

Ann Marie Gamble

A Shot of B

The three men had slipped in when Jennifer was closing up the clinic. Two guys in scrubs and one in a suit telling her to get four pints of B negative like it was a restaurant, and her brain fried at the end of a long week leading into a holiday weekend. Already two pickups today, and 52 minutes until the Mercy's hospital paramedics made the final stop and she could go home.

The man in the suit pointed a gun at her and she backed into the blood draw room. The men in scrubs locked the door, set the closed sign in the window, and pulled the blinds.

"Door in the back is secure, Mr. Gardiner. Refrigerators, too, but there's not much in 'em." The man that the others improbably called Hippo came back from a circuit of the clinic.

Mr. Gardiner stretched out in one of the faux leather recliners for the blood donors. "You're going to have to draw from one of them," he told Jennifer. "Or come up with some O negative. You have a chance to save a life."

"What's wrong with what's here? Or take her blood." The third man rubbed the inside of his elbow unconsciously. Not a fan of needles, she guessed. As a certified phlebotomist, Jennifer was used to monitoring pulse rates. Her own had reached target depressingly quickly — this was the pulse rate at which she would consider unplugging a blood donor. She glanced at the clock. The Mercy hospital driver would be banging on the now-locked back door in 43 minutes.

"I'm B," Hippo said.

"All of you get tested," Mr. Gardiner waved her out of her corner with the gun. "Hippo can donate a pint while we wait for the result."

"I'm A positive," Jennifer said.

"Why aren't you getting tested?" the third man asked.

"I know my blood type," Mr. Gardiner said. "We can't get it all from Hippo."

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Hippo reclined in a faux leather recliner, just like a regular

donor, working on the second unit. Jennifer had brought him juice and cookies out of habit — the dishes were on her work tray. She should have hooked up his dominant hand to the IV, but she'd followed that habit too. Now she was sitting on a stool in the middle of the room, where she'd been told stay put.

Hippo rolled a poker chip between his fingers while they waited. Over, under, over, and back again. After four rounds, he flipped the chip into the air and caught it.

The phone rang.

Hippo and the third man looked at Jennifer. Mr. Gardner frowned at the television and spoke. "You're going to let them know you have no O negative or B negative if they ask. Business as usual, of course."

He tapped the butt of his gun on his thigh.

Jennifer picked up the phone. "Yes, he usually gets here at seven ... No." She hesitated. "It's been a weird week. We don't have O or B negative ... Sure, everything else."

She replaced the phone. The third man relaxed against the counter, and Hippo began flipping his chip again. She was still behind the clinic desk, two steps from the computer. Internet. Outside contact.

A shot rang out, and bits of red plastic clattered to the floor. Hippo froze, his hand ready to catch and his jaw open. Jennifer's heart rate reached a new target.

Mr. Gardner used his pistol hand to pull down an armrest. "You're making the lady tense, Hippo. The lady who has to pull a needle out of your arm."

The third man came out of the back room. "I'm not finished going through these coolers."

Gardiner waved him away. "Step away from the computer," Gardner said to Jennifer. "In fact, step out from the desk. How close is Hippo to being finished?"

"No worries — I've got juice and cookies. You ought to try this." Hippo dropped the juice glass on the floor. He slumped back in the chair, his mouth twisted into some sort of smile. He was a tall guy, but lanky, and if he'd been at all dehydrated, trying to get two units from him had been an act of desperation.

Gardner reached him before she did; she knocked over the snack tray on her way. She slid the needle out of Hippo's arm,

pressed a wad of cotton over the vein and Gardiner's hand over it. "Keep the pressure steady and his arm raised."

Their associate came out of the back room with a blood bag in his hand. "What's going — hey, what's with Hippo?"

Gardiner used his free hand to grab Hippo by the jaw and shake him. "Snap out of it. It's time to go. You stand up, we're out of here."

His free hand ... he'd set the gun down. The third man was still threading his way around the desk. Jennifer pulled the IV stand closer and pressed the needle against Gardiner's jugular. The artery pulsed against the metal, and Hippo's blood oozed onto Gardiner's skin.

"Everyone stay where they are." Jennifer's voice, at least, held steady. "Hippo will need plenty of fluids and he'll get winded easily for the next few days. Mr. Gardiner, you'll need to get this needle out of your neck and apply pressure. Have your helper call 9-1-1 immediately — we have A positive here; you can tell them that."

"You're so close to getting out of here without anybody getting hurt." Gardiner put Hippo's arm down and reached toward her. Jennifer pressed the needle into his skin. She could hit a spot that gave him a chance and still generate a distracting amount of blood.

"You have to take care of yourself right away, and don't worry about me."

"Lady, just get out of here and let me call," the third man said.

Jennifer pushed the needle into the man's neck and ran for the door.