



Michelle Park watched the monitor in the Basement's security room at 06:50. White had already risen, exercised, and showered. He was getting dressed now, putting on his Service A uniform with green trousers, khaki long-sleeved shirt and tie, and service ribbons. That was good. He was preparing to make a good impression by adopting the Marine parade ground affectation. The creases in his pants were as perfect as the shine on his shoes and the tucked corners of his bed.

"Does he have an iron in his room?" Michelle asked.

"No ma'am," Lance Corporal Roberts replied quickly. Michelle had invited him to view the monitors with her and Captain Soodjinda since he would be accompanying her again. "He asked for one, but we wouldn't let him have it. So we offered to iron his uniform for him."

"And I suspect he refused?"

"Of course, ma'am."

Michelle smiled. "Of course. So how did he get them done?"

"We let him use it under supervision for today only," Soodjinda said. "He made an eloquent case for making a good impression."

The captain had a soft spot for Gunnery Sergeant White, Michelle mused. There had been no reason to allow such a request. There was no reason for the game system either. But White wasn't a prisoner, he was a patient. And though he had a history of violence, he had shown excellent control yesterday, even when Michelle had pushed him to his emotional limits. Another subject would have thrown that chair, but White had kept himself in check, merely slamming it to the floor.

At exactly 07:00, the door to White's room buzzed and a navy orderly entered with a tray. She placed it on the table,

spun on her heel, and exited without a word. Michelle couldn't hear it over the speakers, but White's shoulders sank the tiniest amount, and he huffed out a small sigh. He lifted the cover to the plate and started inhaling watery eggs.

"That's our cue," Michelle said, and headed toward his room without asking permission.

Roberts fell into step behind her. "I did what you asked."

"Oh really?" Michelle asked.

He held out a tie clip with the Marine Corps emblem on it. "I don't know why you wanted it, but I have it."

"Good. Thank you, Trey," Michelle said, without taking the tie clip. It seemed Roberts was willing to be cooperative. That was a good sign. Now she'd find out a second piece of information: how White handled the missing part of his uniform.

When they reached room twelve at 07:04, Roberts scanned his badge and opened the door for her. "Good morning Gunnery Sergeant, I hope I'm not..." Michelle trailed off. White was standing at parade rest behind the table, the tray and dishes stacked neatly on top of the mini fridge. Since she'd seen the video feed, he'd donned his olive uniform coat and belt.

"Good morning, Doctor," he replied.

This was excellent. He'd assumed she was a doctor. Besides that, he was fed, prepared, and in uniform, which made him appear calm and comfortable. The anguish Michelle had caused him yesterday was nowhere to be seen on his face. It was almost too bad; it would return before too long.

"This is quite a different greeting from yesterday," Michelle said.

White nodded, a small smile crossing his face. "Yes. I apologize for that. Please sit." He pulled out a chair for her,

but she walked past it toward the couch. He was too prepared. She had to keep him on his toes.

"Thank you, Gunny," she said. She saw Roberts take his position by the door as she started to pull things out of her briefcase. "Gum?" He shook his head, and she shrugged, taking a piece for herself. "You seem refreshed today."

"I am. I thought a lot about our talk yesterday."

"Oh?"

"And I decided I wanted to feel more like myself today."

"I can see that." Michelle let her eyes track from the spotless shine of his shoes to the perfect knot in his tie. With the coat on, she couldn't even see that his tie clip was missing, which of course, had to be the point. When he'd discovered the absence, White could have chosen to wear the short-sleeved shirt without a tie, but instead he'd gone for the more formal uniform. That said plenty about his state of mind. He wanted the comforting reassurance of rigidity. "And do you feel better?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I thought we agreed you were calling me Michelle now?" She made another tally on her clipboard and smiled sweetly at him.

"And I thought we could skip the games today and get straight to the point."

Michelle didn't drop the smile, but she let the sweetness run out of it. "All right then, let's get to it. We left off yesterday talking about June of 2014. Your sister had her twins about that time, right? Skylar and Payton?"

"That's right."

"You weren't able to visit them, obviously, since you were in Mosul. When did you see them for the first time?"

White's face didn't move but he couldn't keep the sourness out of his expression. The skin at the corner of his eyes crinkled, belying the politeness of his smile. "I think you know the answer to that. But since you'll just insist, I'll tell you that I've never seen them in person."

"How does that make you feel?"

"You're asking questions this time? Yesterday, you just led me to how you wanted me to feel."

Oh, White was good, Michelle mused. She'd expected him to analyze her tactics, but she hadn't expected him to go on the offensive so quickly. It was a genuine surprise to see him address her methods so bluntly. It was nothing she couldn't handle though. "I can keep doing that if you want," she said.

He returned her smile coldly. "That's all right. I think I'm qualified to feel my own emotions without a helping hand." His words were calm, but the intent behind them was as sharp as the crease in his slacks.

Oh, he was definitely prepared. But Michelle enjoyed a challenge. Breaking him today was going to be fun. "Then please enlighten me. How does that make you feel?"

"Distant," he replied without pause. "But I'm already distant with my family, especially my sister."

"Even though you saved her from rape?"

"I thought you weren't going to lead my emotional response?"

"It's an honest question," Michelle said. "You saved her from being raped, and she's been distant ever since. It can't feel good."

"You're still doing it. But no, it doesn't feel good. However, I also know that I kept her safe, even if she blames me for something less severe."

Well that was interesting, Michelle thought. He added a false comparison to protect his feelings. Yesterday, he had pushed the emotions away or tried to hide the details. Today, he was owning it, but making the benefit of his action outweigh the consequence. Granted, the events of high school were out in the open between them now, but it was still a fascinating tactic.

"So they were born in July--"

"June," He interrupted. "June 19. I may not have met the twins, but it doesn't mean I don't care."

"Of course. They were born in June. So they just turned one."

"That's right."

Michelle took a breath to think. He was actually handling this rather well so far. He wasn't shutting her out, but he wasn't giving her anything to work with either. She'd have to bait him so he'd open up. Luckily, his family was an easy target.

"Have you had a chance to tell them happy birthday yet?"

White showed his teeth in what could almost be called a smile. "You know the answer to that, too. I don't have internet access for gaming, so FaceTime is out the window too."

"So you've never seen your nieces in person, and now you've missed their first birthday. How does Jenna feel about that?"

"I assume she's not pleased, but as we said, she hasn't been pleased with me for a long time. You'd have to ask her for more details."

"And your parents? How do they feel about it?"

If White's smile was even sharper, it was also more brittle. "Again, you'd have to ask them."

"So you haven't talked to them recently either?"

"The last time I talked to any of them was in March, before Spellbind. After that, I was a patient at a MASH in Afghanistan, and then a 'guest' here."

"Do they know that you're here? Or that you've been injured?" When White didn't reply, she continued. "Do you want me to contact them? To tell them you're safe?"

The pained look on White's face told Michelle that she'd hit the bullseye. She had no intention of calling anyone, but he couldn't know that. Yet, his reaction was unexpected. "If I say no, you'll make me feel guilty. If I say yes, you'll keep it just out of reach to keep me cooperative. So you can do whatever you'd like, ma'am."

Michelle actually blinked in surprise. That had been a prepared line. He was too good at this with all the preparation he'd obviously done last night. She had to get him on the defensive again. "So what happened the last time you talked to them?"

"We caught up, mostly. Family gossip."

"Like what?"

"Nothing particular. It's hard to go in depth when you're on a time limit."

"You're really telling me you don't remember the last time you spoke to your parents? Or your sister and her family?" White gritted his teeth. Bullseye. "Your parents sold their house this winter, didn't they? Did you talk about that?"

"Yes. We did."

"You grew up in that house, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why did they sell it?"

White's response was carefully crafted. "They found a more economic living situation."

"With Mike, Jenna, and their daughters, whom you've never met?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I know what you're doing," White said softly. "And I know where you're going with this, so I'll cut to it. When the store went under, they couldn't pay the second mortgage. Mike offered them the in-law unit at his house."

Michelle lined up her next shot. "And why did the hardware store go under?"

"If I tell you, are you going to say that I'm wrong? Or that I'm irresponsible for not helping?"

"You know my answer," she replied coolly. "I just want to hear how you explain it. You do want to finish this evaluation, right? So you can get discharged?"

His smile didn't mute the low growl under his breath, and he kept the expression still as he quietly said, "You're a bitch, you know that?"

Michelle pretended she hadn't heard.

"Your sister's husband, Michael Dixon, is the regional manager for Home Depot. He undercut their prices and put them out of business."

"Yes."

"And how does that make you feel?"

Growl.



"If you don't want me to guide your responses, then you have to make your own."

White kept the neutral expression, but his eyes were burning now. "Angry? Betrayed? What do you think?"

"Like your brother-in-law intentionally hurt your parents?"

His eyes narrowed, and Michelle was grateful he wasn't looking at her. White was intimidating. And he was dangerous. But she could handle him, as soon as she broke through the defenses he'd set up this morning.

"Sure, let's go with that," he replied.

"So just to reiterate, your sister doesn't know you saved her, and she's been distant with you ever since because of the fallout. Then while you were in Iraq, she married your parents' competition, had children with him that you've never been able to meet, and then," she emphasized the last word for emphasis, "he put your parents out of work, they lost their house, and he moved them into his place. Did he want control of your family?"

"I wouldn't know," White replied. His voice was still a low growl, an angry bear kept behind bars. Exactly what Michelle wanted.

"But why didn't you know? Couldn't you have helped your parents at all?"

"Objection. Leading the witness."

Michelle smiled. "No one's on trial here."

"I'm not? You aren't judging me?"

"This is just an evaluation. I need to know how you feel about all this."

White scoffed. "We both know that's not true. But no, I didn't know anything. My parents never told us about anything bad happening. We never knew anything about how the store was

doing growing up. I didn't realize Home Depot was edging in until that first time I met Mike."

"When was that?"

"2008. I was on leave."

"And what happened?"

"I should refuse to tell you, but you're going to force it out of me anyway." White's tone changed, becoming slightly more relaxed as he acquiesced. "I was in the shop with my folks when Jenna showed up. We were supposed to meet her for dinner with her new boy toy, but her shift at the hospital was over already."

"She's a nurse, right?"

"Right."

"You called him a boy toy. Was she promiscuous?"

"Promiscuous? Like I'm one to judge. But no, it's not like that. I'm just calling him names."

This was going well. He was still angry, but the tension had ebbed. His mannerisms were reverting to natural and he was giving information willingly now. He wasn't on the verge of snapping. Michelle noted the progress on her clipboard. "So you met Michael Dixon for the first time that day. And how did that go?"

"He was polite. You have to play nice when you meet the parents because everyone there knows you're screwing their daughter."

"But?"

"But I saw through him. Mike was saying the right things, but he was casing the joint. I could see him looking and judging everything in the store. I didn't know why until dinner that night when Jenna told us his job."

"Home Depot."

"The Home Despot," White replied, emphasizing the "s" sound. "He was a store manager at that point. But he worked his way up, all the way to regional, where he could use corporate backing to start price gouging. My parents couldn't keep up. You know the rest."

As White had relaxed, his defenses had come down, too. Now was the moment for the attack. "And now he's the head of the family," she said.

His hands balled into fists, and though White tried to keep his anger contained, it leaked out of his words like secrets from a government committee. "My dad's the head of the family."

"Is he though? He doesn't work, doesn't bring in money, and lives in your brother-in-law's house."

"You can say it all you want. It doesn't change the fact."

"Doesn't it though?" Michelle asked. "Your father doesn't control his life any more than he controls Jenna's or yours. And it could have been different."

"Yeah? And how are you going to make it seem like this one is my fault?"

"It's not your fault."

"But isn't it? Don't you want me to say that?"

Michelle leaned her head to one side affectionately. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I saw through him and I knew. But I was in the Sandbox. There, I'm angry now, did you get what you wanted?"

"I'm not trying to get you angry," she lied. She was, but not for the reasons he thought. "I'm just trying to examine how you see the world and why your perception is so different from

reality. You're excellent at reading people, but once things go wrong, you blame yourself for everything."

White didn't respond, just staring ahead trying to control himself.

"You saw through Cody, but once he and his family won, you resigned yourself to your fate. The IED was a trap, but you say you should have been driving. You were ordered to take the shot in Mosul, but you think you're the one who murdered Yousef. Why do you do that to yourself?"

White chewed on his lip and exhaled hard. "I take responsibility for the things I screw up."

Michelle knew that wasn't the answer. But the real answer didn't matter. She had him where she wanted him, which meant she could lead him along. "You take responsibility for things that go wrong. But it's not your fault that those things went wrong."

"Yeah?" he asked, studying her.

"Blaming yourself doesn't make anything better, especially when there's nothing you could have done differently. What you have to do is move on."

White stared at her. His eyes were a steely blue-gray and focused completely on her expression like a hawk stalking a mouse. "Why are you being supportive suddenly?"

"Because believe it or not, I'm not here to hurt you."

"Bullshit," White spat. His eyes didn't leave hers, and try as she might, she couldn't help but feel like prey. "What are you here for then? And don't give me that discharge crap."

Michelle thought furiously. White had turned the situation to his advantage even when she'd thought she had him. He was still thinking too clearly, even though she'd used the family tactic. She'd expected that to break him, which is why she'd let

him recover from last night's session before firing it. But now she was left with only one option. If she couldn't manipulate or coerce him, she had to gain his trust. She had to tell him the truth. Or at least part of it.

"You're right, Jeremy, I'm not here to evaluate you for discharge, because that's already been decided." It worked. White blinked hard, and Michelle continued. "Whether you realize it or not, CJTF-613 is done. Operation Spellbind saw to that."

He shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Spellbind can't go on official records, even under secrecy clearances. It has to disappear. And as far as the US military is concerned, it's Britain's problem. Except for one loose end."

"Me."

"You."

"But I didn't do anything."

"You did do something. You did your job. You did the right thing."

"And I'm about to get punished for it again?"

"Unfortunately yes," Michelle agreed. She put a kind expression on her face. "I'm sorry, Gunnery Sergeant. I didn't want to be the one to tell you. But now that you know, I hope you'll cooperate with me. I'm here to see if you'd be a good fit for my organization. I'm trying to help you."

White blinked a few times and looked back up at her, all traces of what she'd just said missing from his expression. It was remarkable really, and if Michelle hadn't seen it firsthand she wouldn't have believed it. But now there was a new expression she hadn't seen yet. He was focused. He'd acquired a target and he was dialing in.

"Fine," he said. "Evaluate me. What's next?"

Michelle looked down at her clipboard, relieved to have an excuse to break away from his gaze. She wondered if that stare was the last thing his victims saw, but no, that was impossible. He was a sniper. His victims never even realized he was there.

She composed herself and looked back up.

"Let's go over something successful. How about Operation Errant Venture?"