

Toxicity

By CJ Lyons

Dr. Gina Freeman was used to getting what she wanted. A tall black woman--over six feet tall in the Jimmy Choo stilettos the police had confiscated--she had the power to quiet rambling drunks, disarm quarrelsome old men, and distract whining college boys as she popped their dislocated joints back into socket.

Usually. Right now these talents were useless. Might have had something to do with her being handcuffed like a common criminal.

"Do you know who my father is?" she demanded of the desk sergeant seated behind the bullet-proof lobby window of Pittsburgh's Zone Five Station House.

He didn't pause in his typing. They'd had this conversation twice already. "Lady, I keep telling you, what I need is proof of who you are. I really don't give a crap who your old man is."

"He's Moses Freeman. The lawyer. The very famous lawyer who is having dinner at Judge Sandler's house as we speak."

"Good on them. Hope they're having steak. Boy, what I wouldn't do for a nice steak. Wife's got me on this diet, all tofu and couscous and crap." He paused, gazing at his computer screen with a wistful expression. "Hell, I'd settle for a chipped-chopped ham sandwich. With a side of fries from The O."

Gina rattled the handcuffs, focusing him on the immediate problem once more. If this was her tax dollars at work, she was not impressed. The Zone Five station house was bleak--not totally surprising, given its location in East Liberty, not the nicest Pittsburgh neighborhood--but expecting her to sit on a hard wooden slab of a bench with her wrist shackled to a steel ring was absurd.

"I haven't done anything wrong," she insisted for the twenty-third time.

"Tell that to Jansen. His foot is swollen bigger than an elephant's nuts. And his nuts are swollen bigger than--"

"He shouldn't have grabbed me from behind like that. How was I to know he was a police officer? This is all a total misunderstanding. If you'd just remove these handcuffs and let me call my father--"

"Moses Freeman. Yeah, yeah, you said." He continued his hunt and peck across the computer keyboard. "Told ya, no phone calls until we get you processed."

"I don't need processed. I didn't do anything wrong."

"Those restaurant owners would disagree. Jansen said the bill you tried to run out on was over \$500. Think that might bump things up to a felony. Add to it resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, drunk and disorderly...." He clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Glad you're not my daughter, that's all I can say."

"I told you. My purse was stolen. Not my fault."

"Lost your purse, lost your date, lost your temper. Guess nothing's your fault is it?"

Gina decided to ignore the last comment. It had been her first date with Pierre--if that was even his real name. He'd seemed decent enough when they met at the gym earlier today, but obviously, once again her

judgment of men was lacking. It galled her to think of him enjoying the expensive meal at the trendiest restaurant in Shadyside, swilling her favorite Chateau Neuf de Pape, much less the idea of him behind the wheel of her BMW.

She yanked on the handcuff. Designed to immobilize men much larger than her, it didn't budge. Anger crackled through her--at the cops, at Pierre, mostly at herself.

The spaghetti straps of her Roberto Cavalli cocktail dress drifted down over her arms, but she had more than enough of a bust to hold the dress up. Hmmm, unless letting it slip down might convince the sergeant to uncuff her?

Before she could put her plan into action, the doors opened and a woman around Gina's age, mid-twenties, entered, a drift of snow arriving with her. She had blonde hair, was made up for a casual date--hair done and sprayed into place against the March wind, nice sweater and jeans, makeup not over done and just a whiff of perfume. Something cheap that made Gina's nose itch.

"Are you who I talk to?" she asked, approaching the desk sergeant with a wobbly gait, balancing on the kitten heels of black leather boots. Up close, Gina could see that her upper lip was bloody and swollen, making her lisp the tiniest bit.

"Lady, I'm who everyone talks to," he said with a pointed glare at Gina. "What can we do for you?"

"I think somebody is trying to kill me."

"Name?" the sergeant said, sounding bored and unimpressed by the girl's statement, holding the phone to his ear with one hand and drinking his coffee with the other. He hadn't offered Gina any. And he didn't look cold at all--probably had a space heater back there behind the glass with him, more of her tax dollars going to waste.

"Melissa Schultz." The girl opened her purse, grabbed a wallet and fumbled her driver's license through the slot in the window for the sergeant to examine. She tugged at the collar of her sweater. "It's hot in here."

Gina was freezing--but she had no coat, no hose, no shoes, only her wisp of a dress. The sergeant took another phone call and Melissa paced the small foyer with faltering steps. Finally she came to a stop, sinking onto the bench beside Gina.

Melissa closed her eyes, revealing blue glitter eye shadow and clumps of black mascara. Beads of sweat blossomed on her forehead. "I don't feel so good. I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Nerves. Put your head between your knees, see if that helps." Gina massaged Melissa's neck as she leaned forward. "Hey buddy, where's the ladies room?"

The cop pointed his pen across the lobby.

"Want to uncuff me so I can help her there? Or would you rather she puke all over your floor?" He hesitated and she shot him her best glare. "C'mon. I'm a doctor, she's sick."

Instead of coming to her aid, the sergeant picked up the phone again. Melissa made a choking sound and raised her head.

"Hard to breathe," she gasped.

The swelling around her lip had progressed dramatically, now her entire face was mottled and swollen.

"Hell." Gina pushed Melissa back up to a sitting position, keeping her head elevated and propping her up against the wall behind them. The girl's breathing was noisy, whistling with every inhalation. "Hell, hell, hell. Melissa, are you allergic to anything?"

Melissa's eyes were closed down to small slits and she couldn't talk, but she managed to nod her head and flail an arm in the direction of her purse that now lay on the floor between them.

"Epi-pen?" Gina asked, straining to reach the purse with her uncuffed hand. Impossible. She hooked a bare foot through the strap and pulled it closer then scooped it up onto her lap. "Please tell me you have an Epi-pen here somewhere."

The sergeant lunged forward, pounding on the glass wall between them. Gina ignored him, awkwardly unlatching the purse and dumping its contents on her lap. Wallet, lipstick, tampons, breath mints, cell phone, wads of tissue, keys, pens, matchbook from a bar--ah hah! Her fingers closed on the grey tube that looked like a marking pen. The label read: use in case of anaphylaxis.

She pulled the cap off with her teeth and reached across her body to jab it into Melissa's thigh.

"Stop that!" the sergeant yelled just as the inside door opened and a man wearing a navy blue suit rushed out.

"What's going on here?" the man asked, ripping the Epi-pen from Gina's hand.

Melissa's body arched as the epinephrine--the same chemical as the body's own adrenaline--flooded her system.

"Let me out of these things," Gina demanded, straining to pull the handcuffs as she tried to keep Melissa upright. "She's going into shock."

"And who the hell are you?"

"Dr. Gina Freeman, I'm an ER resident over at Angels of Mercy."

"Hopkins said you were some kind of lawyer's daughter."

"Hopkins is a jackass, trying to teach me a lesson 'cause I embarrassed one of your cops. I really am a doctor."

The man, obviously a detective from his plain clothes and the gold shield on his belt, eyed the sergeant who shrank back.

"Call an ambulance," he ordered. Then he knelt beside Melissa, examining the Epi-pen. "Are you feeling better, Miss?"

Melissa barely had the energy to shake her head. She clutched at Gina's hand in panic.

"Peanuts." Her voice trailed off.

"Melissa did you eat some peanuts?" Gina asked. "You're allergic to peanuts, right?"

"Not-not me. Date. Must've--" Her breath whistled out her, the ominous sound of an airway being choked off.

The detective--who would have never have attracted Gina's attention under any other circumstances, he was too ordinary with brown hair and large brown eyes, just another Irish cop--glanced at Gina.

He didn't waste time with words, instead immediately released her from the handcuffs. "What do you need?"

"Any first aid kit you got--preferably one with drugs." Drugs including more epinephrine and other medications to combat the allergic reaction before Melissa's airway totally closed off. "How long for the ambulance?"

The sergeant was still on the phone. "Ten minutes." He glanced at the detective. "I got Jansen looking for a first aid kit, Boyle."

Boyle nodded, wadding up his suit coat to place under Melissa's head, keeping his hands there to support her airway. Not a total idiot, Gina noted with approval. She unbuttoned Melissa's sweater, this was no time for modesty, and found hives blossoming across the girl's chest.

"Her respirations are slowing," Gina noted, wishing to hell she was anywhere else--like the well-equipped Angels of Mercy ER where she'd have everything she needed to treat Melissa. It was so aggravating, knowing what needed done and sitting here, helpless.

"That's not good is it?" Boyle rocked back on his heels, obviously as frustrated as she was. "What can I do?"

Melissa gagged, her entire body arching as she vomited. Then she slid to the floor, unconscious. To his credit, Boyle didn't waste time dealing with the smelly stomach contents spewed onto his lap. Instead he immediately flipped Melissa over before she could aspirate any of the nasty fluid.

Gina knelt on the linoleum, hiking up her short skirt so she could bend forward and open Melissa's airway. "She stopped breathing."

She tired mouth to mouth, her own stomach rebelling at the acrid smell and foul taste. She couldn't force any air in, Melissa's tongue and throat had swollen too much. Gina sat back up. "I need to cric her."

Boyle handed her a handkerchief--what kind of guy carried handkerchiefs these days, and a clean one to boot?--and she wiped her mouth clean.

"What do you need?"

"An operating room and bronchoscope would be nice, an ENT surgeon better." She dug her fingernails into her palms, trying to still her rattled nerves. "Get me a knife. Anything sharp. And a plastic tube."

"A straw?"

She shook her head, her braids rattling free of their elaborate coiffeur. "Too flimsy. Something about that size around but stronger."

He dug a knife out of his pants pocket--a single bladed Emerson that looked wicked sharp--and handed it to her.

"How about this?" he asked, rummaging through the debris from Melissa's purse and coming up with a tampon. He stripped it free of its paper wrapping and unearthed the slim plastic tube that was tapered at one end.

"Perfect." She straddled Melissa, trying to feel through the swelling that had consumed the girl's neck. She

had to find the small plateau of tissue below the thyroid cartilage. But all she felt was mushy, fluid-filled tissue.

Panic surged through Gina, throttling her own breath. Damn it, she couldn't just blindly slice into this woman's neck with no landmarks to guide her. That might be how they did it on TV but this was real life with a real person's life in her hands--hands that trembled uncontrollably. Oh, this was not going to go well.

Boyle left her side for a moment, running to the restroom and returning with a bundle of paper towels, some wet, some dry. Melissa still had a pulse but she was turning an alarming shade of purple, highlighting the hives that had devoured her pretty features, turning her into something from a B-rated zombie movie.

"George Ramirez on crack," Boyle murmured as he knelt across from Gina.

She glanced at him, it was spooky the way he echoed her own thoughts and anticipated her needs. Her father always scoffed at cops, called them thugs licensed to kill, and her own experiences tonight seemed to reinforce that stereotype--until Boyle came along.

She aimed the knife as best she could. Only one chance to get this right. Her hand still shook. Boyle laid his hand over hers and she felt calmer.

"You ever do this before?" he asked.

"Once. On a dog. In the trauma lab." Under sterile conditions, the dog totally anesthetized, with two lab partners to help her identify surgical landmarks twice as large and easy to find than they were in a human.

He pursed his lips, didn't patronize her with any false assurances. "Talk it through."

An uniformed cop, Jansen the one she had hit when he had surprised her at the restaurant, rushed through the inner door. Gina looked up, surprised to see several uniformed officers and two in plain clothes surrounding them. No paramedics though--she'd kill for a good street medic right now.

Jansen thrust a small white box with a red cross emblazoned across it at her. "Best I could find."

"How long until the medics are here?" Boyle asked as she searched through the first aid kit. It was basic, nothing here she could use except some Betadine and gauze pads. Not even a scalpel. Just her luck.

"Five minutes they say."

Too long. Gina poured the Betadine over Melissa's neck and aimed her knife again. She held her breath, steadying herself. She could do this. She had to do this. If not, Melissa was dead.

Boyle motioned for the cops to give her room. He blotted the brown antiseptic dry, giving her a better view. But a view wouldn't help, she needed to feel it.

She slid her fingers down Melissa's neck, concentrating her entire being on what she felt below her fingertips.

"What are you looking for?" Boyle asked, his voice calm, commanding.

"The crico-thyroid membrane," Gina answered. Her hand stopped its trembling. "Small piece of tissue that--there."

Finally certain--well, at least half-way certain--of her target, she sliced the skin open.

"Vertical through the skin, horizontal through the trachea," she mumbled. Blood sluiced over her fingers, obscuring her vision. "Damn, maybe it's the other way around?"

Boyle quickly mopped up the blood, holding open the skin edges with his fingers. "No. Keep going. What next?"

"Got to find the membrane. I can't see anything, it's all swollen, messed up." She fumbled, holding the knife upside down, probing with the blunt edge. Didn't work as well as a scalpel. She swallowed hard as panic sliced through her. "How the hell am I supposed to do anything without the proper equipment?"

"You're doing fine," he said as if he knew what the hell he was talking about. He pressed down on a particularly stubborn area of bleeding, staunching it. "Does it help if I stretch it open a bit like this?"

"Yeah, that's good." A tantalizing glimpse of shiny white membrane slid past her field of vision. "There. Right there."

Before she could lose her courage, she stabbed the blade through the tissue and was rewarded with a gush of air. She grabbed the tampon tube and shoved it into the hole before the swelling could force it closed again. Boyle clamped his fingers around the slim plastic tube while Gina tried blowing into it. This time air moved freely, expanding Melissa's lungs.

"Nice work." Boyle met her gaze. Despite everything--the blood, the vomit, the cold biting her skin--she returned his smile.

The front doors burst open, paramedics and equipment entering the station with a flurry of noise. The medics applauded Gina's efforts, she helped them thread an endotracheal tube through the opening she had made, then they bagged oxygen into Melissa and began an IV, packaging her for transport with efficient movements. "You coming with, doc?"

Boyle took Gina's blood-stained hand and helped her to her feet. She was standing in blood, Betadine, and unknown stomach contents, her toes squishing. The same unpleasant fluids and smells covered her dress as well. Probably her face and hair.

Despite that, Boyle didn't let go of her hand--of course he was similarly attired in bio-hazards.

"We'll both go," he said, retrieving his coat from the bench and wrapping it around Gina as they followed the stretcher out.

The cold air sliced through Gina's wet clothes and bare skin. While the medics wrestled the stretcher onto the ambulance, two patrol officers appeared with Pierre, Gina's date, walking between them, his hands cuffed behind him.

"Pierre!" she called out. "You found him!"

"Yeah, emptying out your house," one of the officers answered.

Pierre didn't even have the grace to appear embarrassed. He simply grinned at her and shrugged.

"Too bad about your car," the second officer said as they escorted Pierre inside. "We'll keep looking for it, though."

Numb with cold and disbelief, Gina allowed Boyle to help her inside the ambulance. He handed her a blanket

to wrap around her bare legs.

"She doing okay?" Gina asked the medics.

"Heart rate nice and steady, swelling starting to come down with the Benadryl and steroids. You did good, doc."

She sank back, relieved that at least she'd made one good choice tonight.

"His real name isn't Pierre," Boyle said. "It's Toby Klemens. Hit and run specialist."

"Hit and run?" Gina blinked. Yeah, that was about how she felt.

"Hit and run, snatch and grab. You know, short cons--one night, a few hours at most. Has a record in three states."

"So, all the time the sergeant downstairs was ignoring me--"

"I was upstairs doing my job. When I heard your purse and car were missing, I figured he'd hit your house."

"But the sergeant--"

"He was just letting you cool your heels--assaulting an officer is no laughing matter."

She massaged the red marks left behind from the handcuffs. "Am I going to be charged?"

Boyle grinned. "Nah. Not after you played hero and saved a life in front of everyone. You've had quite a night, beating up a cop and saving a damsel in distress."

The adrenaline that had forced Gina's heart into double-time was fading, leaving her feeling queasy and empty. "I think Melissa was right. Someone is trying to kill her."

"What makes you say that?"

"There's a bite mark on her lip. She said something about a date. What if he ate peanuts and then kissed her, bit her lip?"

"That makes him a bad kisser, a lousy date, not a killer." He thought for a moment. "There was a matchbook from a bar in her purse. Maybe she was exposed there."

"I'm thinking someone with a peanut allergy wouldn't go to a bar that served peanuts." She glanced down at Melissa. Her color was better, the swelling going down. She looked almost human again. "With a peanut allergy this bad, the guy could have purposely eaten peanuts then kissed her, trying to induce a reaction."

Boyle didn't look convinced. The ambulance arrived at Angels. Gina immediately felt better, more in charge, now that she was back on her home turf. She gave report to the attending taking over Melissa's case, knowing that tales of her exploits would soon be flying through the medical center's airwaves. Verizon had nothing on the hospital grapevine.

Melissa was stabilized, ready to spend the night in the ICU before the ENT surgeon would repair the hole in her trachea tomorrow. Gina watched the ICU team wheel her out of the resuscitation room. She went to the steel scrub sink in the corner and turned the water on full blast, dunking her face in it, hoping to erase some of the residual grime along with the fear-laden sweat that now coated her skin.

She raised her head, blindly groping for a paper towel when she was handed a cloth one. She blotted her face dry, opened her eyes and wasn't surprised to see Boyle there--showered and changed into scrubs, carrying his badge and gun and other cop paraphernalia in a plastic patient bag, somehow looking naked without them.

"You were right," he told her. "Someone did want to kill Melissa."

"How do you know?"

Boyle slid his cell phone from the pocket of his scrub top, wagging it at her. "I gave the bar a call. They know her there. One of the bartenders is also allergic, so they're real careful. Pretzels only."

Gina towed her hair, the braids completely haphazard now, making her look like Medusa. "Was it the date?"

"Turns out there's an ex-husband--well, almost ex."

She stopped and pivoted to him. "A husband? He'd know about her peanut allergy. He set her up."

"Anyone tell you, you have a devious mind?" Boyle's smile was wry. "Seems the ex just happens to have a half a million dollar life insurance policy on Melissa."

"He was trying to kill her for the money, hired some guy to go out with her, kiss her--" Gina shuddered, a combination of anger and revulsion. "That kind of death--you saw her--it's an awful, terrible way to go."

"Thanks to you, he's not going to get away with it. The bartender fingered the date. He's at the zone now, telling all to my partner."

Gina dabbed at her ruined dress, trying not to think of how close she'd come to losing Melissa.

"You put it all together pretty fast. Guess you're not as dumb as you look, Boyle." She glanced up at him and smiled. "You have a first name?"

He took the dirty towel from her and tossed it into a hamper. "It's Jerry. I think I owe you a new dress."

"And a pair of Jimmy Choos. Your guys confiscated mine."

His gaze drifted down her bare legs, obviously appreciating the view. "They didn't happen to be black? With tall, skinny heels and those tiny straps in the back?"

"That's right."

"My favorite kind." A smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. "I'll have the boys send them right over. How about if I buy you coffee while we wait?"

Gina laughed and hooked her arm through his. "As bad as the cafeteria coffee is, you may need a doctor after."

"Looks like I found one of the best around."

Barefoot, she walked with him out into the ER. A gurney sped by, nearly knocking them down. In the corner a woman sobbed. Across from her, two drunk college girls giggled. A baby's cries drifted past, accompanied

by the tones of a trauma alert.

Boyle squeezed her hand and together they strolled through the chaos.

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