corridor toward the recovery room without answering his question. Her innocent remark gave him cause for hope. Maybe his charming sister hadn't gotten her hooks into those long legs and nicely shaped ass yet. Laney must be slipping not to have tried the famous Riddle charm on the leggy doctor. He walked to the cafeteria and stood at the door, watching his old man hold court. He'd better drag his father away from his fan club. His father loved performing. He smiled when he recognized one of the young nurses standing next his father. He caught her eye and winked. She blew him a kiss as he walked toward the old man. He tapped Bedford's arm and then whispered in his ear, "Laney's awake, Dad."

Bedford held a hand up. "Sorry, folks. I gotta go see my daughter. Come on, Douglas. Let's go see your sister."

Douglas frowned as he and his father walked away from the crowd of admirers. Laney would be pissed when she found out the old man had made that announcement in public. She hated associating with the old man or his money. As soon as she turned at eighteen, Laney vowed to make her own way in the world. She did too, earning a scholarship to John Jay College in New York City. She earned a BA and her Master's in criminology. He remembered how the old man and Laney argued vehemently about law school. He wanted her to attend law school and she didn't want to go. She won the battle and joined the police force as a beat cop. She worked her way up the department's career ladder based on her own achievements until she'd reached the rank of sergeant. She claimed that she loved her job because she'd earned it without Bedford's help and because she enjoyed protecting people. She also loved rubbing her father's face in her success every chance she got, so she used every opportunity to embarrass him.

* * *

When Sandra walked down the corridor to the semi-private room, she heard two loud male voices. She couldn't believe what they were doing. It sounded like an interrogation!

“Sergeant Riddle, do you mind telling us again just how the accident occurred?” the first voice demanded.

“Huh? I ... didn’t hear ... Whatdaya ... want?” Elaine’s head lolled against her pillow and her eyelids drooped, then fluttered shut. She couldn’t keep her mind focused or her eyes open. She was all mixed up. Why were the cops pestering her? She was sleepy. Why couldn’t they let her sleep?

It was obvious to Sandra that her patient was suffering from the effects of the anesthesia. “That’s enough, gentlemen. I’m afraid you’ll have to leave. My patient needs her rest,” she remarked, eyeing the two men.

One of the men marched over to Sandra. He tried to intimidate her by looming over her with his solid frame and glaring down at her. “Look, Doctor, we have to know what happened on the road last night. Sergeant Riddle is the only one left alive who can tell us. Do you mind leaving us alone for a minute?”

“Yes, I absolutely mind, Officer!” Sandra didn’t see a badge number, but she knew an interrogation when she heard one. She folded her arms and returned his glare. “What’s your name, Officer?”

The annoyed Internal Affairs cop whipped out his ID and shoved it in front of her face. “It’s Detective Connelly, Doctor.”

Sandra glanced at his police ID briefly and then marched over to her patient’s bed. “I don’t give a shit what your title is! I gave strict orders for this patient not to be disturbed until tomorrow morning,” she stated. “How did you get in here anyway? It’s off limits to anyone but her family.”

“We don’t need your goddamned permission, Moxely,” Detective Connelly snapped and glared hard at Sandra.

“Oh? You think not, Detective?” Sandra stubbornly re-folded her arms across her chest. She glared at the two men, who didn’t seem to be in a hurry to leave. “Let’s just see how fast security can get here to throw your butts out after I call your lieutenant to lodge a complaint against you.” She reached for the phone and dialed security.

Detective Connelly and his partner watched Sandra Moxely punch numbers into the phone. Connelly decided he wasn’t leaving until he’d gotten everything he could from Sergeant Riddle. He could be just as stubborn as the doctor was. His eyes narrowed and he shot hard-eyed daggers at Sandra as they waited. The standoff continued with Sandra glaring at the two men while she waited for hospital security to arrive. Detective Connelly returned her nasty stare until he grew tired of waiting. He flipped his small notepad shut and then stormed out of the room, muttering. “Goddamn crazy bitch!”

Connelly’s partner ran double-time to keep up with his rapid stride. The two detectives marched down the corridor, rounding the corner quickly together, and bumped into Elaine’s two brothers.

Douglas and Max nodded to Detective Connelly and his partner, then kept walking to their sister’s room.

“What the hell was Internal Affairs doing here, Dougie?” Max asked, watching the two men gallop down the long corridor in the opposite direction.

Douglas shrugged his answer, then rubbed his chin before he spoke. “Damned if I know, Max, but I’m gonna find out. You stick with Dad and Laney. I’ll go talk to Connelly.” He strode down the hall, following the direction of the two IA cops.

Max nodded. “Okay, Doug. See you later.” He continued his journey to his sister’s room.

Five minutes passed before Doug stepped into his sister’s room. He entered, grinning broadly, and looked around the room, searching for somebody. “Where’s the little tiger, Dad?”

“The who?” Bedford looked puzzled as he stared at his son.

“Dr. Moxely, Dad. I wanted to congratulate her for chasing the cops from IA out of Laney’s room. She called security to have them thrown out of the hospital.” Douglas laughed delightedly as he imagined the scene. “Sure wish I coulda seen that!”

“She did that?” Bedford Riddle asked. He was surprised that the quiet doctor would take such a protective attitude toward a patient. He smiled. It was what he’d have done in his younger days.

“Dr. Moxely said she didn’t want them pestering her patient right after surgery. Connelly’s madder than a wet hen. Moxely threatened to report him and his partner to their lieutenant.”

Maxwell supported his brother’s humorous opinion. “She sounds like a real fighter to me, Dad.”

Bedford Riddle stared thoughtfully into space for a moment. “Carl said she is a bit headstrong, but she is also an excellent surgeon. He’s been trying to convince her to take over his practice for the last year, but she claims to love being a trauma surgeon in the ER.”

Douglas and Maxwell nodded in agreement. They’d decided earlier to give their father a few minutes alone with Laney. They slipped outside.

Bedford looked down at his daughter as she slept. Her stark white cast contrasted with the red-brown suntan she’d gotten helping her brothers at the ranch. There was a spot of dried blood on her forehead, which he gently removed with a damp washcloth. “Damn it, Laney!” he muttered softly. “If you weren’t so all-fired stubborn, you’d be a doctor or a lawyer. You’d make a damned good one. Instead, here you are, lying in a hospital bed with a concussion and broken wrist.” He stroked his daughter’s good arm, then pulled the covers up higher on her chest and leaned down to kiss her forehead.

* * *

Sandra glanced at her watch, then wearily rose from a hard plastic chair to stretch stiff muscles. She’d given the Riddle family twenty minutes to see Elaine. That was fifteen minutes longer than she was supposed to allow families to visit their loved ones. She strode out of one of the empty hospital rooms and headed back to her patient. “Gentlemen,” she remarked, nodding to the two Riddle men standing patiently in the hallway outside Elaine’s door. She pushed her patient’s door open and stepped inside. She sighed when she noticed the sadness in Dr. Riddle’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Dr. Riddle, but you and your sons will have to leave. I have your numbers. I’ll

call you if anything changes.”

“Take care of our tigress, Dr. Moxely,” Bedford Riddle remarked, staring at Sandra.

Sandra caught the warning in his eyes. His look said nothing better happen to his child while she was under her care. “Yes, sir, I will.” she replied, returning Bedford Riddle’s glance.

Bedford Riddle’s eyes softened when he read her concern for Elaine. “You’re gonna sit with her for the next twenty-four hours, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I want to make sure she doesn’t slip into a coma,” Sandra answered honestly.

Bedford Riddle sighed, nodding. “I’ve done the same thing on occasion. I’ll stop at the front desk to have a cot sent in here for you.”

Sandra started to protest, but Bedford Riddle held up a hand. “It’s the least that I can do for you, Dr. Moxely.”

“It would be nice to finally get some rest today. Thank you.” Sandra sighed wearily.

Bedford Riddle nodded in agreement. He kissed his daughter’s forehead, then stroked her cheek. “Dr. Moxely, do you ride horses?” he asked, turning around suddenly to face Sandra.

His question sounded odd to Sandra. Why would he ask that? What did it have to do with her patient, or anything else, for that matter? She was puzzled, but she was also tired. Maybe she didn’t hear him correctly. She allowed a shy smile. “I ride a little. Why?”

“When you get some time off, why don’t you spend a day at my ranch?” Bedford walked over to press a business card in her hand. “I’d love to have you visit the Double R Ranch. My sons would welcome the chance to show you around.”

“I’m pretty busy at the hospital. I can’t promise anything, Dr. Riddle, but I appreciate the offer. Thank you for the invitation,” Sandra replied politely.

Bedford sighed. He studied her face for a moment without saying anything. “Okay, Doctor, I’ll accept that for now. But I’ll keep asking because I think you’d love the ranch.” He strode to the door, stopped and looked at his daughter, then Sandra. “Take good care of my tiger, Dr. Moxely.”

“Don’t worry, sir. I will.” Sandra looked at her patient, who was sleeping peacefully, and sighed. She needed that cup of coffee Bedford had promised but didn’t deliver. She stepped outside in time to watch Bedford Riddle and his sons striding down the corridor together. The old man didn’t say his daughter would be at the ranch to show her around and she wondered why. She covered a yawn with her hand, deciding instead of coffee to return to her patient. She took Elaine’s pulse, temperature, and blood pressure while she waited for the cot to arrive. She decided to look at Elaine’s ribs again. She probed Elaine’s side and elicited a grimace.

Elaine opened drowsy eyes, feeling a little high. “He-e-e-y, Doc. How’m I doing? I’m going home, right?”

“Except for your wrist, nothing else is broken. I just checked your ribs to make sure nothing’s out of alignment.” Sandra pulled down the hospital gown and stripped off her latex gloves.

“Oh goody, Doc. Whew...tired.” Elaine drifted off to sleep.

Sandra adjusted Elaine’s gown to cover her and then spread a sheet and summer quilt over

her. No matter how tired she was, and she was bone weary, she could still appreciate the sergeant's generous chest, narrow waist, full muscular hips, and firm straight legs. Elaine Riddle was a hottie, to use her teenage patients' descriptive phrase. But she also knew better than to date a patient. If Elaine wasn't her patient, she'd prefer her humorous advances to her brother's swaggering, confident bravado, but she wasn't entertaining a relationship the Riddles. She remembered Mel's dire warning about the sergeant's love affairs. Add Douglas Riddle's snide comments about his sister, and that seemed to reinforce the warning. The end result was a womanizing, cynical dyke. No, she did not intend to see Elaine Riddle or her family beyond her role as a doctor.

Sandra glanced at her watch. "I have to wake you and make sure you're okay," she said, tapping a sturdy shoulder. Her patient tried to sit up. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," she warned as she encouraged Elaine to lie against the pillows by applying pressure to her shoulders.

"Ooh, my head hurts!" Elaine grimaced. Waves of pain rained down on her head and made her wish she hadn't moved. She clutched at the bed's handrail with one hand until her knuckles looked like tiny mountains of brown flesh. She tried to control the pain in her head until she felt a cool washcloth on her forehead and closed her eyes.

"Feel better?" a concerned voice from somewhere above Elaine asked quietly.

"Yeah, you win, Doc. No more sudden movements for me tonight."

"I wasn't aware that we were in some sort of contest. Hold still for me." Sandra leaned over the railing to shine a light in Elaine's eyes. "Look over right my shoulder, please."

The pleasant aroma of vanilla assailed Elaine's nostrils every time the doctor leaned over. She inhaled deeply before she winked at Sandra. "Hmm, that scent you're wearing. It smells delicious on you. What is it?"

Melvin Potter was right after all. The good-looking cop was a womanizer. "Mostly sweat, I'd think. I've been up for the last thirty-two hours. I could use a shower." Sandra moved away from the bed to observe the effects her sharp-witted remarks had on her patient.

Without missing a beat, Elaine's dark golden eyes stared into hers. "I had a woman once. She could roll her tongue lengthwise and hold it that way for hours. She could do unbelievable things with that rolled tongue of hers." She frowned like she was trying to recall something important. "I never met a woman that could sweat vanilla, though. It must come in real handy after making love."

Sandra made the mistake of seeming interested in her good-natured banter. "Oh, why is that?"

Elaine shrugged casually. "It'd sure save time on cleanup afterwards, as long as your lover liked the smell of vanilla. I happen to find the scent extremely erotic. Don't you?" Her eyes grew darker and the flecks of green in them became more pronounced.

"I'll tell you what," Sandra said, trying to ignore the obvious sexual overtones as she felt the heat rise in her cheeks. "You get some rest. I'll let your father take you home early."

Elaine's demeanor rapidly changed from easygoing humor to near rage. "So the old bastard was here? What did he want? Did he say anything about me? What did he say to you?" she

demanded angrily, not waiting for an answer before she let loose with another barrage of angry words. “He made a big deal about me, didn’t he? Did he tell you who he was? I’ll bet a dinner he had an audience too...a bunch of moron doctors and nurses fawning all over him before he came in to see me. The son of a bitch probably told everybody who I was too! Goddamn him and all his doctor friends! I’m leaving before he gets the chance to mess with me again. Move it, Doc! Let me get my clothes.” She shoved at the bedcovers, preparing to sit up.

“Walk around me, Sarge, because I’m not moving from this spot. I will not help you re-injure yourself.” Sandra stood with her feet planted firmly in front of the bed to block Elaine’s exit.

“Fine, I’ll just do it myself.” Elaine pushed the bedcovers aside after several tries and then sat up. She gritted her teeth as storm clouds of dizziness descended on her. Her jaws tightened as she tried to withhold a groan, but it escaped her lips despite her steely determination.

Sandra moved away from the bed to observe her patient’s struggle to stand, watching as the waves of nausea hit her. She could tell Elaine was in pain. She also noted her determination to continue her journey. Oh yeah, Elaine Riddle was one of the most obstinate patients she’d seen in a long time.

Watching the solid woman walk unsteadily into the bathroom, Sandra realized she’d need reinforcements if she were to prevent Elaine’s exit. Judging from the angry expression on Elaine’s face, she wasn’t about to listen to a rational discussion that included keeping her here. She was determined to have her own way. She’d just walk out the door before her body had the chance to expel the anesthetic in her system, or adjust to the broken bones in her wrist or the conk on her head. The situation called for backup. She hustled out the door to find two oversized candidates before Elaine left the bathroom.

By the time her new patient slowly shuffled out of the bathroom, two of the biggest orderlies Sandra could find were parked at the doorway, blocking Elaine’s exit from the room. Sandra glanced at Elaine’s crisply creased pants, which drooped to her ankles. She’d tucked the left pant leg into a crooked navy sock but given up on the right pant leg so it hung over her boot. Her untied bootlaces were dragging on the ground. A partly tied hospital gown was hanging off one shoulder. Her sloppy outfit and scowling face presented quite a picture. Sandra barely maintained a straight face.

“Where’s my damned shirt?” Elaine Riddle snapped.

Sandra could feel the beginnings of a smile tickling her cheeks. She exhaled, trying to ignore it, and then cleared her throat. “You mean the one we cut off of you in the emergency room? If you want it, I can get somebody to call housekeeping. They can probably dig it out of the garbage if you need it.”

“Goddamn it!” Elaine said with as much dignity as she could muster under the circumstances. “This isn’t funny!”

“If you could see yourself, you’d laugh too,” Sandra muttered, hiding a smile behind her hand. “Guys, wait outside for a minute, please.”

One of the huge men guarding the door finally spoke. “Are you sure about that, Doc?” He glared at Elaine Riddle with a look that said, “Try anything, and I’ll be on you like stink on shit.”

He looked at his partner, who nodded slightly. They studied the disheveled-looking woman. “She looks pretty unstable to me. How do you know she won’t try something when you’re alone with her?”

“She’ll give you her word.” Sandra stared pointedly at her patient.

“Excuse me?” Elaine snapped. She was amazed at how badly this little scenario was playing out. “You didn’t look like a sneaky bitch in the ambulance!” she muttered. She glared at the doctor, then at the two huge bookends that were barring her exit.

“They didn’t hear you promise, Sarge.” Sandra grinned when she heard Elaine’s complaint. “Better tell them you won’t try anything.”

Elaine sighed heavily. She counted to ten and then to twenty. “I swear on my nephew’s head, you have my word.” She held a hand over her heart and looked in Sandra’s direction. “Nothing is gonna happen to your friend,” she announced loudly as she glanced at the two men.

“If you need us, Doc, we’ll be right outside this here door,” the larger orderly assured her. He gave Elaine a hard look calculated to put a scare into her and then he and his partner marched through the door to plant themselves directly outside.

“You sure didn’t look capable of that little trick.” Elaine wiped at the sweat popping across her forehead and down her cheeks.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to judge a book by its cover,” Sandra snapped briskly. She frowned as she stared at Elaine Riddle. Her eyes took in the heavy perspiration on Elaine’s face and sudden droop to her shoulders. “Unless I’m misreading your symptoms, we have about two minutes to get you back in bed before I have to use those guys outside to cart your barely conscious butt to bed.”

“What are you talking about?” Elaine stopped wiping at her sweat and tried to stand up straight.

“I expect you’ll be feeling dizzy and tired. It’s gonna hit you like a ton of bricks when it happens.”

“You win this round too, Doc,” Elaine mumbled. She wobbled, then leaned unsteadily against the wall.

Sandra rushed over in time to grab Elaine’s waist and help her slowly walk over to the bed. “Sit down. Let me take your clothes off.”

Elaine sat down heavily on the bed and let her legs flop over the side.

“That’s it.” Sandra slid the heavy right boot off Elaine’s foot and then the sock. She studied her patient’s face for signs of shock. “Give me the other foot.”

Elaine tried to lift her foot to comply with the doctor’s orders, but she couldn’t.

Sandra grabbed her foot and slid the boot off. “How do you feel?”

“Ooo, everything’s spinning, Doc.” Elaine grabbed her head. “Whew! I’m kinda woozy.” She wiped her brow. “Better lie down before I fall”

Sandra watched her patient wilt, slumping backwards on the bed with her legs still dangling down. She hurried over to tap on the room door’s small window. “Guys, could you put the patient under the covers?” Her concern was that Elaine had damaged some of her repair work.

She monitored the two men as they lifted Elaine and gently slid her under the covers, then re-attached her IV. She checked the leads and then ran a quick vitals check on the unconscious woman. "Everything is fine." She breathed a loud sigh of relief as she recorded her findings on Elaine's chart.

The two large men watched the doctor write notes on the chart and then climb wearily into the cot at the foot of her patient's bed. "Are you sure you wanna be sleeping in the same room with her? She seems kinda crazy to me, Doc." the larger of the men asked as he eyed Elaine.

Sandra walked over to the cot and sat down on it. "It's okay, guys. She's a police officer with a slight concussion. I have to wake her every couple of hours." The doctor's eyes closed as soon as her head hit the pillow. "I'll be fine," she muttered. "Just need a couple of minutes rest." She fell asleep before the two big men slipped quietly outside to discuss the situation. They decided to check on the doctor as well as her surly patient throughout the night, just to make sure the cop lived up to her promise not to harm one of their favorite doctors.