

Doctor's Orders

By A.C. Hall

People cross oceans to spend Valentine's Day together. People cross the entire globe, spending eighteen hours on a flight just to be with the one they love. And I can't be bothered to go across town in the rain to be with Emily.

I know what she's saying into the phone right this second. It's either Brenda or Rebecca on the other end. Emily's trying not to cry as she listens to them tell her how much of a jerk I am. How I'm unreliable, how I did this exact same thing last year on Valentine's Day.

I hate her friends.

And I hate this rain.

This wouldn't be half as bad if it wasn't for the rain. Even robbers, rapists and murderers hate the rain and unfortunately for me that means seven hours on this damn rooftop, waiting for just one of them to venture outside to engage in some nefarious behavior.

"Screw you!"

A voice, female, followed by a slamming car door. Moving to the edge I can see her, running away. Her boyfriend is the classy type, doesn't even try to get her back in the car. He speeds away as she runs onto the sidewalk, the downpour ruining her expensive dress. She's looking for shelter and her eyes settle on the alleyway right below me.

Don't do it lady.

She runs into it and in less than ten seconds a creep emerges from the dark behind her. I thought he was down there, but I couldn't be sure. The lady screams when a second creep jumps out in front of her from behind a dumpster. Him I didn't expect. Now there are two of them. The Doctor will be pleased.

The next part is my favorite. I move to the edge of the roof, look down to see where I'm going to land, and then lean forward. You never get used to committing a suicidal leap and the fear is there, even if you know you're not going to die. For a few short seconds, I'm free. There's no more Valentine's Day, no more angry girlfriend, no more infernal mission that seems to never end.

Just the fall.

But then there's the wet pavement of the alley, and that hurts like hell every time. I hit just a few feet in front of the back creep, causing him to jump in the air and let out a girlish scream. That takes the edge off my pain and puts a smile on my face. My bones crack as I get to my feet.

"You dropped into the wrong alley, freak."

He hid in a dark, dirty alley for over seven hours in the pouring rain waiting for a woman to wander down so he could attack her, and I'm the freak. Go figure.

I wish the Doctor would let me kill them, but that's never been the deal. The man sticks a rusty knife into my gut and all I get to do is reach out and grab him and put him into a choke hold. It's highly unfulfilling, but soon he's unconscious and I'm on his friend. The woman screams as she runs back out onto the street.

"Idiot," I say to her as she passes me.

I immediately regret it, but what did she expect to happen at one in the morning in a dark alleyway on the wrong side of town? The second creep goes down easier than the first and soon I'm dragging them both out onto the street. It's safer to take the alleys, but with this weather no one is out and besides, I'm in a hurry, so I drag them right down the sidewalk. The Doctor would have a coronary if he saw how nonchalant I was with it, but he didn't have an angry girlfriend to get back to.

His building is as ominous as ever, all brick and steel, an industrial holdover in a residential slum. The perfect place for his experiments. I raise my hand to knock on the heavy door but pause. Just for kicks I try the handle instead. The door swings open.

It's almost enough to make me turn around, take the two creeps and never come back. He knew I was going to come tonight.

After taking a minute to swallow my pride I drag them in and close the door. Some of the heavy equipment is gone but there's the Doctor in the middle of the room, as busy as always.

"How'd you know I was coming?"

"Because I asked you to."

He didn't look up to answer. He rarely looked away from his work.

"I ask you to do something and you do it, that's how things have worked between us is it not?"

I could snap his neck in an instant, or better yet, choke him out with that weak choke move he forces me to use when I'm taking down creeps.

I make sure to throw them on the floor extra hard so they bump his table. He stops writing for a moment, obviously aggravated.

"Go clean yourself up."

The only reason I comply is because I smell like wet alley. A hot shower and a fresh change of clothes are almost enough to wipe out my sour mood. The Doctor already has the two men in cages by the time I return to the main room.

"Going to see Emily?"

"If she'll let me in the door."

She always has in the past, but lately things have gotten deeper between us. She wants more and her tolerance for my tardy ways isn't nearly what it was early on.

"She will if you give her this."

Without looking the Doctor tosses a box over his shoulder. I catch it and flip it open. It's a necklace, an expensive looking one, with a sparkling round green something in the middle. Green is her favorite color.

I close the box slowly, not wanting him to know how excited I am, how much he just saved my butt. But he always knows, so why I bother with the pretending is beyond me.

"Take it, I insist," he says. "Doctor's orders."

It's one of his favorite sayings, but I've never been able to tell if he's joking or not when he says it.

"This just might do the trick," I tell him.

He's too busy to respond and I head back out into the rain. I go down into the subway, thankful that there's no one around and no train in sight. I'm faster on my own. I jump down onto the tracks and sprint off into the darkness, thankful for this small release, this small window when I don't have to mask my abilities.

It takes me just four minutes to get all the way across town to her apartment door. After that it takes twenty five minutes of knocking and begging to get her to open it up. She keeps the chain on and glares out at me angrily through the crack.

"What do you want, Neil?"

"I just want to give you your Valentine's Day gift."

She sighs but I can sense some of her anger fading now that I mentioned a gift.

"Valentine's Day is over."

She doesn't mean it. I want to smile, triumphant, but I don't and besides, it wouldn't be fair. Her friends are right, I can be a jerk, and if she does open the door it'll be more than I deserve.

"Please Emily," I say.

Finally, mercifully, she opens it all the way. I try not to be too excited as I step inside. She's acting mad but really she's hurt that I blew her off tonight. I don't know exactly how to fix that other than to not answer the Doctor's call next time, but I do know that she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She's wearing a crappy, worn out white tank top and a pair of gray boxers and it's the most striking outfit I've ever seen a woman put together.

I hold out the box and she reluctantly takes it from me. I follow her over to the dining room table and watch closely as she opens it. I can see immediately that she loves it. She finally looks up at me and smiles.

"How did you afford something like this?"

"I've been working a lot of extra hours lately."

It's only a partial lie, better than a full one, at least. She smiles wider as she pulls it out of the box and holds it up to the light.

"It's beautiful."

"And green," she adds.

"Your favorite color."

She gives me a look that tells me I'm forgiven. Maybe the Doctor isn't so bad after all. I watch with a smile as she wraps the chain around her neck and clasps it. As soon as the sparkling round green something in the middle touches her skin I know something's wrong. Emily starts convulsing and her eyes roll up in the back of her head. She's choking on bile by the time she hits the dining room floor.

I rush to her side and rip the necklace off of her, but it's too late. She stares up at me, her eyes filling with blood, accusing me of doing this, of killing her. And I guess in a way I did. She stops convulsing but her eyes don't close. I don't have the heart to close them. I don't have the right to close them. I deserve that death's stare they're giving me.

Looking down at the necklace I see a tiny needle on the back of the green part. There's a liquid on it and I touch it to my tongue. It's poison. I can immediately feel it coursing through my veins like fire. This is what she felt. But unlike her I don't die. It's a good thing too, because I've got a man to kill now.

I'm not sure how long I sat in the floor beside her, staring into those godforsaken eyes, but it's raining harder when I emerge back onto the street. This time I don't bother to go down into the subway, now I don't care who sees me. I make it from Emily's apartment back to the Doctor's building in less than a minute.

I'm filled with more anger than I ever knew could exist. I'm rushing for the door. I'm running through all the ways I could kill him in my head.

I'm doing exactly what he would've expected me to do.

The thought freezes me in place, my hand outstretched towards the handle. I always do exactly what he expects me to do. That's how he knew I'd deliver him someone tonight, why he left the door unlocked. The only thing I ever did that surprised him was fall in love with Emily.

But what could he gain from me coming back to get revenge for her death? My hand is shaking now, threatening to override my brain and tear the door open anyways. Lately the Doctor spoke about overstaying our welcome in this town, about needing to start over somewhere new.

Thinking isn't my strong suit but I'm starting to put it together. There was equipment missing earlier, important stuff to the Doctor. He had already moved it out. He left just enough behind for it to be convincing to me.

So what's waiting for me behind the door? Is it wired to explode? That one's easy to dismiss. Not his style at all and besides, it would just raise questions. The Doctor was more careful than that. He'd want there to be no reason for any investigation to be done, for anyone to go looking for him.

That's when I finally see it. Two unmarked vans, parked at each end of the street. They're heavy duty, working hard to be inconspicuous, but anything manufactured after 1987 sticks out like a sore thumb in this neighborhood.

The Doctor didn't clear out everything. He tipped them off and then left just enough behind to land me in the electric chair. Just enough so the police and the shocked citizens could grasp a full idea, that there was a monster in their midst, and that he had been captured and was going to be brought to justice. Open and closed, with no reason for anyone to pay attention when robbers, rapists and murderers start disappearing in the next town.

Now that I focus my senses I can hear the snipers on the rooftop breathing, and I can smell the cheap liquor the officer poured on himself to sell the illusion of being a passed out hobo on the nearby bench.

Slowly I pull my hand back. Will they still arrest me even though I didn't go inside? Maybe try to intimidate me into giving a confession before facing the inevitable legal deadline by which they have to let me go? I turn and walk away, tense as hell even though I'm trying to act normal. I can practically smell their disappointment as I pass one of the vans.

As soon as I'm around the corner I break into a dead sprint and don't let up until I'm in an empty field two states over. Even though she's a lot of miles away, Emily's eyes are still with me, burned forever into my brain. And the Doctor's on his way to somewhere new. It'll be a while before he starts again, and by then he'll know that I didn't fall into his trap. He'll know I'm coming and he'll be well prepared, but I don't mind at all. As a matter of fact, I'm glad for it.

That'll make it all the more satisfying when I kill him.

Copyright © 2011 A.C. Hall