

JUSTIFIED VENGEANCE

By

Christian Daniels

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. **D.O.E. (Date Of Execution).....Pg. 3**

PROPERTY OF CHRISTIAN DANIELS

D.O.E. (Date Of Execution)

She lay on the restraining table with a cold, even expression – hiding the sheer panic and terror that tightened her throat and tensed the muscles in her arms and legs. Her heart was beating as though she had run a marathon. The only thing that betrayed her anxiety was the slight, but frequent shifting of her arms and legs in the straps that bound her to the table. She knew that it was only a matter of minutes before she would be delivered a quick death. *If I gotta go, she sardonically thought, let's not drag it out.*

It was 11:56 pm, as measured in the Mountain Time Zone on Earth, on a February evening in the execution theater of the ADX Florence Supermax Federal Prison in Florence, Colorado. A light, steady breeze blew in from the overhead vents, giving a slight, biting chill to the room. The overhead lighting lent a bright, fluorescent white glow to the room in stark contrast to the dim lighting cast on the spectators in the observation room just beyond the large, three segment window. Sandra struggled against the straps that bound her hands, legs and torso – again, to no avail. *Dammit, she groused, internally. Gotta love those resistor straps.* She then relaxed her chafing limbs, relenting to the inevitable.

The Warden entered the room, his footsteps echoing in the sterile surroundings. A clean-shaven man in his early fifties, he stood at around 1.8 meters with a medium build and graying sandy-blonde hair. For this occasion, he exuded a commanding presence, much more so than the slovenly kempt man Sandra had first encountered upon her intake at the prison. He had dressed appropriately for the somber occasion, wearing a faded black suit that was slightly wrinkled with worn fabric. His off-white dress shirt strained against his

protruding abdomen - a long, vibrant blue tie adding a touch of color that attempted to hide a missing button. A gleaming lapel pin on his suit clearly marked his position: Warden of ADX Florence.

He caught sight of the futile attempt by Sandra to break her bonds, then chuckled as he stepped up to within half a centimeter of her face and said, “Forget it, honey. Those resistor straps only tighten the more you resist.” He gave a gloating smile and added, “Face it, sweetheart – you’re on a one-way trip to hell. And the Doc and I,” he said as he indicated the young man in the teal medical garb of the prison medical staff, “are here to put you on the train.” He then cracked a yellow-toothed grin that reeked of days old tobacco.

“Good for you,” Sandra sarcastically replied. She stole her breath against the malicious odor and added, “I’ll see you there, lard ass.”

The Warden’s smile faded instantly, replaced by an indignant scowl. He then pursed his teeth against his lips and let fly a droplet of spittle, landing squarely on Sandra’s right cheek. Despite her instinct to flinch, Sandra’s expression remained unfazed, save for a blink of her eyes. “Screw you,” he growled silently at her.

Sandra snickered and replied, “You wish you could.”

The Warden just closed his mouth and let out a slightly angry breath through his nose before stepping away from Sandra and closer to the observation window. He cleared his throat, raised the data tablet in his right hand and began to speak to the gathered crowd.

“Let it be known to all present,” the Warden said in an authoritative tone, “that this woman, having been tried by a lawfully appointed judge in good standing, and by a jury of her peers, in accordance with Title 18, U.S. Code Section 7, Subsection 1111 of the United States

of America and its exoplanetary territories, and having been found guilty of her crimes, is hereby sentenced to be executed by way of lethal injection on this day, the 25th of February, 2135."

The small crowd replied with interspersed murmurs comprising of epithets and curses, as well as such angry requests as "Let the bitch suffer!" and "Burn in Hell, whore of Satan!", all of which the Warden let Sandra hear after "accidentally" engaging the two-way function on the room's speakers. Sandra kept her eyes towards the ceiling, focusing her ears only on the sound of the lightly blowing breeze. There was a pronounced and highly localized chill on her face from the Warden's spittle as the recirculated air made contact with it. The sensation made her face twinge slightly. The Warden walked back over to Sandra and stood at her right side as he read more from the tablet in his hand.

"Sandra Darlene Barton," the Warden stated, "having been found guilty of and convicted for the premeditated murder of forty men, women and children as the result of explosive devices detonated by you on the cargo and passenger transport *Elysium*, sentence is to be carried out at 0000 hours for your crimes. Do you have any last words before sentence is passed?"

Sandra merely replied by taking in a slow, deep breath and releasing it just as slowly – her gaze never moving from the ceiling above. *Just get it over with already*, Sandra thought with all the calm she could muster.

The Warden gave a silent snicker as he turned from Sandra to the Doctor, nodded and said, "Proceed."

The young, fair-haired doctor nodded in acknowledgement and set about his lethal task. He picked up the matte black injector cuff and walked it over to the execution table, placing it temporarily on the side. He then removed an alcohol swab from the pocket of his medical scrubs, tore it open, and began to swab over an area on the inside of Sandra's forearm. This elicited a slight chuckle from her at the irony of what the doctor was doing – swabbing the injection site on the arm of a person about to die.

“Thanks, doc,” she sarcastically said with a mocking smile. “I sure wouldn’t want to wind up in hell with an infection.”

The doctor simply looked at Sandra with an even expression as he finished his task, discarding the used swab. He then set about clamping the cuff around Sandra’s right forearm. Sandra felt the needle inside the cuff pierce slightly into the vein of her inner forearm and let out an involuntary hiss of discomfort at the sensation. *Any minute now*, she thought. The doctor then stepped behind the table and wheeled over the machine containing the combination of drugs and chemicals to be administered into Sandra’s body. He removed the flexible plastic tube and plugged one end into the feed mechanism of the chemical delivery machine, then proceeded to plug the other end into the receptacle on the outside of the injector cuff, securing it tightly with a click. After ensuring both ends of the tube were secure, the young doctor looked over to the Warden and gave an approving nod.

The Warden returned the nod and motioned for the doctor to step aside. He then made his way back over to Sandra’s side, looking over to the LCD wall clock. Sandra followed his gaze and saw what he was looking at. The time read 11:59 PM exactly. The Warden then looked down at Sandra with a neutral gaze.

“Sandra Darlene Barton,” he stated, “a compound of lethal chemicals shall now be passed through your body until you are dead, in accordance with state, federal and planetary law. May God have mercy on your soul.” He then stepped away from the execution table and positioned himself by the viewing windows.

Sandra looked back at the wall clock one more time. It read 11:59 and 13 seconds. She turned her head back to looking at the ceiling above her. In that moment, the reality of what was about to happen to her set in. Even though the logical part of her mind knew it was an exercise in futility, a feeling of sheer desperation engulfed her emotions as she gathered up her strength and wrestled her arms and legs, one last time, against the straps holding her to the table. The internal sensors of the resistor straps, sensing the kinetic energy being exerted against them, responded by increasing the tension against her limbs and retracting into the table itself. She continued to fight against the ever-increasing resistance of the straps until she could feel the burning of her muscles in her arms and legs. The pain of her exertions intensified, making her feel as though a limb would surely break if she persisted.

Her struggle suddenly stopped as she felt a sharp tingle where the needle of the injector cuff pierced deeper into her forearm. A feeling of warmth began at the injection site and spread rapidly up her arm. Sandra knew that the lethal compound was coursing through her at that point. She knew the sedative properties of the injection was already beginning to affect her senses as her grasp on the world around her began to falter. Her sight became more blurred with each passing second, and the sounds around her faded steadily into oblivion.

Dammit, she thought, as the world around her faded to black. That's it. Recalling a single name in her final moments, she thought; See you in hell, Wang.

"Timer's set," she called out from under her mask. "30 seconds!"

"Good," the masked man replied, his rifle trained on the uniformed crew in front of him. "Hear that, assholes?!" The man then said to the six in front of him, kneeling with their hands behind their heads. "We're gonna be rich!"

"I keep telling you," one of the captive men in a white jumpsuit pleaded, "there's nothing in..."

The man's words were cut off as the man holding the rifle slammed the butt of it across the other man's face. "SHUT IT!" he yelled to the man in the jumpsuit.

"Save it, W!" she sniped at the man as she moved quickly to a safe distance away from the armoire-sized vault. Seconds later, the small, shaped SEMTEX 40 explosive charge exploded with a loud bang, reverberating slightly in the small cargo hold the eight occupants shared at that moment. After the noise died down, she moved back to the vault, swiping her hand in front of her to clear the smoke away. Once the smoke cleared, she focused her sight on the contents of the vault. And saw nothing but what looked like old style accordion file folders and various actual paper documents – all now slightly charred by the resultant explosion.

She was shocked at the revelation, thinking there was hard currency to be found, then becoming angry at the sight. "It's not here!!" she yelled. She then started to turn to the man called W and started to shout, "The money's not he-

Her sentence was never finished, as the abrupt sight of a rifle butt approached her face and made contact, giving a brief moment of sharp pain, followed quickly by unconsciousness.

Groggily, her vision began to clear as her surroundings came into focus. While it took a moment to register, she realized that she was fastened in the safety harness of a four-person emergency escape vehicle, and she was the sole occupant! As her vision focused more clearly, she saw what appeared to be a stuffed duffle bag float across her field of vision in the zero-G environment of the pod. Soon after, the starfield beyond became obscured by the sight of a ship decelerating to a stop, followed by the blinding white light of an exterior searchlight, causing her surroundings to be bathed in pure, bright whiteness.

The light moved away and, as the haze in her mind started to slowly subside, she was able to see a fair-haired man moving the light away from her field of vision. Though still somewhat blurred, she could make out that it was a man, wearing teal-colored scrubs, and the device in his hands was a pen light of some kind. The light moved across her sight again, forcing her consciousness to compel her other eye to open to aid in focusing on the world around her.

Is this how you arrive in hell? Sandra questioned, recalling what had just happened to her not moments before. They give you a check-up?

The blurriness faded and brought a dark room, aside from a dim light coming from above Sandra's head, into focus. The teal clad figure became recognizable to Sandra after a moment – the young doctor who delivered the injection. Startled by the sudden sights, Sandra

found the strength to snap her right arm up and grab the wrist of the man only centimeters from her face. The sudden grasp of Sandra's hand caused him to grunt involuntarily, dropping the light onto the bed she then saw that she was lying in. A quick survey of her surroundings gave her what she needed to know about where she was and what was going on.

A hospital room! She thought, loudly. I'm not dead! What the fuck?!

"I'd let go of him," a mysterious male voice stated, calmly, "if I were you."

Shock and anger welled up in her rapidly as Sandra blurted out into the dimness of the room, "Who is that?! What's going on?! Where the hell am I?!" The young doctor had grasped his free hand over Sandra's strong grip at that point in an attempt to free himself from her obvious anger.

"Let go of the good doctor's hand," the mysterious voice replied, "and I'll be happy to answer all your questions." There was a brief pause before the voice added, "Well, at least the ones I can answer right now, anyway."

Sandra quickly tried to focus her sight on where the mystery voice was coming from, and was only able to make out a figure sitting in a chair against the wall opposite the end of her bed. Given the level of light in the room, she could only make out a male figure. She shifted her attention back to the doctor, struggling in vain to free his clasped hand from Sandra's vice-like grip, and looked him in the eye with a mix of anger and anxiety. After another moment, she abruptly let go of his hand. The doctor reflexively grasped his wrist and quickly stepped back from the bed. Sandra immediately grabbed the discarded pen light and shined the weak light in the direction of the mystery man in the chair. The doctor then circled

around the end of Sandra's bed to the other side, putting more distance between him and the semi-violent woman on the bed before him.

The chair was occupied by a young looking man – possibly late twenties to early thirties – wearing a gray suit jacket and matching slacks with a plain white dress shirt and a plain black tie. He wore his short brown hair parted on the right, looking only slightly disheveled. He had blue-gray eyes and his skin showed the light, telltale pock marks of severe acne, as well as the slightest hint of a feeble attempt at getting a tan. He reflexively brought his hand up to block the light, but then immediately lowered it in the face of the weak brightness of it. Rising from the chair, he stepped slowly over to Sandra's right side, reaching into his left jacket pocket as he did. As he reached Sandra's side, he produced a small, handheld digital display device and activated the screen, revealing a digital ID badge belonging to the United States Marshals Service.

"Art Cahill," the young mystery man stated as he flashed the ID. "Deputy U.S. Marshal." He then replaced the digital badge into his jacket and said, "I wanted to be here when you woke up. We need to talk."

There was a brief moment of dead silence, after which Sandra, once again, acted on her feelings of rage and anxiety and shot her arm to the young deputy's throat, clasping her fingers tightly as her grip found purchase of the form of the larynx and esophagus beneath. She felt her anger grow as it became mixed with gratification as her fingers clasped tighter, causing the young Deputy Marshal to gag and gasp under the choking grip. The young man's hands instantly went to Sandra's in an attempt to unclasp it from his neck to no avail, much to Cahill's dismay and terror.

After gagging and gurgling for a few seconds, he managed to desperately eke out the word, “Doc!” The doctor replied by fumbling quickly on the rolling table tray that was in the room – the sound of plastic thudding against a faux wood surface. Seconds later, Sandra felt the sharp pain of an object being jabbed into her left leg. Her focus had been so intent on the Deputy that she did not realize what the doctor had done to her until she started to feel an instant wave of drowsiness enveloping her. She fought against the rapidly blurring vision and the distorted sounds around her, but eventually fell victim to the fast-acting sedative she had just received. Before her world went dark, once again, she could hear Cahill cough after being freed of her death grip, then his steadily warping voice exclaim, “Who thought this was a good idea again?!”

Grogginess greeted Sandra once more as her vision tried to come into focus. She immediately recognized the hospital room she had just experienced however long ago, only better lit. She saw no sign of the young doctor whose wrist she probably injured. She did, however, catch sight of the Deputy Marshal she tried to kill, as he walked towards the foot of her bed. She instinctively shot up in her bed, only to find her arms restrained. She looked down and saw the familiar sight of resistor straps around her wrists. The sight was immediately confirmed as she tried to struggle against them, only to be rewarded with the sensation of having her wrists pulled against, painfully. Knowing how futile it was to continue, she eased up and fell back into the bed with a grunt, her teeth ground together in anger.

“Just a little precaution,” Deputy Cahill stated, “given how our last conversation went. Now, I was hoping we could have a more civil conversation this time. That all right?”

Sandra looked into Cahill's eyes with contempt and turned her head away.

"Close enough," Cahill quietly replied. He then pressed the controls on the side of Sandra's bed and raised her upper body into an inclined position. Walking back to the foot of the bed, he rested his hands on the raised edge. "Now, in case you forgot, I'm..."

"Art Cahill," Sandra finished, grumbling, "Deputy U.S. Marshal. I remember." She then turned her head to face Cahill. "Why am I not dead?"

Cahill drummed his fingers on the bed before standing up straight and replying, "Oh, but you are - at least officially. Sandra Darlene Barton was lawfully executed for the crime of multiple homicide on 25 February 2135." He paused for a moment, then added as he walked over to the right side of her bed, "That was two weeks ago."

Sandra wrinkled her eyebrows at Cahill's statement. Cahill then continued.

"See," he stated, "you've been in a medically induced coma during that time." He then looked around the room, opening a drawer in one of the nightstands. He produced a handheld mirror and placed it in front of Sandra's face as he said, "We made a few changes during that time."

Sandra turned her eyes to the small handheld mirror and looked, immediately shocked and angered at what she saw. Instead of the round faced woman with neck length blonde hair and blue eyes, she saw a woman's face with a prominent jawline, sporting short, wavy black hair. The blue eyes were the only thing that remained unchanged. She turned her head to different angles, her look that of disbelief of what she saw staring back at her. She turned to Cahill with fury in her eyes and yelled, "What the fuck did you do to me?!"

Cahill raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips and calmly replied, “Just did some work on you.” Sandra then looked down at the rest of herself, covered by bedsheets and the gown she wore. Cahill then added, “Just your face. Believe me, the rest of you was just fine.” Cahill then closed his eyes, shook his head slightly and said, “Sorry. That was incredibly insensitive and off-color, wasn’t it? My apologies.”

Sandra once again fought against the resistor straps holding her to the bed, her teeth gritted in rage and pain as the cuffs threatened to break her wrists. She then relented and fell back onto the bed again, panting lightly through her teeth, looking at Cahill. “Yeah, you were probably in the room, pervin’ on me while I was under, weren’t you? You look like the type, you little shit!”

Cahill put his hand over his heart in playful indignation and replied, “I’m hurt that you would think I would do something like that. Really.” He dropped his hand and added in a snarky tone, “Besides, don’t flatter yourself, honey. I’m happily spoken for.”

Sandra chortled and replied, “Yeah, and I bet she gives you a great discount, too.”

Cahill scoffed and replied, “Funny. Now, why don’t we talk for a moment, shall we?”

Sandra spat at Cahill and yelled, “Go to hell!”

Cahill calmly wiped the spittle from his face as he turned to walk away further into the room and replied, “Let’s keep it calm, now.”

“Fuck you!” Sandra screamed.

“You can either calm down and talk to me,” Cahill replied as he turned on his heels, “or I can get a medtech in here to put you under again until you can.”

“Bullshit,” Sandra replied with narrow eyes.

Cahill took a few steps forward, placed his hands on the edge of her bed again, looked her in the eye angrily and replied, “Try me. Now, what’s it going to be?” He then stared at her intently, waiting for her next response. Sandra stared back at him for a long, quiet, tense moment, then let out a relented sigh. Cahill then stood up straight and said, “Good.” He then took a chair from the nearby wall, brought it next to the right side of Sandra’s bed and sat down before speaking again. “Now, as I mentioned before, I know you have a lot of questions, and I’ll be happy to answer the ones I’m able to answer. But, we’ll get to that in a minute. Let’s review some things first.” Cahill leaned back in his seat and looked up and to the left as if recalling something. “Sandra Darlene Barton. Age, 32. Born 16 June 2102 in Seattle, Washington. Formerly Staff Sergeant Sandra Barton, U.S. Army Rangers. Served with distinction in the Army for twelve years. Spent seven of them in the Rangers. Aptitudes include close combat, small arms marksmanship and, last but not least, explosive ordinance and demolitions expertise. Was dishonorably discharged from the Army two years ago amidst charges of gross insubordination and conduct unbecoming a member of the United States Armed Forces. The word is you had become disenfranchised with the military over, how did your former CO say you put it, ‘unbelievable caving to corporate and political bullshit?’ How am I doing so far?”

Sandra simply remained silent as she stared ahead, simmering in her emotions. “I’ll just assume I’m right then,” Cahill replied. “After being cashiered out of the Army, you tried to get work in the civilian world, only to find that there was no call for a disgraced ex-Ranger, close combat, crack shot, demolitions expert. That’s when you ended up meeting and falling in with three unusual and rather unscrupulous individuals.” Cahill then rose from

his seat and went back over to the nearby wall to retrieve his aluminum attaché case. He then placed it on the rollaway tray table for Sandra's bed, opened it and pulled out a handheld data tablet. He activated it and tapped a few touchscreen panels, then showed it to Sandra.

Sandra shifted her eyes slightly to see a picture of an unfamiliar, youthful Asian male, next to the familiar face of an Asian male with a completely shaved head, chiseled features and a well-manicured goatee.

"Wang Yuxan," Cahill said. "Born Liu Jietang in Jishou City, Hunan Province, People's Republic of China, 24 May 2093. Mother and father were both factory workers, living in a tenement apartment block. Given his rather disturbing psych profile, this didn't sit well with young Jietang. Thankfully, his academic aptitude tests landed him a scholarship to a rather prestigious prep school in Changsha. There, he excelled in the fields of business and finance, whilst also finding time to be instructed in the fine and deadly art of Krav Maga Tactical Knife Fighting – a rather dangerous hobby, if you ask me. After graduating from said prep school, under Chinese law, he was made to perform compulsory military service sometime in 2111. Somewhere between that time and 2113, Jietang reportedly suffered a fatal accident, along with his Commanding Officer. The details of that accident have been classified by the Chinese government, but it was confirmed that his body was never found. However, as confirmed by DNA testing, he would later resurface as your ersatz benefactor - Wang Yuxan."

He then tapped some additional panels on his tablet and replaced the face of Wang with the face of a Hispanic female in her late twenties. She had spiky black hair and puffy lips with a prominent scar on her right cheek, with a smolderingly angry expression on her face. "This cheerful young woman," Cahill stated, "is Magdelena Villalobos Menendez, born 15 August

2107. Tried to join the Army herself with aspirations of becoming a VTOL combat pilot. Thankfully, due to her being evaluated as ‘violently and emotionally unstable,’ she was rejected by the Army, forcing her to turn to more ‘mercenary’ means to pursue her career in combat aviation. Said skills became useful as the group’s ‘wheelman,’ to use the old term.” Cahill then brought up the face of a Caucasian male in what looked like his early forties with curly, dark, oily looking hair, a soup strainer mustache, and a face only a mother could love. “And this prime example of manhood is Wayne Alexander Fulbright, born 16 January 2095 in Denver, Colorado. Is known also as ‘Insane Wayne’ Fulbright, on account of the fact that he is diagnosed with actual Dissociative Identity Disorder or, more colorfully known as Multiple Personality Disorder. One personality is a violent, gun-wielding psychotic who fancies himself a lady’s man – the one that always seems to rear its ugly head during one of your heists – and the other is more of a cold, intellectual and calculating psychotic, the one that is apparently the planner of the group, but will also put a bullet between a person’s eyes if his mood is so inclined.” He gently tossed the tablet onto Sandra’s legs, causing her to involuntarily wince at the impact of the device. Cahill then continued, “After that serendipitous meeting, you spent the next two years running with them, where you utilized your skillset to aid these ‘people’ in successfully hitting about three dozen different high value marks – among them, four transports carrying gold and platinum bullion, marked for Federal Reserve Depositories on Mars and Titan. And, because most of these targets were associated with the United States government and large corporate entities, they just happened to fall in line with your disdain for the government and corporations in general, and you happily went along with their operations. And, for two years, you were successful. That is, until about two months ago,

when you were literally left holding the bag for a robbery gone horribly wrong,” he leaned in and added, “and forty murders that you didn’t commit.”

Cahill’s statement about the forty deaths grabbed Sandra’s attention as she turned her head slightly to meet his gaze – a mixed expression of surprise and anger on her face.

“That’s right,” Cahill said. “I know you didn’t do it. Despite what the evidence showed, you didn’t do it. While the type of explosive used fit your usual M.O., according to the forensic reconstruction of the explosion, the sheer amount and placement of the explosives used didn’t scream ‘demolitions expert.’ More like ‘I like to watch things go BOOM!’ You were definitely set up.”

Sandra looked at Cahill with dagger-like eyes and seethed, “Well, that’s just great! Why the hell didn’t you say anything at that bullshit trial of mine?!”

Cahill looked sheepish as he replied, “Because, I was only able to finally get my hands on the evidence and do that analysis on the day of your execution. When we did, those higher up the ladder than me decided, rather than stay your execution, you could be better used for some other purpose.”

Sandra looked angrily at Cahill and blurted, “Like what?!”

“A way to take your ‘associates’ down,” Cahill responded. “Or at least, a way to take Wang down. And don’t tell me the thought of some payback for what they did to you hasn’t crossed your angry little mind.”

Sandra looked into Cahill’s eyes with simmering fury for a long moment, then settled back down into her bed – her expression still one of disdain. She then asked, “Is that why you

faked my execution and shuffled my face around? To try and get Wayne, Maggie and Wang?

Why? What's stopping you from getting them yourself?"

Cahill started to meander away from Sandra towards the door as he said, "Well, I don't know if your pal Wang told you this, but this isn't the first time he's left a 'friend' to hang in the solar winds. In fact you, Menendez and Fulbright are the" Cahill counted with his fingers on one hand for a few seconds before finally saying, "tenth crew he's had in about ten years. At one point, he had even been caught and apprehended back in '31 – sentenced to 25 years hard labor on Io. Incidentally, that's how we were able to make the connection between Liu Jietang and Wang Yuxan. But, he managed to 'extricate' himself from there, thanks to that silver tongue of his, as well as a well-staged riot in the work prison there. As a result, he is a fugitive from lawful incarceration, and therefore under the purview of the United States Marshal Services for fugitive retrieval." Cahill then turned and started to slowly walk back towards Sandra's bed as he said, "However, the shifty little S.O.B. has used his very extensive network of connections to stay ahead of the Marshals at every turn since then – each time, throwing someone from, or all of his crew, under the proverbial bus and making them take the fall for something whenever he thought we were getting close to capturing him. Then, he goes to ground for a little while, until he finds more 'volunteers' for his 'get rich quick schemes.' You, unfortunately, had the honor of being the first that got set up for multiple homicides – which went against the psych profile the Feds put together on you, indicating that you never have, nor would you ever willingly harm non-combatants. But, the evidence, according to the jury, outweighed your profile and...well, you know the rest."

Sandra just lay in bed, staring straight ahead, absorbing all that was being said to her. She knew Cahill was right about Wang’s “silver tongue.” She remembered meeting Wang for a face-to-face, to discuss joining his crew. After talking to him for only five minutes, he had managed to get out of her the disgust she had for the military caving in to political and corporate pressures and interests. That’s how she was convinced to join the crew, in the end. She had taken the bait – hook, line and sinker. Her anger still simmered, but had subsided enough for her to face Cahill again. “So,” she finally said to Cahill, “what’s the deal?”

Cahill gave a wry smile and replied, “Funny you should say that, because there actually is a deal. As we’ve established, Sandra Barton is officially dead. You’ve been given a new face, new fingerprints, and even a new name.”

Cahill paused as he knew that she had actually NOT been given a new name or official identity – yet. His eyes happened to glance at the medical bed, particularly at the manufacturing and distribution information on one of the side panels. He saw that it was from a company called Innovative Outcomes, Inc., in Denton, Texas. Searching his mind in that moment for a first name for the former Sandra Barton, he then looked at Sandra and said, “Denton. Sara Denton. A lot of thought went into that identity.” He then turned his back to Sandra, hoping she didn’t catch the fact that he had just pulled her “identity” out of thin air.

Sandra scoffed and said, “Sara? Really? That’s the best you could come up with?”

Cahill turned back to her with a sarcastic tone and replied, “Well, I’m sorry we didn’t consult you about your choice of a new name. You were...indisposed at the time. Besides, we thought it would be easier to adjust to, being so close to your old name.”

Sandra rolled her eyes slightly and shook her head before replying, “Right. You pulled that name out of your ass, and you know it. So, about this deal?”

Cahill chuckled, knowing he had been called out on his lie. He held up a finger to acknowledge her point, then stated, “You’ve been given a second chance at life. And, in return, you will be charged with the duty of apprehending and retrieving your former associates - Menendez, Wang and Fulbright – as an undercover Deputy U.S. Marshal.”

There was a pause before Sandra chuckled loudly at the statement that just came from Cahill’s mouth. Seeing how Cahill’s expression remained even, Sandra simply asked, “Are you serious? I have no trust in the government, much less law enforcement anymore, and you want to...deputize me and make me bring those three back for you?”

Cahill nodded his head and evenly replied, “Yeah. That’s about it. We figure you know them well enough to know how they operate – where they might go, what they might do. Plus, they think you’re dead, so most likely, they’d never see something like this – or you – coming.”

Sandra shook her head and looked away again, incredulousness apparent in her eyes. Cahill looked Sandra in the eye with a reassuring expression and said, “Come on. Like I said, it’s a second chance at life. You’re essentially being given full pardon for all your past crimes. It’s your actual clean slate. Plus, and I pointed this out before as well, you’ll have a chance at some payback against the ones who hung you out to dry. That’s got to appeal to you on some level.”

He’s not entirely wrong there, Sandra thought with a hint of glee. Finding those sons of bitches and making them pay for what they did? It does sound tempting. But, is it worth being leashed to the Marshals?

Sandra looked at Cahill with a seriously concerned expression and asked, “And, suppose I say no?”

Cahill shrugged his shoulders as he folded his arms, let out a quick sigh and replied, “Then, you’re a dead woman – for real. And we already have a coffin for you. Convenient.”

Sandra’s expression changed to a combination of somber contemplation and lightly smoldering disdain as she said, “Some choice.”

“But,” Cahill replied, “it is a choice.”

Sandra looked intently at Cahill’s face, as if trying to read through the veneer of his pock-marked face and cheap suit to what was underneath. She then asked, “Someone else must be involved. The Marshals wouldn’t go to all the trouble of setting me up with a new face, fingerprints and ID, just to threaten me with killing me off if I said no. Who else is involved with this?”

Cahill smirked as he said, “Let’s just say that certain Federal and international interests are involved. That’s all I can say, because that’s all I was told. But, essentially, you’re right. They’re the ones who said that if you turned this offer down, your death would be made truly ‘official.’” He paused for a moment before adding, “Sorry.”

Sandra just nodded her head slowly and let out a long exhale through her nose as she looked at the wall again. “No choice, then. Not if I want to stay above ground, that is.”

Cahill nodded and silently returned, “Yeah. No choice.”

Sandra absently nodded, saying nothing. A pervasive silence hung in the room for what seemed like an eternity. She then let out a sigh, looked at her resistor straps, then looked at Cahill again and asked, “So, you want to take these off? I promise, I’ll be good.”

Cahill gave a wry smile as he stepped to the side of the bed and pressed a single button on the side. A second later, the straps around Sara's wrists snapped open and she removed her hands from their painful grip, rubbing her wrists reflexively. Cahill then looked at Sara and said, "One thing I want to make very clear to you. This deal is dependent on one very important thing – non-negotiable." Sara looked at Cahill questioningly as he stated, "At the very least, Wang Yuxan has to be brought in alive. If he somehow ends up dead at any point during his apprehension or transport back to us, the deal is null and void and...well, you know."

Sara looked at Cahill with wide eyes, tinged with disbelief and disappointment. *Bullshit!* She screamed in her mind. *That asshole deserves one between the eyes for what he did!!! So do the rest!!!*

Having seen the look in Sara's eyes, Cahill immediately stated, "Like I said – non-negotiable. Understood?"

Sara opened her mouth, as if to protest the imposition of this asinine rule. She then shut her mouth and nodded curtly, begrudgingly acknowledging the condition imposed on her.

"Fine," Cahill said with a quick nod. "Now, let's get you dressed. I'll get you some clothes we picked out while you were asleep. Be right back." He then turned on his heels and walked out of the room, the door closing slowly and lazily behind him.

Sara leaned forward in her bed, rubbing her face in her hands. "I don't care what you and the rest say, Cahill," Sara murmured in a low register. "I find him, he's dead. Be worth dying again to send that prick to Hell." She snickered lightly and added, "Definitely worth it."

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