

# Restless Hearts

a *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*  
fan fiction series

Standing in  
the Dark



by Cat Lady Firebird

# **Standing in the Dark**

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## Acknowledgments

No author writes in a vacuum, however much it might feel that way sometimes. With the caveat that all errors, omissions, and mistakes are my own, I would like to thank:

My beta readers, Orson Henry and Becky, for service above and beyond. They're responsible for more improvements than I could ever list here.

My brother, Steven, a paramedic who did a medical review of Chapters 3-5, and who offered some great suggestions;

The Signum SPACE Creative Writing community, who constantly reassured me I wasn't crazy, and who forgave me for hijacking my original "Novel in a Year" plan;

The Holy Ghost Writers, who also reassured me and kept asking how it was going;

All those folks who sent me questions, tweaks, typos, comments, and notes;

The SMK fandom, for welcoming a new writer with open arms; and, of course,

The cast and crew of *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, without whom none of this could have ever been possible.

*All good giving and every perfect gift is from above,  
coming down from the Father of lights,  
with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change.*

James 1:17 [NABRE]

*In memory of Nia Laiki (1948-2024)*

## 1. Amanda: Break

Amanda King frowned at the documents in front of her. They were in English, so she technically understood she was reading, but the phrases didn't actually make sense. There were few commonalities, fewer insights, and almost no patterns at all. She flipped back and forth from document to document, looking for something — anything — that would make it make sense, but the only thing she succeeded in doing was increasing her frustration.

A pair of hands came out of nowhere to cover her eyes, breaking the intense concentration she'd developed. Jumping, she tried to turn, but the arms around her held her firmly in place. Panic began nibbling at the edges of her mind as she reached up, clawing at her assailant, but then she heard a familiar chuckle. "At least you remembered to lock the door."

"Lee!" she scolded. "A lot of good that one of your 'security precautions' did me. You know better than that, especially now that I've passed Stanley's class. What if I'd tried to flip you again? I almost really hurt you that time in the kitchen, and this could've been worse! Even from this angle, I could've —"

"First off," he began as one set of fingers began to trail her hairline, "I'm not just anyone. I remember the kitchen, so I'd have been prepared if you tried that. Second, are you challenging me to a wrestling match?" He laughed as he came around her desk to face her. "Here? Now?"

"Of course not," she grumbled, determined to ignore the tantalizing sensations from her neck. "I have work to do."

"But maybe later?" he asked hopefully.

"Don't *you* have work to do?" She was trying to keep her tone and expression serious, but it was a losing battle.

"We're taking a break." He leaned in for a kiss. "Done with the interrogations, but then there's the meeting with Legal so we can talk about our court strategy."

"Ugh."

"Exactly. I need a little bit of sugar to keep me going."

She gave up on being stern. "You're impossible."

"But you love me anyway." He stole another kiss before peeking over her shoulder. "Are those the Middle East transcripts? I've been reading your interim reports."

You've been working pretty hard on those."

"Yeah," she answered. There had been a lot of chatter about Syria and Libya recently, but it was coming to them in a jumble of bits and pieces. While the steno pool had handled the transcriptions, she was working on matching up data to find patterns and consistencies. So far, she'd come across both Muammar Gaddafi's and Abu Nidal's names multiple times, so there seemed to be something, but —

"Hey," he interrupted. "Stop for a second. You need a break too."

"I guess I could spare a few minutes," she allowed.

"That's all I need. What are you doing on Saturday night?"

"What?"

"Saturday night," he repeated. "The day after tomorrow. Or had you forgotten that date?"

"That date?"

"October 3rd. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I do." She began to laugh. "Seriously? You want to celebrate our first meeting?"

"Why not? It's the first anniversary of that date since we got married, and we have a lot to celebrate. You're healing and back to work, Joe has the boys, your mother thinks I'm an eleven *and* she won't mind staying home by herself —"

"Assuming she doesn't have a date," Amanda murmured. "Which she probably does."

"— and I have a special bottle of wine that'd be perfect after a special night out. What do you say?"

"That'd be fun. What did you have in mind?"

He shook his head. "Hm-mm. It's going to be a surprise. Which is why I need you to take a break, so I can call for the reservations."

She made a face. "Can't you call from your car?"

"I could if I were going to be in it. But," he continued, and now he was the one who sighed. "I don't think either one of us is going to leave before six, which is when they cut off for weekend requests. I know I won't be, anyway."

"Yeah, me either." She folded her hands on her desk. "Since you won't let me help out with whatever case you're working on right now."

"I already told you. AOS-14 and up. I can't say anything to anyone lower than

that.” He knelt down next to her. “I wish I could. It’d be nice to hear your take.”

“I know,” she acknowledged, but her lips thinned. Spouses were frequently offered clearance to the same level as each other, even when they didn’t both work for the government. It allowed Federal employees a useful safety valve, while also preventing marital problems related to keeping secrets. Both tended to have a positive impact on the affected employees.

Of course, spousal clearance required actually acknowledging the marriage first.

“That’s actually something I wanted to talk about this weekend,” said Lee, guessing her line of thought. “Maybe it’s time to let your mother and the boys in on a little bit more. Both personally and professionally.”

“Oh? Any particular reason?”

“Their questions have gotten pretty pointed.”

“I haven’t heard anything like that.”

“Dividing and conquering. They always hit me with the tough ones when you’re upstairs or outside.” He took a breath and exhaled through his nose. “I’m worried they’re getting close to jumping to conclusions. The wrong ones.”

“That wouldn’t be good.”

“No. Plus, I think it might be time to get them into some of the family training classes here, anyway, so we’d also have to —” the rest of his sentence was cut off by the ringing of his desk phone. He pushed to his feet to answer it. “Stetson.”

There was a pause, during which he glanced at her. “Yeah, she is.” Then another, longer pause, during which his face went completely blank.

Amanda felt her heartbeat accelerate. He rarely did that anymore, now that she was a full-fledged agent. “What is it?”

He held up a hand and shook his head. “Okay. Yeah, thanks, Billy. We’ll get over there as soon as possible.” There was yet another pause. “I know, and I appreciate it. I’ll give you a call as soon as we find out more.” When he hung up, he closed his eyes, rubbing them in a familiar gesture.

“What is it?” she asked again.

He opened his eyes again, and the blank expression was gone, replaced by something else. Something so awful as to be terrible.

“Lee?”

He knelt back down beside her chair, but this time he turned it gently so that she was facing him. Then he took both her hands. “Amanda, I’m sorry. I, ah, I —” his voice caught. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to tell you this.”

“Tell me what?”

He swallowed. Hard. That was when she realized he was shaking.

“Whatever it is,” she told him, “it’s all right.”

“No.” His eyes began to shine underneath that horrible look. “It’s not. There’s...” he trailed off. “There’s been an accident. We need to get over to the hospital right away.”

“An accident? What happened?”

He swallowed again. “It’s...it’s Phillip. And your mother.”

## 2. Lee: Not This

Amanda was completely silent in the car.

She didn't cry. Didn't ask a million questions. Didn't ramble about minutiae the way she usually did when she was nervous or upset. In fact, her face was composed and her demeanor completely calm, except for the fact that she continually twisted her hands in her lap. It was so out-of-character as to be scary, but he didn't have time to worry about it as he sped through and around traffic. Lee pushed the car as fast as he could get it; let the cops ticket him for speeding later if they wanted.

Despite her eerie calm, Amanda was clearly aware of everything around them. She was out of the car and sprinting toward the emergency room door before he even finished parking it, ignoring the fact that she'd broken a heel.

He wasn't far behind, crashing through the door of the waiting area just in time to see a nurse leading her back. But when he followed, the doors closed in his face, locking and preventing him from going any further.

"Sorry," said the receptionist. "Family only."

"I am family!" It took a second to realize he'd shouted it, and he fought for control. Now wasn't the time for explanations or arguments. "Please. *Please*. She'll want me there. They all will." And he wanted to be there. Needed to be there, for her, for Jamie, for all of them. Maybe even for himself as well.

There was a long pause as she considered him, but there must have been something in his face or the way he was standing, because she buzzed him back. Lee was running before his second step. Rounding the nurse's station at full speed, he came upon Amanda in the middle of the hallway, standing in stocking feet with her face stark white.

"Lee," she choked. "Lee, it's Mother, she —"

He pulled her close. "Okay. Okay, I'm here. What —"

"She — she —" She clung to him as if her life depended on it, and finally, *finally*, he felt her shoulders begin to heave. "The doctor — the paramedics — she —" Her hands flexed on his chest, twisting the shirt fabric so hard that he was surprised it didn't tear. "In the — in the ambulance — they tried but — but she — she's not — she didn't make it to the hospital."

At that statement, her legs gave way, and she crumpled. There weren't any

chairs or tables nearby, so the best he could do was support her as they slumped to the floor together. She was crying hard now, and he could feel her tears on his neck. A huge lump had lodged in his own throat, and when he reached up to loosen his tie, he felt wetness on his own cheeks. Their tears mingled as they slid under his collar, trickling down to soak into his undershirt.

It took three tries before he could speak. "And Phillip?"

She visibly fought for a breath, and when it came, it was shaky. "Sur — surgery." The word set her off again, and he just held her, there on the floor, for what seemed like forever.

This wasn't the way things were supposed to be. They were supposed to be looking forward to a special date, to be planning a way to tell Dotty and the boys their good news. Not...his mind trailed off, refusing to finish the thought. Not this, it finally came up with instead. Definitely not this.

"Sir."

He looked up to see a nurse standing over them.

"Sir, I'm so sorry. But you can't wait here." Her eyes were soft with sympathy. "There's a separate waiting room, one with more privacy, a little further down. Can you—"

Nodding, he slid his hands under Amanda's arms to help her up. She moved with him, trying to arrange her feet underneath her, but without succeeding. Moving one arm so it was under her knees, he staggered to his feet and carried her down the hallway as the nurse led them to a quiet room containing two couches and a chair.

"There's a phone in here," the nurse continued as he settled onto one of the couches, cradling Amanda's head against his shoulder. "But if you need me to call anyone for you..."

"No," he answered, voice still thick. "I'll do it." He looked down. "Amanda?"

Her eyes were wet, glassy, and unfocused. She twitched slightly at the sound of her name, but there was no change in her haunted expression, no attempt to speak or otherwise respond to the situation. Lee had seen this type of behavior before, but never from her, and his heart plummeted.

"Don't do that," he told her. "Don't disconnect. Stay with me."

In response, she re-tightened her hands on his shirt and buried her face back against his neck. Swallowing, he eased the purse strap off her shoulder and then be-

gan to root around inside, looking for her address book. It was a good thing she was so organized as to carry one of those, because right now she was clearly in no state to even think about what needed to be done next.

• • •

She had fallen into a fitful doze by the time he finished his third phone call, but she sat straight up at the sound of the receiver clicking into the cradle. “Jamie!”

Lee had moved to the other couch to give her room to stretch out, but he was back by her side immediately. “It’s all right. Joe and Carrie are picking him up from school.” Probably already had, in fact, since those had been the first two phone calls. “They’ll be here soon.”

She took a long, shaky breath, one that ended with a hitch. “Thank you.”

“I called Billy, too. We’re both to take whatever time we need.”

“The Middle East transcripts —”

“Francine’s got them for now. She’ll lock them up and make sure they stay that way.” He took her hands. “Amanda, did they tell you what happened?”

She shook her head. “All I know is what you said. A car accident.”

“Okay.” He kissed her forehead before standing up. “I’m going to go see if I can find out more.”

As if on cue, the waiting room door opened, and a uniformed man stepped in. “Mr. and Mrs. King? Phillip King’s parents?”

“Stetson,” Lee clarified. “Mother and stepfather.” The last word felt like ash in his mouth. It was another bit of news that shouldn’t be coming out like this. “His father and stepmother are on the way. What happened?”

The policeman, who had sergeant’s stripes on his sleeves, sat down. “We’re still working on figuring that out. Right now, it looks like there was a left front blowout and Mrs. —” he stopped to check his notes. “Mrs. West lost control of the vehicle. It rolled over into oncoming traffic, right in front of a delivery truck. There was no time for the truck to stop or even swerve.”

Amanda frowned. “Mother’s a super cautious driver. Too cautious, really. She usually doesn’t even drive at the speed limit, especially when she’s in traffic, and she’s super methodical. She’s doubly cautious if either or both of the boys are in the car.”

“Sport utility vehicles have a higher center of gravity. It looked like this one was

relatively new?”

She nodded.

“If she wasn’t aware of the difference in profile, she easily could have jerked the wheel too hard by mistake.”

Lee dug out his ID and showed it, noting the name plate pinned to the other man’s shirt. “I’d like to be read into the investigation, Sergeant Moore.”

“Mr., ah, Agent Stetson, it’s likely no more than a routine traffic matter.”

“My family’s not routine to me. And we have enemies. Both of us actually, since we’re both agents.” At that, Amanda sat up, fumbling in her purse to retrieve her own ID.

“Yes, but neither of you were in the vehicle.”

“It’s registered in Amanda’s name, and to her address. That could be enough.”

“Has anyone ever tried to go after your family like this before?”

Lee sighed, shaking his head. “Not in public or on the road, no. But they have been targeted other ways, so there’s no reason they couldn’t be this way too. We’d been meaning to have her address of record changed from Maplewood Drive to a post office box, in order to make her harder to find, but it just...” he trailed off. Why hadn’t they made that change as soon as the Agency hired her?

Because they’d been hoping that *her* address would become *their* address first, he realized. Had that hesitation cost his mother-in-law’s life? He shoved that thought away, trying to refocus on the moment.

“I see,” said Moore. “Well, there was nothing at the scene to suggest anything other than a blowout. Those happen all the time. It was just bad luck that it was the front left tire, and the vehicle rolled over the way it did.”

“Those tires were almost new.”

“Even a brand-new tire can blow out if someone runs over a nail. I’ll tell the investigators to be watchful while they process the scene, but the chances of it being anything other than an accident are pretty slim.”

“Are they? Do you have any idea how many different ways someone could carry out an attack?”

The sergeant’s expression hardened. “Of course I do. We are right next to Washington, after all, and a number of high-profile people live in Arlington. I promise you that we’ll be absolutely sure it’s an accident before we finalize any statement to that

effect.”

Would they, though? This guy seemed far too willing to classify it that way, and not willing enough to actually talk to him. Maybe he would call Manny Trudeau when he had a chance. Would he be able to wiggle information out as some sort of inter-departmental courtesy? Did that even exist at their level of law enforcement?

“Agent Stetson,” said the sergeant, breaking into his thoughts. “I’ve heard your concerns, and I *will* make sure they’re communicated —”

The waiting room door banged open, and two voices shouted at once. “Mom!” “Amanda!”

She stood, dropping the ID back into her purse. “Joe. *Jamie*.” Her arms went around her younger son, holding on as if she might not ever let go.

Joe wrapped his arms around both of them, but his gaze slid over. “Lee.”

“Joe.” Lee took Carrie’s hands and squeezed them gently before guiding her toward the other couch. “How much have they told you?”

“Nothing,” replied the other man as he stepped out of the embrace. “The receptionist just directed us back here. I don’t know anything other than what you told me on the phone. What happened?”

“Mr. King,” interrupted the policeman, offering a hand, “I’m Sergeant Moore with the Arlington Police. As I was explaining to Mr. and Mrs. Stetson here —”

“Mrs. *Stetson*? They’re not married.”

Lee’s hands clenched into fists, but he made the effort to unclench them. “Yes, we are. But right now it’s more important to get answers about the — the accident,” he finished, lacking any better way to describe the situation.

Joe nodded, although his eyes flashed a clear message: they would definitely be discussing his revelation of their marriage later. “Okay. How’s Phillip?”

“Still in surgery. And I still don’t know for what, or how much longer it’ll be.”

He went as white as Amanda had been in the hallway.

In contrast, Jamie’s face flushed. “But he’s going to survive. Right? He’ll make it? And what about Grandma? Is she in surgery too?”

Lee opened his mouth and then closed it, not sure how to start. He’d told Joe about Dotty when he’d called him at work, but he didn’t realize that Joe and Carrie hadn’t told Jamie anything. His own relationship with the boy was still tenuous and would likely be strained by having the revelation about his and Amanda’s marriage

come out this way. Having to be the one to deliver the next piece of news might push things into another breakdown.

Joe sat on the couch next to Carrie, pulling Jamie over to stand in front of him. "Son, this isn't going to be easy for you to hear. But..." he trailed off to take a deep breath, noticing when Lee gave a tiny shake of his head. "But there's no other way to say it. Your grandmother didn't survive."

"No!" The word was a cry. "You're lying! Don't —" He turned toward Amanda. "Tell him he's wrong, Mom!"

She pulled Jamie backwards against her. "Sweetheart, nobody's lying. Your grandmother..." her voice broke. "She died before they could get her to the hospital to fix her."

His wordless scream was high-pitched and ear-splitting, but nobody, not even Sergeant Moore, moved to stop him or even clap their hands over their ears. Instead, Amanda turned him around as he began sobbing and struggling. But when his fists started pounding her shoulders, hard enough to bruise the scar tissue underneath, Lee grabbed him. "No, don't! You'll hurt —"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do! You're not my father!" Now the fists were pounding on him, but when Joe moved to intervene, Lee shook his head again. Better to let him get it out. He held Jamie close, wanting to soothe him but also hoping to calm him quickly. There were still too many questions needing answers, questions that couldn't even be asked until everyone, including Jamie, was under control.

Feeling a hand wrap around his, he looked down to see Carrie's concerned eyes. Her other hand had begun to rub Jamie's back, and he realized that Joe and Amanda had left the room with Sergeant Moore. Good; in addition to getting more information, they would also have a chance to check on Phillip. In the meantime, thought Lee, he and Carrie would handle this.

### 3. Carrie: Counting

She kept rubbing Jamie's back, adding soothing words, until the child's distress wound down into whimpers. At that point, Lee guided him to a seat on the couch next to her, settling himself on Jamie's other side. Jamie didn't seem to be sure which one of them he should lean on. Glancing up, she could see that Lee had already anticipated something like this: he was holding out a hand. She took it and they rested their arms on the back of the couch. This let Jamie simply lean back as they nestled close on their respective sides, surrounding him with warmth and support.

"Are you all right?" she asked behind Jamie's head. "He's strong; I'll bet you got quite the bruising."

"I've been through worse," replied Lee. He scrubbed his free hand through his hair. "It's a normal reaction."

"Yeah, I know. I've unfortunately seen it before myself."

He tilted his head, a question in his expression.

"You know I'm a teacher. First grade, right now," she explained. "But when I was in the Peace Corps, I handled the lower half of an all-ages classroom."

"Peace Corps? Where were you deployed?"

"Sierra Leone. I was there during the 1982 election."

His eyes widened. "And they let you stay?"

"I was in the eastern part of the country, and I was able to blend in pretty well. The violence wasn't that bad there anyway, mostly because people were afraid to come in to vote at all." She sighed. "But there was some, and it affected my students."

Jamie's voice was small. "Did they lose their grandparents, too?"

"Some of them," she answered. "Plus other family members. Some even lost their entire family." She paused. "How are you doing?"

"I guess I'll be okay." He looked up toward Lee. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"Nah, I'm fine. Like I said, that was normal. I remember doing it myself a few times while I was growing up. I've told you about that, that my parents died in a car crash when I was five and then my grandmother died when I was seven. She'd been sick for a while, though, so I'd known it was coming."

"Yeah. You went to live with an uncle after that."

"And I was one angry kid. It came from the same place as all the hurt."

At that, Jamie leaned back, closing his eyes, although the fresh tears leaked out anyway. “Does it ever stop hurting, Lee?”

He scrubbed his hand through his hair again. He was usually quite the debonair man, Carrie thought, but right now he looked pretty worn: tousled hair, half-undone tie, wrinkled shirt. The pocket square on his jacket had a loose corner which hung awkwardly, and a collar pin dangled on the other side. The rims of his eyes were red, and it looked like they might be bloodshot later.

“I wish I could tell you it does stop hurting, sport,” he told Jamie. “But it doesn’t. I still miss my parents and grandmother even now.” He took a long breath, letting it out slowly. “You do get used to it, though, and after a while you learn how to deal with it better. Most of the time, anyway.”

“We can help you with that,” she added. “You aren’t going to be alone through all this. Your mom’s going to miss her mother, too, and even your dad is going to be sad for a long time. He loved Dotty.”

Jamie nodded slowly, his eyes moving from one to the other, but there was a slight frown on his face. Was it from her use of the past tense?

“I’ll miss her, too,” said Lee. “I didn’t know your grandma all that long, but...” he trailed off, eyes going distant. “We spent a lot of time together while your mom was in the hospital last February. I think she’d have been thrilled to find out that we’re actually already...” he blinked back to their surroundings, looking mildly surprised before the lines of grief got even deeper. “Or, at least, I hope she would have been.”

“I think she would have been,” said Carrie.

The door opened, and Joe and Amanda came back in, this time with a doctor and a nurse. She knelt in front of Jamie. “Hi, sweetheart. Your brother’s out of surgery, and the doctor says we can go see him for a few minutes if we want. He hasn’t woken up yet, though, so we’ll have to stay quiet. Do you think you can do that?”

He jumped up. “Yeah. Let’s go!”

She held out a hand, and the three of them left with the nurse. The doctor remained behind, sitting down in the chair across from Lee and Carrie. “Should I repeat the update, or do you want to wait and get it from Mr. King and Mrs. Stetson?”

“I’d like to know now, please,” said Carrie. She hated being the last to know anything.

“All right. I’m sorry to have to tell you that it’s a difficult situation. He has

what's called a basilar skull fracture, among other things, with cerebrospinal fluid leaking out and some intracranial hemorrhaging. We've managed to repair all that and relieve the pressure, but he's still in a coma. Are you with me so far?"

Lee glanced her direction. Under his tan, his skin had gone gray. "I am. Carrie?"

"Mostly. This is pretty bad, isn't it?"

"I'll be honest: the survival rate for this kind of injury is only about 67%. But this kid's a fighter. He was otherwise in good shape, and he hung on hard during the surgery. Right now, he's stable, and if we can prevent infections, we've got a decent chance. We've started him on some pretty strong antibiotics for that."

"What about traumatic brain injury?" she asked. "I...she trailed off. "I've had some kids in my classes that had those. They're not easy to work with."

"No," sighed the doctor. "And yes, there's a pretty good chance of one here. If he pulls through, he'll be in some sort of rehabilitation for a while, and I'd expect some permanent effects. But it's too soon to speculate about how bad they'll be, or even about what they'll be."

Carrie nodded. "Anything else?"

"No, I —"

He was interrupted by the door banging open again. "Doctor Dawson, stat! The King child —" the nurse broke off, seemingly realizing which family was in the waiting room, even as the doctor leapt to his feet.

"I'm sorry," he began as he moved toward the waiting room door. "But —"

"Go," Carrie interrupted. "Take care of Phillip first. We'll wait." He was through the door before she'd finished speaking, letting it slam behind him. Lee stood up, obviously intending to follow, but she caught his wrist. "Not you."

"Didn't you hear? The nurse said —"

"I heard her. But you and I can't go anywhere."

"It's Phillip!"

"Joe and Amanda and Jamie are already there with him! That's a crowd, and we'd only make it worse."

He turned back to look at her, the anguish plain on his face. Then he screwed his eyes up for a moment, letting out a harsh breath, before returning to sit beside her. "I guess you're right. If anyone should take a step back, it's us." He paused. "Damn it."

“I know,” she said sympathetically, reaching down to take his hand. This was the first time they’d had a chance to have any more than a brief conversation, but the touch seemed like the right thing to do. He didn’t avoid it, although he flicked his gaze up to meet hers. After a moment, she felt him shift so that his fingers wrapped around hers. They were warm and strong, just like Joe’s.

“Does it ever get any easier?” he asked. “Being a parent — er, stepparent. I’ve been reading about it, and trying to follow Amanda’s lead with the boys, but I still always seem to be off-balance. And now this. I don’t even know how I’m going to support either one of them through this. Emotionally, I mean. I just...” he sighed. “That’s not in any of the books I’ve read.”

“You can start by just being there,” she told him. “I don’t have my own children, either, but I’ve...” now she was the one who trailed off. “I’ve seen parents lose spouses and children, and I’ve seen children lose their parents and grandparents and even siblings. Families tend to form and re-form as a result of those losses. The one thing that seems to get them all through is a steady presence, someone who won’t leave, no matter how bad it gets.”

Lee nodded. “Sounds simple enough. I’ll bet it isn’t, though.”

“No. Are you familiar with the stages of grief?”

He thought for a moment. “I think so. They had a couple of seminars about them at the Agen...at where Amanda and I work. One of our documentaries is about, um, what was her name?”

“Elizabeth Kübler-Ross.”

“That’s right.” His next words came out in a rush. “Five stages, right? Starting with anger? I was only in the seminars because I had to — so I could learn about her work in preparation for shooting, but I ah, I don’t remember all of it. It always seemed to me that lots of people used a different order anyway. Some people never do get angry, and some seem to stay that way, so I figured the theory wasn’t right.”

He was clearly hiding something but confronting him probably wouldn’t do any good. Carrie shook her head. “There’s a progression, but it’s different in every person, and it isn’t necessarily linear. It’s also not a sequence that a person goes through only once before returning to normal. That’s especially true for children.” She paused. “He might come back already into denial, or depressed, or even beginning to show some signs of acceptance. He’ll probably also cycle through the stages a lot faster, since

children process emotions differently. Not to mention it's going to present differently, since even at his age, he's still learning the vocabulary to be able to talk about his feelings. We'll need to watch his behavior as much as, or even more than —" she cut herself off. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lecture. Teacher hazard."

"It's all right." The ghost of a smile appeared. "I'm used to rambles and lectures, and at least you took some breaths in between the sentences. Amanda sometimes doesn't."

It stood to reason that she and Amanda would have some things in common. After all, Joe had chosen both of them. It would also stand to reason that this man might have things in common with Joe, too, since both of them had chosen Amanda. Blended families, she knew, were often fraught with recriminations and harsh words. Hopefully, though, they'd all be able to continue avoiding that.

She squeezed his hand, and they lapsed into a companionable silence. After a while, Lee leaned his head back and closed his eyes, apparently dozing. It was a good idea; he looked exhausted, and things were still a long way from being over. She wondered when they would hear something. It already seemed like quite a while had passed, although she had no way to accurately count. Had the doctor been able to address whatever called him back to Phillip's side?

Waiting was often the hardest part. Unfortunately, it was also the only thing the two of them could do right now.

Well, that, and one other thing. Twisting around, she replaced the hand that was holding his so that she could cross herself, and began whispering under her breath. "Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grâce, le Seigneur est avec vous. Vous êtes bénie entre toutes les femmes, et Jésus, le fruit de vos entrailles, est béni. Sainte Marie —"

She was startled to hear Lee's voice joining her. "Mère de Dieu, priez pour nous, pauvres pécheurs, maintenant et à l'heure de notre mort. Amen."

"I didn't know you spoke French," she said into the silence that fell afterward. "Or that you were Catholic."

"I'm not, but I've lived in Europe. Which means I've seen the words written out a couple dozen times, and I have a good memory. I have to, for a job like mine. When I'm directing while we're out on location, I mean."

"Your accent is almost perfect. Where did you study?"

“Here and there. What about you?”

Yet another evasion. She covered by chuckling softly. “My brothers and sisters and I grew up speaking English and Kreyòl, but we went to a French-language parish, so we all tend to use that for prayers. And I took it in school, too.”

“Makes sense,” he observed. “Are you still — do you still go to Mass, I mean?”

She sighed. “Not as often as I should, and I go in English now. Do you...” she trailed off, wondering if he would at least answer this honestly. “Do you have any kind of faith, Lee?”

“Amanda’s Presbyterian, and I’ve gone to church with her and the boys a couple times, but...” he trailed off. “I didn’t find out until last year, but my parents had me baptized. I found the certificate when I was going through some of their papers. So I guess I’m Episcopalian, but I don’t know what that actually means.”

The chuckle this time was genuine. “That’s your creed. I was asking about your faith. Do you pray?”

“I used to insist there was no such thing as a God, but I’m...” he shook his head. “I’m not so sure anymore. Ever since I met Amanda, some things have seemed too perfectly timed to be coincidental. I’ve never learned how to pray, though.”

“You did just fine a moment ago.”

“I can memorize and recite words. People tell me that’s not the same thing.” He sighed. “I envy you, actually. I...” he scrubbed his hands through his hair. “I can’t *stand* this, the waiting, and it’s *the second time this year* I’ve been stuck in a hospital waiting room not able to do anything. Even praying might at least give me something!” He pushed up, beginning to pace. “And Catholics seem to have it better than most, with their —” he broke off, making a gesture with his hands. “Rosaries, isn’t that what you call them? They’re something you can actually touch.”

“But we don’t need them,” she said, standing so she could walk up and face him. Or try to, anyway; she hadn’t realized before how tall he was. “Can you count to ten?”

“What?”

“You already know the words, Lee, and with time the meaning might come. Even if it doesn’t, it’ll keep us both busy. Can you count to ten?”

He stopped, staring down at her. “Of course I can.”

“Then I’ll get you through the rest.” She offered her hand. “Come sit back down.

We'll do it together. A Rosary usually takes between fifteen and twenty minutes. Surely we'll hear something by then, and if not, by then we'll have waited long enough to go ask."

Carrie couldn't figure out if the expression on his face was exasperation, desperation, or something else. But whatever it was, she'd gotten through, because he took her hand and let her guide him back to the couch.

"All right," she said once they settled. "We'll begin with —"

"En français, s'il vous plaît," he interrupted. "Cela attirera davantage mon attention de cette façon." *It'll keep more of my attention that way.*

"D'accord," she acknowledged. "Nous commencerons au nom du Père, et du Fils, et du Saint-Esprit..."

## 4. Joe: Out of Time

Jamie ran down the hallway in the direction Amanda indicated, checking names until he found Phillip's room. "Why's it locked, Mom?"

"They're using oxygen," explained Amanda as she and Joe caught up. "And there's a really high chance of infection, so they have to be careful to make sure the only people who go in there are the ones who are supposed to."

"But we're supposed to, aren't we? Right?"

"No, sweetheart." She rested her hand on his shoulder. "That's why the window's there. When he's moved to a regular room, they'll let us go in, but even then, it won't be for very long at a time, and we'll have to scrub and wear masks and gloves first."

"Why? Is he sick?" Although Jamie had stopped crying, his eyes were still bright with unshed tears. "I thought he was hurt. That's not the same thing."

"They say it's because of the risk of infection," she repeated, but to Joe's ears it sounded half-hearted. Behind Jamie, she was wringing her hands, clearly wishing she was inside the room with their older son.

He laid his hand over hers to stop their motion and spoke to her in a low tone. "Are you sure he'll be all right after seeing this?"

"I'm not going to be all right after seeing this," she answered, equally low, although Jamie showed no sign of being aware they were speaking. "Or you, either. But he needs to see it to understand why everything's going to be different for a while. He won't if we try to hide it."

"We could just tell him to —"

"No." She was shaking her head. "He'd just...he won't follow the rules if we're not clear. And he's stronger than you think. They both are. They've..." she trailed off as her breath hitched. "They've seen me in some pretty dangerous situations already, and hurt, too, but I always pulled through fine. And he might — they say he —"

He wrapped his hand tighter around hers. "We don't know that yet."

"But we know it's...there's no way it's not going to take a while, sweetheart." She lowered her voice, pitching it for Joe alone. "And this time we don't have the Agency who'll help us cushion the way they did before. They've — they've always been careful to help keep the kids out of danger, like they did when you'd been accused of the

Prime Minister's murder."

"Why aren't they doing that this time?"

"It's not related to a case," she answered. "I mean, we'll still have normal security in place, and that's not nothing, but there won't be anything extra, the way there has been before..." she trailed off. "Before. You know what I mean."

He nodded.

"Dad might, but I don't," said Jamie. "What are you talking about?"

"How grown-up you're acting," said Joe smoothly. "You're really doing a great job handling all this, Jamie."

He nodded awkwardly before turning back to the window, pressing his nose up against the glass. Phillip was almost unrecognizable, covered in bruises and swathed in bandages from the nose up. The proliferation of monitors, tubes, and other medical equipment around his bed dwarfed him, even though he'd started his adolescent growth spurt this past summer.

Tears had begun sliding down Jamie's face again. "Is he going to die too?"

"We hope not," said Amanda, "and it's a good sign that he came through the surgery as well as he did."

"But you said it's going to be a while before things are normal. How long —" his voice caught. "How long is he going to be like...like *that*?"

"We don't know, sweetheart. As long as it takes."

"Will he be normal after?"

Amanda's eyes dropped to the floor as she took a deep breath, and she began to wring her hands again. Joe remembered one of the nurses mentioning a rehabilitation center, and the doctor had said something about some of the damage potentially being permanent. It was going to be a long, difficult recovery and Phillip might not come all the way back to what he'd been like before.

He shook his head. There wasn't yet any reason to think he still couldn't have a normal childhood.

"Mom? Dad? You're not answering me."

"It's too early to tell," said Amanda quietly.

"Does he...does he know about Grandma?"

Amanda shook her head. Her eyes had become wet and glassy again. "He's been unconscious since the wreck, Jamie. Even if he hadn't been, we wouldn't have told

him right away. He needs to focus on getting better.”

“I guess that makes sense,” he said after thinking for a moment. “And I guess it’s good he’s not awake right now, either. All that stuff’s gotta hurt a lot.”

“Yeah,” she acknowledged. Her voice was rough and choked, and her eyes had already drifted back to the other side of the window.

“We’re gonna need to be strong for him, aren’t we?”

Amanda didn’t acknowledge that at all.

Joe stepped in again. “Looks like you’re already working on that, son. You’re right. He will need it. We’re all going to need help being strong. But none of us have to do it alone. That includes you.”

Jamie’s lips twitched. “That’s what Carrie said. And Lee said it won’t ever stop hurting completely, but we’ll get used to it. I guess he will, too, won’t he?”

He laid a hand on his shoulder. “I guess we all will.”

They stood there for a long while, watching without speaking, each of them lost in their own thoughts. The only sound was the steady *beep-beep-beep* of the heart monitor; another piece of equipment emitted periodic clicks as it cycled through whatever it was doing. Part of him wondered exactly what it was, but another part of him wasn’t sure he wanted to know. He’d seen injuries like this in Estoccia, but somehow, for some reason, this was different.

Of course it was different, he realized as Amanda shifted her stance beside him. This was his son. *Their* son, their oldest child that they’d made together out of what they’d imagined to be a long-term, sustainable love. Even if they’d been wrong about its nature, he had still come from something wonderful and amazing. He was a touchstone, a symbol, and one of the best things he’d ever had a hand in creating.

Not for the first time, he wondered how Carrie had so easily been willing to give up the idea of having children.

*Because it wouldn’t be fair to them, her voice sounded in his head, and I don’t have to have had children to know what it’s like to raise them.* She was the oldest of eight siblings. *It takes time and energy, Joe, and a lot of both, and we can’t give them what they deserve and have our dreams too.*

He found himself blinking away tears, wishing he’d realized this earlier, before he’d done so much damage to the children he already had.

But he had time now, didn’t he? Jamie was still here, and Phillip wasn’t gone.

Why was he thinking this way?

Then his awareness sharpened, coming back to the present with a jolt, terminating any further rumination. One of the monitors had started beeping faster. Too fast, it sounded like, and he could dimly hear an alarm going off. Behind him, there were running feet, shouting voices, and then a nurse unlocked the room and rushed in, pulling a curtain across their window.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Don’t do that! We’re his family! What’s —” he stepped toward the door. “Don’t cut us off like that!”

Another nurse stopped him before he crossed into the room. “Mr. King, please. They’re trying to save him. Let them do their job.”

“But what’s going —” he cut himself off in horror. There was a new noise now, another one he’d heard before in Estoccia. One he’d hoped he never had to hear again: the loud buzz of electrical paddles as they charged. He peeked through an opening where the curtain hadn’t completely closed. A nurse was already placing the pads, one on Phillip’s upper chest and the other diagonal from it, nearer his abdomen.

“Clear!” someone shouted. There was a loud *thunk*, and then the beeping resumed. But it was erratic, wrong, and it accelerated even as the doctor who’d spoken with them earlier came running into the room, skidding slightly as he came to a stop.

The defibrillator finished its next charge cycle. “Clear!”

There was another *thunk* and then another series of beeps. They had no rhythm but got faster the longer they lasted.

Amanda was beside Joe, craning her neck. Her hands were to her mouth and tears were streaming down her cheeks.

“Damn you, don’t give up!” shouted the doctor. Joe belatedly remembered his name: Dawson. “There was no thoracic damage, nothing — where’s that EKG? *Why the hell is he arresting?*”

The nurses kept working, adjusting things, charging the defibrillator again and again even as he, Amanda, and Jamie moved from window to doorway. This time, no one stopped them or shoved them aside.

Something wrapped around Joe’s waist and hung on, hard, and he looked down to see Jamie’s face buried in his chest. He put his arms around his younger son and held on tight. Jamie shouldn’t be here. Jamie shouldn’t have to see something like this. Hell, Amanda had been right: none of them should have to see it.

She was keening softly under her breath. Freeing one of his arms, Joe wrapped it around her shoulders and pulled her close. It wasn't enough. It wasn't anywhere near enough. But it was all he could do as they watched the scene unfold in front of them.

Another charge. Another *thunk*. Another spate of erratic, accelerating heartbeats. A nurse had a syringe and was injecting something into one of the IV lines. Joe peered at the label and was just able to make out the word *epinephrine*. Why? Phillip's heartbeat was accelerating, not slowing down. Then he saw that his chest was fluttering, too, and that Phillip seemed to be struggling to breathe despite being on a ventilator.

Next to the nurse, the doctor was calling out information he didn't understand, something about hidden thoracic damage and checking for evidence of any blows to the chest. Then he demanded another look at the CT scans, saying something about the medulla. Joe frowned. Wasn't that a part of the brain?

They set off the defibrillator again, and this time the beeps continued their erratic rhythm without accelerating. He thought that should be a good sign, but Phillip was still fighting to breathe. A faint tinge of blood appeared around his lips, and his chest had developed a pink flush.

There was so much motion, so much activity, so many conflicting sights. The only indicator of how things were actually going was another of the nurses, swearing through tears. "Come on. Come on, don't do this. You're too young."

The heart monitor sounded again. "Defib again, stat!"

Joe heard another buzz, and another *thunk*, but there were no beeps afterward. There was only a steady tone. The medical team kept working, kept fighting, kept demanding that Phillip find his way through whatever was going on. But nothing happened, and the pink flush on his chest slowly spread up his neck to his face. His fingers began turning the same color.

"No," whispered Amanda. It would've been a scream, but she didn't seem to be able to summon the volume. Two more nurses started crying.

"No, damn it!" shouted Dawson. His voice was angry and anguished at the same time. "Not this one, too!"

But the nurse at the head of the bed, the one who'd begun crying first, shook her head slowly. Dawson turned away, sweeping his hands across a nearby table and

sending its contents crashing to the floor.

“No,” whispered Amanda again, and she fell to her knees. “Not Phillip. *Not my son, too.* Dear God, dear *anyone*, anything but this!” Her voice rose to a shriek. “*Why are you giving up on him so quickly?*”

“Ma’am,” said one of the other nurses. “It’s been twenty-eight minutes.”

In Joe’s arms, Jamie had turned around, and now he began to shake, too. Joe caught him, forcing himself to stay steady, knowing that was what the child needed. Inside, though, he was screaming the same words as Amanda: not Phillip. Not his son. Not this. Anything but this. He was too young. They needed more time with him. Parents weren’t supposed to lose their children!

The head nurse took a ragged breath. “I’m sorry. We have to call it.”

Amanda’s shrieks rose to screams, joined by Jamie as he broke free from Joe, running down the hall toward the waiting room and exit. Joe knew he should follow, but his feet felt as though they were made from lead. They only allowed him the two steps he needed to get next to the wall. He cried out at a sudden, sharp, searing pain in his knuckles. Another equipment failure?

No. The wall had a new hole in it, one that perfectly matched the size of his fist.

It wouldn’t take any time at all to fix it, he knew, but there was no more time. He’d run out of that, run out of chances, run out of everything that mattered.

How in the world was he supposed to go on from here?

## 5. Lee: Making It

Lee jumped up as soon as he heard the racing footsteps, recognizing their cadence. Carrie was barely two steps behind him as he sprinted through the door and out into the hallway. He managed to grab Jamie's waist just in time. The child fought him, squirming and struggling as if his life depended on it, and when Carrie caught his legs so that he couldn't kick out, he began screaming at the top of his lungs. They ended up carrying him back into the waiting room.

"Jamie! What the hell is going on?" he finally panted after they had him down on the couch.

He was still writhing, striking out in what Lee could now see was something akin to blind panic. To his surprise, Carrie quickly reached in and slapped Jamie.

The strike had been gentle, but it had the desired effect: he quieted down and stopped fighting them, dissolving instead into hard, gulping tears. "It's Phil — Phillip — he — oh God, *why?*"

"Why what?" asked Lee as he and Carrie exchanged a nearly panicked look of their own. "What happened to Phillip?"

Jamie stilled completely for a long moment, as if drawing his strength together. "He died too!"

"He *what?*"

But Jamie burst into tears again. Carrie laid one of her hands on each of their shoulders. "Lee, I think he said that Phillip didn't make it."

"That can't be right. Amanda told me he survived the accident and just needed surgery. Which was finished because they were allowed to see him. That meant he was stable. The doctor even said so!"

"Lee." Tears were sliding down her face now, too. "You also heard Dr. Dawson say that the chances weren't yet a hundred percent."

"But Phillip's strong, and he was in good physical shape from all that baseball, and basket...ball, and..." Lee heard himself beginning to sputter and clamped his mouth shut. This wasn't happening, was it? Why wasn't Dotty's death enough? Why wasn't Amanda's shooting, only eight months ago, enough? Was it ever going to end?

"Sit down before you fall down." He was barely aware of the hand that had been on his shoulder moving to his elbow, guiding all of them toward the furniture. Lee

staggered to a chair and collapsed onto it, head slumping over his lap, shuddering through the nausea while excoriating himself for weakness. He'd seen death before. Hell, he'd seen people he loved die before. Dorothy, Frenchie —

Carrie shook him. "Lee. Come on, now. Jamie needs us."

Fighting for even breaths, he pushed himself up. "He must've misunderstood something. Maybe Phillip had an emergency, and it looked like —"

"Can you stay here long enough for me to check?"

He managed to nod.

"Can you keep an eye on Jamie while you do it?"

He nodded again, although his breathing was still erratic.

She stared at him for another long moment before climbing back to her feet and heading out the door. It wasn't long before she came back in, her face a mask of horror. Joe and Amanda were right behind her, and they looked even worse.

"No," Lee whispered, but now that he'd had a chance to pull himself back together, it was a protest, not a denial. "Oh, damn it. *No*. What happened?"

"One minute everything seemed fine, but the next..." Joe shook his head as he stumbled toward Jamie and the couch. Carrie sank down next to him, pulling him against her. The tears that had been sliding down her face had segued into quiet sobs. Across the room, Jamie sat up, his face bright red as he continued sniffing. Amanda stopped just inside the door, swaying on her feet, her eyes blank and unfocused, reminding him sharply of the way she'd looked when he'd first been shoved into the holding room at Addi Birol's safe house.

Lee didn't remember getting to his feet, but he must have, because he wrapped his arms around her as hard now as he had then, rocking them both back and forth. "Amanda. Oh, God. Are you all —" he broke off. Of course she wasn't all right. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry." The endearment, something he usually only used in private, slipped out without warning, but he didn't care. "Did they tell you what went wrong?"

She just shook her head. He looked over at Joe and Carrie. He was favoring his right hand and kept pulling away every time she bumped it as she attempted to pull him into a hug. Finally he shook his head, murmuring something too soft to hear, and she contented herself with holding his left hand.

"Mom?" Jamie's whisper was harsh. Lee hadn't even been aware of him standing up and coming over to them. Based on her lack of reaction, Amanda hadn't been

either, now was she noticing now. He shifted just far enough to pull Jamie into his arms alongside Amanda. Slowly, far too slowly, one of her arms came up around her son as well. She was shuddering hard, her voice softly keening, but the front of his shirt was dry: she wasn't crying.

Lee wasn't sure if that was good or bad. She'd cried earlier, so she wasn't just pushing everything away, but —

The waiting room door opened, and the doctor came in, his own steps dragging. "Mr. and Mrs. King and — I'm sorry, what did you say your last name was?"

"Stetson," rasped Lee.

"Mr. and Mrs. Stetson. Thank you. Do you have a few minutes?"

He pulled back from the hug. "Jamie? Amanda?"

Amanda looked up at him dully, and Jamie's eyes were still wet and red, but they both seemed to know where they were. He guided them down to the couch that Jamie had abandoned, initially intending to position Jamie in the middle between them. After another look at his wife, though, he put himself there instead so that they could both lean on him. It was, he told himself, mostly for her benefit, but there seemed no point in denying that he needed the comfort as well.

"I'm, ah, I'm Doctor Warren Dawson. I took over after your son's surgery —"

"But didn't keep him alive," said Joe. "And my son has a name: Phillip."

The doctor pulled up a folding chair, positioning it between the two couples. "Mr. King, I understand that you're upset but try to hear me out. I promise I'll answer your questions afterward. It looks like Phillip suffered from what's called a pulmonary embolism. It's when a blood clot or an air bubble develops, travels to the lungs, and then lodges there. If I had to guess, I'd say it was likely from one of his legs. They were bruised pretty badly in the wreck, but not enough to break a bone, so the surgery hadn't focused there."

"You're blaming the surgeon? Instead of taking responsibility yourself?"

"No, Mr. King, I'm not assigning any blame at all. These blasted things —" he broke off long enough to shake his head. "When you're talking about a traumatic injury, they can't be anticipated or predicted. And even when we're prepped, half the time it's not enough to keep them from causing respiratory failure, which is what happened here. Phillip's lungs just couldn't shake the embolism, and when his heart got involved —"

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Joe,” murmured Carrie. “Let him finish.”

“Phillip’s heartbeat sped up because his body was trying to dislodge the embolism. But the recent injuries meant that it wasn’t properly regulating, either, and...” Dawson sighed. “It actually tried to work too hard, seized, and caused a progressive systemic failure.” He paused. “I’m so very sorry. It — most pulmonary embolisms happen as a result of something called deep vein thrombosis, or DVT, which can happen after someone sits too long.”

“Especially on a plane,” said Lee after glancing quickly at Carrie. “I’ve heard of it.”

She gave him a relieved look, indicating she’d understood that he was also trying to de-escalate Joe’s obvious anger.

“Yes,” the doctor replied, who hadn’t noticed the interplay. “So I’ll admit we’d been more focused on treating the traumatic injuries and then preventing any post-surgical infections. I’m not sure I could’ve advised going back in and doing another surgery so soon, and the medications that dissolve clots quickly can cause severe bleeding which might have actually made things worse. The bottom line was that there wasn’t enough time to undo the damage before Phillip’s body simply overloaded to the point where it completely collapsed.”

“And if you had been focused on it right away?” Joe’s voice had gotten harsh.

“We might — and I emphasize *might* — have been able to prevent this by starting a blood thinner just as soon as he came out of surgery. But with all the bleeding, an anticoagulant would have been the last thing that either the surgeon or I would have recommended. Mr. King, I understand that you’re upset —”

“Upset?” Joe was back on his feet. “I’m beyond upset. Phillip was fourteen and did sports, and his mother and I made sure he ate right and was up on all his shots. He couldn’t have been any healthier if we’d tried! So why wasn’t his body able to fight off this pulmo — embo — whatever it is you called it?”

“Because,” said Dawson, standing slowly to face him, “even the healthiest body can’t stand up to some kinds of trauma. Look, Mr. King, I have three children of my own, and I couldn’t even *imagine* losing one of them. But medicine isn’t perfect, and sometimes we simply cannot treat something no matter how hard we try!”

By now, they were nose-to-nose, and Joe’s next words came out in something

close to a snarl. "I want a second opinion."

"So do I." The doctor remained remarkably calm. "Cases like this go to automatic review, and I look forward to getting the results. If you and Mrs. Stetson will authorize an autopsy, we can even —"

Beside Lee, Amanda stirred. "No."

"Amanda! Don't you want to know if this *quack* did anything wrong?"

"It won't bring Phillip back." Her voice was quiet and small, and Lee felt his heart break even more. "Unless...would it help you learn a way to save someone else?"

"Probably not," admitted the doctor.

"Then no. I don't want him cut open. Just...just let us have the..." she didn't finish the sentence. "I don't even know what we're supposed to do now."

"We're *supposed* to get some answers and find out what happened, instead of just —" Joe's voice broke, and he took a gulping breath. "No. I can't accept this. Children survive car crashes *all the time*, even bad ones! They're not supposed to..." he trailed off. "We're not supposed to have to bury them before they ever finish...finish...growing up and..." he sank back onto the couch, shuddering. Carrie wrapped her arms around him, rubbing his back and speaking to him in a low voice.

Lee looked down. Amanda was staring straight ahead, her face pale and her hands shaking. "Amanda. Hey. You still with us?"

There was no response.

Jamie took her hand. "Mom?"

After what seemed like forever, she nodded. "I'm here. I just — I don't —"

Neither did Lee. He dimly noticed that Dr. Dawson had left the room. It gave the five of them some privacy, which he appreciated, but a part of him knew that they couldn't stay at the hospital for the rest of the night. There needed to be more phone calls, more planning. Did they even know of a good funeral home?

*Funeral home.* The skin on his face tightened, and he needed several breaths before he could speak again. "We should...we should go somewhere more comfortable."

Across the room, Carrie nodded. "Not the house."

"Why not?"

She gave him a sharp look. "Because Phillip and Dotty —" she cut herself off, but he got the meaning. Right. Amanda's house was the last place they needed to be right now, with its pictures and reminders of them everywhere you turned.

“Okay,” he acknowledged. “Then where?” His arms were busy holding Amanda and Jamie, but he was able to sweep his eyes around the room. Carrie nodded again, clearly understanding his meaning. They couldn’t go anywhere public. Not right now.

“Our place is twenty or twenty-five minutes away this time of day,” said Carrie. “Is that too far?”

Lee shook his head. “Let’s get out of here.”

## 6. Carrie: Worry

Carrie bustled around their small dining area, making sure all the adults had fresh coffee, and that plates and forks were taken up as soon as they were used. She and Joe usually preferred small breakfasts, sometimes no more than coffee and toast. But she'd heard Amanda's opinion of breakfast a few times from Jamie. He was used to a much more elaborate meal, so she'd gotten up early to go through the kitchen and make up something traditional.

After her third circuit of the table, Joe caught her hand. "Stop," he told her. "Sit down. It's all right."

"But —"

"Vous essayez à nouveau de concourir," he said. *You're trying to compete again.* They'd had this conversation before. Joe had reassured her that she and Amanda were each unique, that he'd married them for different reasons, and that there was no need for her to be nervous. Amanda herself was always warm, pleasant and welcoming. The one time the boys had compared the two of them while both were present, she had gently reprimanded them.

Taking a deep, sharp breath, she sank down next to her husband. Across the table, she could see Lee quickly dropping his eyes back down to his plate. Did Joe know that Lee spoke French? Did it even matter? Amanda barely seemed to have noticed at all. She was eating, but her movements were mechanical and repetitive.

"What time do we have to leave for school from here?" asked Jamie.

Joe shook his head. "There's no need for school today, son. It's more important to be together as a family." The two of them had called out sick from work first thing this morning. When she'd come downstairs to cook breakfast, Lee had asked to borrow their phone so he could do the same. At the time, Amanda had still been ensconced in the blankets on their pull-out couch. She'd finally gotten up about the time Carrie had finished breakfast, and her hair was still in disarray.

Jamie was picking at the remains of his scrambled eggs. "Why?"

"What do you mean?" asked Joe.

"Why do we need to be together? I mean — yeah, I get that we're all sad and everything, and me too, but what are we going to be doing?"

"There's a lot to do," answered Joe. "Some phone calls and decisions to be

made, and we'll probably go out and meet with some people later."

"You will, you mean," said Jamie. "But what about me? I don't even have another change of clothes here, and Mom and Lee are still in yesterday's —"

"I'll go over to the house later," said Lee. "Pick up some things. Is there anything special you're going to want, sport?"

He shrugged. "Depends on how long we're staying here."

Lee sighed, looking at Amanda before scrubbing a hand across his scalp. "I'm not sure yet. But probably no more than the weekend."

Carrie blinked. "Are you sure you can go back to the house that soon?"

"We'll go to my apartment if we have to. Jamie can sleep on the couch. It's not a pull-out, but it's pretty comfortable."

At that, Jamie groaned. "I'd rather stay here, where I have a bed."

Amanda, who had kept staring at her plate once she'd cleaned it, finally stirred. "No. I — please, Joe. I need — I..." she trailed off.

Joe gave her a long look, concern written all over his face. "We don't need to decide now," he finally said. "You'll be staying here for another day or so at least."

"Why?" asked Jamie again. "What are we going to do?"

"Don't you understand?" asked Amanda, her voice wavering and, thought Carrie, unnecessarily loud. "Mother and Phillip *died* yesterday, Jamie. There are a million things we have to do. Talk to the funeral home. Let everyone else in the family know and see how many of Mother's friends are in her address book. Write the obituary — obituaries. Call the insurance companies and find out how quickly I can get another car. Figure out what to do with their things and how I'm going to handle the hospital bills and what we're supposed to do to go on from here because parents aren't supposed to bury their children. Especially not alongside their own parents! It's not fair and it's not right and I don't know what else but I do know that everything's all *wrong* at the moment and the last thing on anyone's mind is work or school!"

An awkward silence followed her outburst. Lee, who had put his hand on her arm, was the first to break it. "Amanda, you need to keep your strength up. Take another bite of your breakfast."

"Breakfast?" She turned on him. "You're concerned about whether I *eat*? Don't you understand? Half my family's *gone*!" She leapt to her feet, the chair toppling over behind her. Tears were streaming down her face. "And they're not coming back!"

Who *cares* about whether I eat right, right now?”

Lee had also gotten up. “I do. Jamie does.”

“We do,” said Carrie. “That’s why we’re staying together. We can lean on each other —”

“Oh, spare me!” At that, Amanda dashed out of the kitchen toward the living room. Lee gave them an apologetic look before he followed her.

Jamie’s face had reddened, and he was blinking back tears of his own. “I know they died yesterday,” he whispered. “Why does Mom think I don’t?”

“She doesn’t,” said Carrie. “She’s upset and overwhelmed.”

“But she said —”

“People sometimes say things they don’t mean when they’re hurting,” she explained. “Once she’s calmed down, she’ll probably come back in and apologize to you.” As the words came out of her mouth, Carrie decided she’d make sure of it. It would be a delicate conversation, but Amanda needed to remember that she wasn’t the only one who was standing in the darkness of grief. They all were.

Jamie lowered his eyes to his plate again.

“Here,” said Joe, reaching for the pitcher of orange juice. “Why don’t you have a little more, and after that you and I can clean up. It’s only fair to Carrie, since she —” he broke off pouring into Jamie’s glass, face crumpling as he pulled his hand back toward him. It was badly bruised, she realized, and there was also some swelling.

“Your hand,” she said. “What happened?”

He shook his head, the pain leaving his expression, but she could see that it was only due to effort. “It’s all right.”

“Joe.”

“Okay. I ah, I reacted badly yesterday myself. But I’m able to use the hand, so nothing’s broken. It’ll go away in a few days.”

She didn’t point out that he *hadn’t* been able to use his hand just now. Not long enough to complete the action of pouring juice, anyway. “There’s some pain medicine upstairs. I think we have both aspirin and acetaminophen.”

“Yeah,” he said after a moment. “I think I’d better. Jamie, why don’t you and Carrie finish up while I go up and get it.”

His eyes flicked up briefly, but Jamie didn’t otherwise react to the situation. His hands shook slightly as he reached out for the orange juice himself.

“Hey,” she said. “You want to talk about it?”

He shrugged.

“All right.” She stood up, beginning to gather the plates.

“Can you wait?” asked Jamie. “I’m gonna help, like Dad asked me to. Soon as I finish this glass of juice.”

Carrie sat back down. “That’s nice of you, but I really can do it.”

“No, I want to.” He stopped and took a big gulp. “It’ll give me something to do.”

“There’s plenty to do here.”

He shook his head. “All those things Mom said? That was grown-up stuff. I didn’t hear anything that I’m going to be doing. I might as well go to school.”

“Do you really think you’d be able to pay attention in class?”

“Yes!” he insisted, but then his eyes dropped again. “No,” he mumbled. “I guess not. I just — what *am* I supposed to do, Carrie? I mean, Phillip’s not here anymore and most of our stuff is at the house anyway, and I finished that book I was reading the last time I was here. We can’t watch TV because Mom and Lee are in the living room and there’s nothing really to do outside except for the playground and that’s for little kids. Phillip would tease me if I —” he broke off, swallowing as the tears spilled out of his eyes. “Except I guess he won’t, will he?”

She scooted over to the chair beside him. “No, love. I’m sorry.”

His fists clenched and he rocked slightly, struggling for control. “No. No, I’ve got to be strong. Mom and Dad and you and Lee, you all need me to be on my best behavior right now. And I’m trying, I really am, but I just...” he trailed off with another gulp.

Carrie put her hand on his shoulder. “You’re actually doing really well, Jamie.”

He breathed heavily for a moment and then turned to face her. “But I don’t *understand* this, Carrie! I mean, I know what’s going on, but I don’t know how to feel or what to think, and when I try to do something there’s nothing to do *but* feel and think, and I don’t want to do that right now. I need to — to — to do *something*...” he trailed off as he began crying in earnest.

Wrapping her arms fully around his shoulders, she pulled him close. He responded by dragging their chairs together and she wondered, if he’d been smaller, whether he might have tried to crawl into her lap. As it was, it felt as though he was clinging to her for dear life. Maybe he was. There was a lump in her throat, but she pushed it away. Clearing the breakfast dishes wouldn’t take that long. There had to be

something else she could assign as a task, something that wasn't related to the situation and would serve as a distraction.

Jamie began to stiffen. "No, no, I can't do this."

She let him push her back far enough that they were no longer embracing, but kept her hands on his. "Why not? It's normal to be sad."

"I told you. I gotta be strong, and besides, men don't cry."

"Yes, they do. Your dad does, anyway. So does Lee."

That earned her a skeptical look.

"Your dad cried just last night," she said. "We both did, after everyone went to bed." They'd clung to each other in a way not unlike the way Jamie had been doing a moment before. Joe had cried himself to sleep. She'd remained awake for a long time, trying to still her thoughts enough to rest, but she'd ended up having to wait until exhaustion took over.

"What about Lee?"

When she'd tiptoed down the stairs this morning, she'd found him already awake, sitting up with his back against the couch while he held Amanda and stroked her hair. She'd been utterly still, staring out at nothing, a numb look on her face. He'd been resting his head on hers, tear tracks on his cheeks, although he'd turned away when he'd realized she was there. She'd left quickly to give them both some privacy, but surely, he would understand if she used him as an example now.

"He cried, too, Jamie," she said. "And he's worried about your mother. That's why he went after her just now."

"I'm worried about her, too," he whispered.

"We all are," she confirmed. She could hear Joe's footsteps as he came down the stairs and paused at the bottom. Then she heard the murmur of his voice in the living room. Lee's voice was equally quiet as he responded.

She didn't hear Amanda's voice.

"I have an idea," suggested Carrie. "Let's clear the breakfast dishes, and then I know something we can do for your mom. She and Lee don't have a change of clothes here, so someone's going to have to go back to your house."

His eyes widened. "You mean we'll go *home*?"

She took a breath, remembering Lee's words over breakfast. "Not yet. Your mom's not yet ready. But what we can do is make a list of the things she'll need, so

that whoever goes over there doesn't forget anything. We'll make one for you, too, since you don't have that much here."

He nodded, his expression becoming determined. "Okay. I can do that. But before they do that, can we get my school things out of your car? I left them there last night."

"Of course. I'll get them right now."

"Thanks." Standing up, he started going around the table, picking up dishes. "What about school? Can we call and get my assignments, at least, so I'm not so far behind when I do go back?"

Carrie watched him thoughtfully for a moment before leaving the room. Jamie was a serious student, but under most circumstances, he wasn't interested in going to school any more than any other child. This repeated insistence that he needed to go now was unusual, and she realized, not necessarily a good sign. Neither was his apparent eagerness to do a chore.

Picking up the car keys from where they lay on the counter, she decided she, too, would make a stop before coming back into the kitchen. Requesting her stepson's assignments would give her a reason to call and talk to his school counselor. He or she might have some recommendations about how to break through Jamie's denial and avoidance. She just hoped they would work.

## 7. Lee: Painkillers

“Yeah,” said Lee into the phone. “In Arlington, the one at Wilson and Edgewood. Will I be able to pick it up for her? Okay. Thanks, Doc.”

Footsteps sounded behind him as he hung up, and he turned to see Joe at the foot of the stairs. The other man had come through the living room a few minutes earlier, but he'd barely noticed; all of his attention had been on a weeping Amanda. She'd tossed and turned all night, apologizing every time she woke him up as they lay on the pullout couch in Joe and Carrie's living room. It wasn't until he'd wrapped himself around her, trapping her arms and legs, that she'd fallen asleep and stayed that way. He doubted it had been restful.

After her outburst in the kitchen, Lee had followed her back into the living room where she was curled onto the as-yet-unmade pullout bed, crying as hard as he'd ever seen from her. He'd sat down and tried to pull her into his arms, but she'd jerked away and he'd let her go. She lay like that for a long time, sniffing and sobbing, her entire body shaking and heaving for a long time before it finally subsided. She'd then gotten up, beginning to jerk the bedding off of the mattress.

“Amanda,” he'd begun.

“These need to come off before we put the bed back into the couch.”

“*Amanda.*” But she'd jerked away again, and he hadn't been able to do anything more than watch as she stripped the bed and put the couch back together. Afterward, she sank down onto it, her face drawn back into that horrible numb expression he'd seen when he first woke up this morning. He'd been able to put his arms around her then, but she didn't respond any more to his presence than she had when she was crying.

Out of desperation, he'd called Dr. Pfaff at the Agency. “Shock,” the psychiatrist had said. “I can give you a short-term prescription for tranquilizers.”

“Damn it, Doc,” he'd started, “she just lost half her family. She doesn't need to be *medicated* out of —”

“It's only for the weekend,” Pfaff had interrupted. “Just enough time for her to get herself back together. She's psychologically strong, Lee. She has coping mechanisms, and once she can work her way through to using them, she'll be fine. I want to see her Monday morning.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to be doing then.”

“Find the time to get her in here. I can make it an order if you want.”

Over on the couch, Amanda hadn’t moved a muscle during the entire conversation, even when he’d said her name. With a long sigh, Lee had capitulated. Pfaff had agreed to call the prescriptions over to her usual pharmacy instead of making him go all the way back to Georgetown to get them.

“How is she?” asked Joe now, bringing Lee back to the moment.

He shook his head. “Not good. That was one of the Agency doctors. He’s going to call in a prescription for a few days of tranquilizers.” Seeing Joe’s expression, he repeated Pfaff’s words. “I don’t like it, either, but I don’t know what else to do. He did say we were right not to take her back to the house last night.”

Joe nodded. “I’ll talk to Carrie. You can stay here as long as you need.”

“No, we’ll go to my apartment. Jamie can —”

“You heard him in there,” said Joe. “If you’re going to do that, you should at least let him stay here, where he has a bed.”

He scrubbed both hands through his hair. Separating Amanda from Jamie might make things worse instead of better, and he doubted it would do much good for Jamie either. It was only his own distaste at the idea of staying with Amanda’s ex, he realized, that had him wanting to get out of here so quickly.

“Lee,” said Carrie from the entrance to the kitchen. “At least leave her here while you go over to the house for her things. That way she doesn’t have to wait in the car for you.” She held up a piece of paper. “Jamie and I made a list.”

He crossed the room to take it. “Thanks. You’ll — you guys have the number for my car phone, don’t you? Joe, you call me if *anything* —”

“I’m going with you.”

They both turned to stare at him.

“Two of us will make it a faster trip, and...” he trailed off, pointedly looking at Lee’s bare left hand. “You and I need to talk anyway.”

• • •

Even when he and Amanda were the only people in her house, it had never been completely quiet. But it was now, and that was more than a little unnerving. Lee could have sworn he’d caught glimpses of Phillip and Dotty out of the corners of his eyes,

and their voices seemed to echo from every corner. He'd shaken his head to clear it more than once; there were no such things as ghosts, and his memory was already vivid enough.

Working quickly, he made his way through Amanda's dresser, pulling out clothing and personal items as he filled up one of her travel bags. It kept him from having to listen to the weird, reverberating silence. He wondered if they'd ever be able to come back to this house so full of memories.

He'd been going through the drawers as quickly as he could, comparing things he found with Carrie's and Jamie's list, but then his hand closed on a solid square-shaped object. Pulling it out, he saw that it was a velvet-covered jewelry box, and when he opened it, his breath caught: her engagement and wedding rings, stored inside for safety. There was also just enough room in the box's domed cover for a satin pouch, which he discovered contained the locket she'd once used to carry a microdot.

At the time, a little over two years ago, the locket had contained an old picture of Phillip and Jamie. Opening it now, he saw that she'd changed the contents: the boys' picture was more recent, and on the formerly empty opposite side...his breath caught again, this time with a hitch. It was a photo of the two of them, snapped just after they'd said their wedding vows. She'd trimmed the print to mostly focus on him, leaving her own face at the very edge.

Lee hadn't realized how much his appearance had changed in the years they'd worked together, but he decided that the changes were mostly for the better. While it was true that there were some lines around his eyes and mouth, and he could see the first hints of gray in his hair, those signs of aging were more than eclipsed by the joy and wonder in his facial expression. They'd been so happy that day.

Neither of them had suspected that they'd be caught in someone else's crossfire just two days later, leaving her clinging to life.

His hands shook as he shut the locket, returned it to the pouch, and then returned the pouch to the box before slipping it into his pocket. They'd pulled through then. They'd pull through now. They didn't have any other option.

Closing the suitcase, he made his way out into the hallway and down to the den. Another packed travel bag sat next to the couch, but Joe himself was in the kitchen, cradling his right hand and grimacing as he searched through cabinets. He'd insisted he was fine, but the pain medicine shouldn't have worn off that quickly.

Dropping Amanda's bag next to Jamie's, Lee headed into the kitchen and pulled out the first-aid kit. "What'd you do?"

"Nothing."

He silently indicated the hand that was still curled against the older man's chest. With a sigh, Joe held it out for inspection. The bruising was spectacular, but there were no obvious deformities and a full range of motion. When Lee worked it through its range of motion, he hissed in pain and sweat popped out on his brow. "Okay. Not broken."

"I know."

"But you did a number on it."

Joe made a soft scoffing noise that, at another time, might have been a laugh. "You should see the wall."

Shaking his head, Lee went back to the cabinets for Amanda's craft box. Joe's gaze followed behind. "You know your way around in here pretty well."

"That the best insult you can come up with?"

"I don't mean it to be an insult."

Lee pulled out an unused popsicle stick from the box, breaking it half and then starting on the edges with a bit of leftover sandpaper. "Then what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. You know your way around in here, better than I used to, even."

He shrugged and kept sanding. "I usually help clean up after dinner. Even cook it every now and then."

"So you are here a good bit."

That led him to pause and look up. "Your point?"

"I don't see anything here that belongs to you, but you're familiar with the house. You knew how to handle Jamie when he was upset. And you claim that you and Amanda are married."

He felt himself bristling. "We are. Have been since February."

"Eight months? Then why haven't I heard about it?"

Deciding the sanding job was good enough, he started digging through the first-aid kit for some tape. "We didn't think it was safe."

"Safe? Wasn't she shot right around then? Was that before or after you got married?"

“After,” admitted Lee. “Right after, actually. That was supposed to have been our honeymoon.”

“So that’s why you were in California. Was it a case?”

“No.” He positioned the popsicle stick between the last two fingers of Joe’s hand and began taping them together, buddy-style. “We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“And now this. Which isn’t based on a case either, is it?”

“It’s too early to tell.”

“That cop seemed pretty sure.” Joe winced again while he finished the taping, but kept his hand still. “You couldn’t have done anything to prevent this, any more than you could’ve prevented Amanda being shot. Right?”

“What are you getting at?”

“You can’t protect them from everything.” With his uninjured hand, Joe slapped the craft box closed. It narrowly missed Lee’s own fingers. “You had no reason to think there was any danger yesterday, any more than you had any reason to think you’d be unsafe in California.”

“So?”

“Life’s dangerous even when you aren’t working cases! But when you are, don’t you think she and the boys are safer with you *being in here* instead of skulking around the garden and running off to hide whenever someone like Edna Gilstrap might see you? Haven’t you ever thought about that?”

The skin under Lee’s collar heated up. “Now, you wait just a damn minute. Only a few people even know Amanda works with the Agency!”

“Really? You’ve been on dozens of cases together. Everyone in the intelligence community knows you’re an operative and that she’s your partner! Hell, they even knew it around the EAO, and that was before the two of you helped clear my name.” He rounded on Lee, voice rising. “And you can bet if they knew already, so did half the lawyers and most of the private investigators in this town. Not to mention all the folks from the three-letter agencies and the government itself.”

“Oh, come on —”

“Don’t give me that. This city is lousy for secrets, and you damn well know it! So don’t try this ‘keeping the family safe’ baloney. It was stupid at the time, and it’s even more stupid now!” Joe paused, breathing heavily. “I don’t even know why you

thought that in the first place. Just being partners was enough to paint the target. Getting married only turned it a brighter shade of red.”

The heat began spreading onto Lee’s face. “It’s also none of your damn business!”

“Getting married? No. But protecting my ex-wife and children? That’s absolutely my business! So do that already!”

“I am!”

“Do it right! Be here!” Joe spun away. “And, oh my God, I can’t believe I just said that.” He stalked out of the kitchen toward the den. “Let’s go.”

Lee forced himself to take a minute to put the first-aid kit and box away, feeling his temper cool as he did so. Still, he stared at the cabinet door for a long time before opening the one beside it and taking out a bottle.

Filling a nearby glass with water, he carried both items into the den. “You, ah, you need any more aspirin? I...” he trailed off. “I know what those package directions say, but as long as you have something on your stomach, it’s okay to double up every now and then. I’ve had to do it myself sometimes.”

Joe let out a long breath. “Yeah. Thanks.” He swallowed quickly and then handed the bottle and glass back. “Sorry. I guess I’m still trying to work through everything.”

“No,” said Lee. “You’re right. I just —” he stopped, having run out of words. “Let me put these away and then I’ll carry the bags out. You don’t need to make that hand any worse than it already is. And we’ll get you some more painkillers when we stop at the drug store for Amanda’s prescription.”

He did one more thing after rinsing the glass and putting everything back in the cabinets. Reaching under his shirt, he pulled out the chain Amanda had given him for his birthday this past summer. Then, he unclasped it, slid the wedding ring off, and put it on his hand.

The little box in his pocket felt like it was burning a hole right through the fabric.

## 8. Billy: Ring of Truth

It occurred to him that he didn't need to stand away from Amanda's family anymore. But that wasn't a pleasant thought, because of the reason: Dotty West wasn't there to berate him, ask questions he couldn't answer, or extol her daughter's virtues.

Billy had been impressed with the woman the first time he'd met her, and during the Stemwinder incident, he'd come to genuinely like her. She'd reminded him of nearly everything he liked about her daughter: the curiosity, the loyalty, the determination to make things right even when they were topsy-turvy. He'd hoped, one day, to at least be able to give her a compliment about her parenting. Unfortunately, though, that was never going to happen. That saddened him more than he had expected.

He stood with Francine and a knot of other people from the Agency, people who had come to like Amanda and who wanted to pay their respects. It was one of those near-perfect days that often happened in October: warm, but not hot, with clear blue skies and low humidity. The sun was bright, but not so high as to cause a glare as it reflected off the two caskets that would soon be lowered into the ground.

All of them were wearing dark, somber colors. The death of a child was always especially tragic. And nobody should ever have to arrange two funerals instead of one.

Billy could see Scarecrow and Amanda clearly from his vantage point. He was also able to identify Amanda's ex-husband and his new wife, as well as an adolescent boy with blond hair and glasses: Amanda's younger son. He fidgeted periodically, clearly unhappy about the fact that his mother wouldn't let go of his hand. It was understandable, he thought, and on both sides; he was now her only child, but he was too old to need a parent's physical control.

Scarecrow — *Lee*, Billy corrected himself mentally, since they weren't at the Agency — noticed the fidgeting too, and said something to Amanda, tightening the arm he had around her. They were both wearing unadorned, unbroken black. He hadn't even known that Lee owned a black dress shirt; it had never appeared at the office.

Amanda, who was dry-eyed, didn't respond to whatever Lee said, and the long lines of grief on his senior operative's face deepened. This one was hitting them both as hard as he'd thought it would, and the obvious worry in Lee's stance didn't bode well for either of them. This past Monday, Lee had brought Amanda in briefly to speak with Dr. Pfaff, but they'd come and gone without visiting the bullpen.

Nobody, least of all Billy, had blamed them.

Taking a deep breath, Lee said something more to Amanda, turning slightly toward her and briefly causing the sunlight to flash off of his wedding ring. After a moment that stretched out far too long, she shuddered and let go of her son's hand. That, he thought, didn't look good, given how even a keel she tended to have.

Then Billy's mind stuttered to a stop. *Wedding ring?*

He looked again, closer this time. No, he wasn't imagining it: Lee Stetson was indeed wearing a wedding ring. So was Amanda King. The engagement ring she wore with it was periodically catching the sun's rays, reflecting them with a sharp, bright energy that seemed too cheerful for the circumstances.

What in the world? They weren't on a case or otherwise undercover; in fact, they were in plain sight of a number of family, friends, and co-workers. When Lee had changed his life insurance beneficiary earlier this year, he'd listed Amanda as his partner, not his wife. She had used the same word to describe him when she'd changed her beneficiary shortly after returning from disability leave.

Of course, he mused, marriage was a type of partnership. But shouldn't this have been caught when they'd run Amanda through a routine security check after she came back from her leave? The check had uncovered the fact that they'd gone to California together — Lee hadn't "flown out the minute he heard" about the shooting — but Billy had chalked that little fib up to them trying to keep their relationship off the record.

Apparently, though, the check had missed the exact nature of said relationship.

The next time they did a round of periodic checks, Billy decided to make sure Scarecrow was on the list. It would give him ammunition for when he asked, once they were back in the office. It also, he thought, might lead to a pretty amusing scene. Goodness knew they could all use one right now.

Beside him, Jeannie tugged gently on his hand. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing? Their left hands."

"Yeah," he whispered back. "Just noticed."

"Maybe you should ask them after the service."

He gave her a sideways look. "Wasn't planning to talk to them. They need their privacy, to spend time with family and friends."

She shook her head. "No, we'll stay a few minutes. They'll be glad we were here,

Bill, and they can use all the support they can get.”

The others from the Agency departed quickly and quietly, but it still took several minutes to work their way over to the couple once the formalities had ended. Jeannie drew Lee into a hug, going up on her toes to whisper something into her ear. He put his arms around her, returning the embrace and giving Billy the opportunity for a clear, close view of his left hand. Yes, the plain gold band, worn on the fourth finger, was definitely a wedding ring.

As he withdrew from the embrace, Lee met Billy’s eyes. “Thanks for being here. We appreciate it.”

“Of course, son.” Was that a hint of defiance in Lee’s expression? “We wouldn’t have missed it.”

Then he turned and saw Jeannie frowning as she withdrew from where she’d hugged Amanda, and he forgot all about the ring as he took in the expression on his newest agent’s face: it was blank, utterly and completely flat. Which, until then, was a phrase he never thought he’d use in the same sentence as Amanda King’s name.

• • •

There was a tap on his office door the next week’s Monday morning. After Billy called out an acknowledgment, an exhausted-looking Lee came in. He held a large mug of coffee in his left hand, which still had the ring on it, and sat down without any further invitation. “I saw that look at the funeral. You need an explanation.”

“Yes. I do.” A quick-and-dirty check, during the week since the funeral, had uncovered the marriage license, but he wasn’t ready to reveal that yet.

Lee closed his eyes. “February 13th.”

“So that was why the two of you were so anxious to get out of there after we colared Felicia McMasters.” He paused. “It’s pretty bad luck to be late to your own wedding. Did you make it on time?”

“Yeah.” Lee opened his eyes again. “Just barely, though.”

“Good. That’s good, Lee. I’m happy for both of you.”

A small, cautious smile appeared. “Thanks.”

“All right then, now I want you to tell me why you didn’t disclose this up front. You both know we run routine re-clearances on our agents. Didn’t you think it would be uncovered soon or later? Why was it such a big secret to begin with?”

“Amanda’s family.”

“You’ll have to do better than that, Scarecrow, because it doesn’t make any sense.”

He took a long sip of coffee before answering. “Remember the Chinese Trade Fair case? Tran Van Khai?”

“What about it?” Then a memory surfaced. “Wait a minute. You were looking at real estate listings right around then. Were the two of you already engaged?”

“Yeah, and we were planning to make an announcement, but...” he trailed off. “They went after Khai’s family even after he faked his own death, Billy! I couldn’t do that to Amanda’s mother and child —” he cut himself off as his voice broke, taking a breath before he continued. “We had to keep them safe. She agreed with me.”

“That has to be one of the stupidest things I have ever heard you say!” Lee’s eyes widened, but Billy wasn’t done. “What on earth could’ve made either of you think that *not* being there constituted *protection*? If anything —”

Lee held up a hand. “Look, I’ve already heard it from Amanda’s ex-husband, the morning after we got home from the hospital. You’re both right. It was stupid.”

“Well, it’s nice to know that you *finally* thought clearly about it!” But Billy’s exasperation had spent itself. “I suppose that’s why you’ve decided to come clean about it now.”

“Something like that, yeah. There’s also the matter of Agency policy.” The defiance began to creep back into Lee’s expression. “You said it yourself, after the P-2 incident. We’re one of the most efficient teams you have, and our numbers prove it. Amanda and I talked a while back. Neither one of us is ready to give up field work.”

With a sigh, Billy sat back in his chair. “You don’t have to. I had started to suspect something had changed between you two, as far back as that mess with Sinclair and Blackthorne. So I checked the regs. As long as one of you isn’t reporting to the other one, the Agency can allow it. Which is part of the reason I put her back under my direct supervision as part of your disciplinary action.”

Lee swallowed, looking him firmly in the eye. “There’s something else, and I should tell you now. I don’t buy the car accident theory.”

Billy felt his eyes narrow. “Why not?”

“Arlington PD estimated her speed at the time of the accident as between forty and forty-five miles an hour.”

“So what?”

“So the speed limit through that stretch is *thirty-five*, and if anything, Amanda’s mother tended to drive too slow. She was so terrified of making a mistake that she sometimes created traffic problems from being too cautious. She absolutely would not have been speeding. Not even by the few miles an hour most of the rest of us would.”

“Maybe she was distracted. And didn’t I read somewhere that these new sport-utility vehicles can flip over at lower speeds?”

“The speed estimate was based on tire tracks. The investigation said she’d lost control of her rear wheels. But she flipped to the left *and forward*, Billy. That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Maybe she hit something or dropped a wheel. Physics can be strange sometimes.”

“The median is concrete through there.” Lee shook his head. “And even if the tires came off the road, she still wouldn’t have been going fast enough to roll completely over. The car should’ve ended up on its side, *between* the two sets of lanes. Not spinning into oncoming traffic!”

Billy folded his arms. “I take it you’ve already started looking into this.”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Yeah. It...it gave me something to do. We stayed that first weekend with Amanda’s ex-husband and his wife, but we’re at my apartment now.”

“That can’t be a long-term solution.”

“No. Jamie — Amanda’s son — is sleeping on the couch in my living room, and that’s not going well.”

“What does Amanda think about this?”

Now a look of what might have been anguish appeared on Lee’s face. “Dr. Pfaff still has her on tranquilizers. But she insisted that Jamie go back to school today. He was more than ready. I took him in before coming to work.”

“She’s at your apartment *alone*? Did Pfaff sign off on that?”

“Yeah, he thought the quiet and some time to herself might do her some good. She’s not a danger to herself, if that’s what you’re worried about. And I...” he trailed off. “I kind of needed a break.”

“I can understand that,” said Billy, and not without sympathy.

“I’ve already put some feelers out about the crash investigation. I should hear

something soon. Or, at least, I hope I will.”

“So do I,” he answered, “And good luck to you. But you’re going to need to work this with your own time and resources. And I *mean* that, Scarecrow, unless and until you find something that can tie it to this Agency,” he added before Lee could voice his protest. “Announcing your marriage is going to put you even further into the spotlight than you already are. Which is, by the way, a good thing. You’re going to have to let us throw you a shower or a party or something, once you’re both ready. But some of the attention you’re about to get might not be the kind you want.”

His lips thinned. “Yeah, I know. At the same time, it’s — it’s something of a relief to stop keeping extra secrets. We already do enough of that in the line of duty as it is.”

“So there’s nothing else you’re holding back, now?”

“No.”

Although he hadn’t noticed its absence, Billy now recognized that he hadn’t heard that particular ring of truth in the younger man’s voice for quite a while. That, alone, made the statement believable.

## 9. Amanda: Fine

Amanda had to admit that Francine had done a good job with the Middle East transcripts; not only were the analyses complete, but they were also filed and cross-referenced against earlier ones. At least they had been in the computer system. She couldn't say the same about the paper files, but then again, very few agents were good about their paper files. The ladies in the steno pool called it "job security." She called it annoying. Would it kill someone to spend an hour every week keeping their paperwork straight?

Ordinarily, she considered it a minor issue, but the files had piled up alarmingly during her three-week absence. It did seem, though, that someone had been at least attempting to work on it, given that she wasn't finding anything more recent than a week ago —

The sound of the Q-Bureau's door brought her out of her musing. To her surprise, it wasn't Lee who stepped through, but Francine.

The other woman seemed equally startled. "Oh. Amanda. I didn't know you were back at work yet."

"Well," said Amanda, "now you do."

Francine's eyebrows went up. "How are you?"

"I'm all right. Ready to come back."

"I see," she answered. "And, ah, it's good to have you back. We missed you and...well, it just seemed like..." she trailed off awkwardly.

"It seemed like what? I'm so emotional that I was going to need more time off? Three weeks is more than the standard, Francine, and from the looks of the filing, there'd have been a big problem if I had taken any more than that. But I'm not everyone's secretary, so I'm not going to catch anyone else's filing up except my own." It was only after the words came out that she realized how shrewish her tone had become.

"Nobody expects you to." Francine indicated the pile. "I came in to work on those. Shouldn't be more than a couple hours. Are you...you're all right if I take everything into the vault? You're not using anything, are you?"

"No," answered Amanda, "go right ahead."

She crossed over and picked up the folders. "Oh, yeah, one other thing. Congratulations."

“For what?” Surely she couldn’t be talking about Phillip and Mother!

“You and Lee. We, ah, it was pretty obvious that any breakup you’d had was temporary, but no one thought...” she trailed off again. “He never seemed to be the marrying kind, but you managed to do it.”

Irritation lanced through her. “Do what?”

“Get him to marry you. Oh, this is coming out all wrong. I’m happy it happened, for both of you I mean. Even if you did lie to all of us about it.”

“Francine,” she snapped, “you know full well why we kept it a secret. You were part of the investigation when Tran Van Khai’s children were kidnapped, and that wasn’t the first time we’ve seen someone go after family members! Can you really blame us for trying to keep mine safe? I mean, even though we did, look what happened!”

Surprise flickered across the other woman’s face. “I thought it was an accident.”

“I...” now Amanda trailed off. “All right, we don’t have any evidence that says it isn’t. Still, doesn’t it seem likely that someone would’ve been trying to come after me or Lee or maybe even both of us?”

“Maybe,” said Francine, her tone still wary. “But if it is, it’ll come out. I just wanted to say congratulations. It’s been good to see you both so happy, and now that we know why...well, maybe when the time’s right, we’ll all go out and celebrate. We’re agents, after all. We can keep the reason for the party secret.”

“Why would you want to? We’re not hiding it now.” She shook her head. “But a party’s the last thing either one of us is interested in at the moment.” Or maybe ever, she thought but didn’t say. How could they do something like that after —

“Amanda,” said Francine in a gentler tone. “We’re not talking about doing it anytime soon. Just someday.”

She swallowed. “Thank you. I appreciate that. I just — I’m sorry, Francine, I just seem to be prickly today.”

“Nobody blames you for that. But I should warn you, you’re going to get a lot of comments about your ring. It’s very nice. Lee did a good job.”

“It was his mother’s,” explained Amanda. “He had it reset before he gave it to me. But he’d used it once before that, when we went down to San Angelo, since he hadn’t been able to get one from Fabrications or Storage.”

Francine chuckled. “How very ironic. The same ring was used at both of your

weddings.”

“We only had one, Francine,” she replied stiffly.

“Did you? Or maybe it was already on Lee’s mind during the —”

“We weren’t seeing each other then. Not even casually.”

“Oh, come on, Amanda, you two were obvious within months of you starting! We all knew what was going on when Lee started crawling down people’s throats if they so much as talked about asking you to lunch! And you — well, he’s never let anyone straighten his tie like that, or hold his hand, or —” she broke off. “There were a million things you two were doing, and everyone noticed. It was actually pretty funny.”

“Funny?”

“Yes. Lee had never met a woman he couldn’t sweet-talk around to his way before, and he didn’t have a clue what to do about it. Let me tell you, some of the other ladies and I had quite a laugh every time you put him in his place.” She shook her head. “I hope he doesn’t forget that, now that you’re married.”

“Why would he?”

“Just that everything’s different now.”

“It’s been this way for months already, and you know what, Francine? Another reason we wanted to keep all of this out of the office was because it’s nobody’s business but our own, to begin with. If there’s a problem with our case work or efficiency ratings, then take it to Mr. Melrose, but until then I’ll thank everyone to keep their opinions to themselves!” She shook her head. “I shouldn’t even have to ask for that, but this has to be the worst place I’ve ever seen for gossip.”

“Oh, come on, Amanda, you’ve dished just as often as everyone else. And we’ve all seen you around the bullpen, trying to figure out what’s going on when Lee’s been on confidential assignment. It’s normal for people to talk. You’ve got no business objecting now, just because you’re a part of the rumor mill this time around. It’s not like it’s the first time, either, and you know it.”

“Well, it needs to be the last,” she snapped. “I’m not here to entertain anyone or live up to anyone else’s standards! And when you understand what it’s like to have *half your life* ripped away from you in an instant, then you —” she broke off, gasping, her hands clenching so hard they crumpled the folders she’d been holding.

“As if you’re the only person who’s ever been through a horrible loss!” shouted Francine. “You’re not the only one who’s ever had something like this happen —”

“Something like what?”

Neither one of them had heard Billy Melrose come in the door.

“Ladies?”

Francine took a sharp breath, her expression becoming neutral. “Nothing. We were just talking.”

His gaze slid over to Amanda, who shook her head. “Francine just came in to catch up on some filing.”

“I see,” he said, although his tone said a lot more. “Well, Desmond, go ahead and get to it, and close the vault door behind you, please. Amanda, we need to talk. Do you want to do it here, or in my office?”

She squared her shoulders. “I’m fine right here, sir, unless it’s sensitive.”

“It’s not a security issue, if that’s what you mean,” he answered, “but it could be sensitive. I just want to make sure you’re ready to be back at work.”

“Is there some reason you think I’m not?”

“Despite what Ms. Tactful-and-Compassionate in there was trying to say, you’ve been through an enormous loss. People have taken more time off for less.” He paused. “You’re welcome to wait until you’re ready, Amanda, but when you do come back, I’ll need you at full strength.”

“I’m fine, sir. Getting myself back into a routine is good for me, and I’m already back at full strength.”

“Are you?” he asked. “Because you don’t usually let Francine get to you like that, and I’ve seen a lot worse than I did just now.”

“I just wasn’t expecting it,” she explained. “That’s all.”

“Amanda,” he said, and he crossed his arms while leaning back. “Let me be clearer. I really think you should take at least another week, at least, so that you’re ready to handle the job and the personalities again.”

She could feel her skin heating up. “I can do my job!” Then she paused. “Unless I’m not, of course, but sir, I haven’t been back long enough to have any performance! I told you. The routine is healthy, and if these files are any indication, it’s not like the bad guys out there took any time off! That means I can’t, either. I appreciate how you’ve been covering for me on the Middle East transcripts and not assigning any new cases to Lee and me, but that can’t last forever and I need...” her voice broke suddenly, without any warning, and she caught her breath.

“Need what?” Mr. Melrose’s voice was gentle, his eyes kind.

Amanda shook herself off. “Sir, I understand what you’re trying to do, but I don’t need to be coddled or babied. I’m a full agent now, and I should be held to the same standards as everyone else.”

He perused her before nodding. “All right. But Amanda, even Lee took four weeks after Eric Devereux was gunned down. There’s no shame in asking for more time.”

“Thank you,” she replied, glad to hear that her voice had evened out. “But I’m fine, sir. I really am.”

“Okay, then. Just be aware that I’m going to hold you to that.”

• • •

Jamie squirmed as he shifted his shirt around, causing the hat to fall off his head. When he bent down to retrieve it, his cane clattered to the ground. “Darn it. Again.”

Sighing, Amanda bent over to pick it up and hand it back. “You look fine. Maybe if you quit pulling on your shirt, you wouldn’t have so much trouble with the hat and cane.”

“Maybe if I had a *Where’s Waldo* costume that fit, I wouldn’t have any trouble at all.”

She frowned. “If you’re not having fun, sweetheart, we can go back to the apartment.”

At that, he straightened. The candy bag banged against his leg. “No, Mom. I’m fine. Come on, we’re only halfway through the street and I haven’t yet met up with Andy Kaskill. He’s going to be so jealous that we found a striped shirt, even if it’s not the right size.”

“Jamie.” It had been the last one and was only one size too big. She’d meant to alter it, taking up some of the worst-fitting areas, but she’d been so exhausted from work that all she’d been able to do most evenings was make dinner, clean up, and then collapse into bed. She was hoping next week would be easier.

“Hey, there he is!” cried Jamie, running toward another family that was out trick-or-treating. “Andy! Look what we found!”

Amanda caught up a minute later. “Hi there, Andy. Sarah,” she continued, greeting Andy’s mother. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“It sure has,” answered the other woman. She reached out to take Amanda’s hands. “Amanda, I heard about what happened, and I’m so sorry about —”

She shook her head. “Thanks, but it’s been almost a month now. We’re doing fine.”

The other woman peered at her as their sons ran off down the street. “All right. Well, I wanted to let you know that we’ve been keeping an eye on your house. You know, since you’re not staying there right now. Not that anyone blames you, and we know your gentleman friend has been —”

“He’s my husband,” corrected Amanda.

“Oh!” said Sarah. “Well, congratulations, I guess. Is this recent?”

“No,” she admitted. “But we...well, we wanted to make sure the boys were adjusting all right, and we also didn’t want to take any attention away from their father getting married again. They had a beautiful wedding, by the way. Were you able to make it?”

“No,” said Sarah. “But we didn’t know Joe very well. I don’t think anyone did. Amanda, if you’re not back at the house, are you really doing all right?”

She felt her spine straighten. “Yes. We just need some time.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you. You can take all the time you need, and tell your frie — your husband — that we’re all keeping an eye on the house while you’re gone. He’s been coming by in the middle of the day, and it’s been obvious that sometimes he’s in a hurry, so it’s probably over lunch when he’s pressed for time. The whole neighborhood is making sure that nothing’s going on. There’s nothing you two need to worry about, except maybe letting us all meet him one of these days.” Sarah smiled. “He looks like quite the catch.”

Amanda smiled back. “He certainly is.”

“Good. You deserve some happiness, especially after...” Sarah trailed off, glancing down the street. “Andy! Jamie! Donald! Make sure you stay within sight!”

A non-specific acknowledgment floated back toward them.

Amanda had used the reprieve to take a deep breath. “Thank you so much, Sarah. This means a lot to me. To all of us.”

“Like I said, we’re happy to do it. How is Jamie holding up? Andy said something about him getting into it with Tad Carlisle at school. The teacher had to move them to different seats. So it didn’t sound that awful, and of course things are kind of

difficult right now, but —”

“Jamie got into trouble at school?”

“Yes, on Tuesday. They didn’t call you?”

They had, she remembered abruptly. There’d been a message waiting for her when she got back from a meeting. But she’d returned the call, hadn’t she? How did she not know about the trouble? “Jamie! Over here, please.”

It took a minute for him to come trotting up. “What is it, Mom?”

“What’s this I’m hearing from Mrs. Kaskill about trouble at school?”

His gaze dropped. “Nothin’. Tad was just bein’ a jerk. He’s been hanging with Bobby Boyd too much.”

“I don’t remember hearing that name before.”

“He’s new. Hey, Mom, a bunch of us are ready to go onto the next street. Everyone on this street is already out of candy. If we stay together, can we go?”

“In a minute. We need to talk about you and school.”

“Mom! It’s Saturday. Come on, can’t it wait? It’s been so long since I’ve had a chance to hang out with anyone here in the neighborhood.”

“No, Jamie. Now. What did you and Tad Carlisle argue about?”

“Just stuff.”

“You need to do better than that.”

His tone became wheedling. “Please, Mom, not right now. I want to finish trick-or-treating with everyone else.”

She suddenly realized she was tired. “No, I think it’s about time to go anyway. And we can talk in the car on the way back to Georgetown.”

“Mom! I promise I’ll tell you if I can finish the trick-or-treating first! And it’s only—” he glanced at his watch. “It’s only seven forty-five. How can you be tired? *You’re* getting to sleep on a bed over at the apartment. I just have a couch.” The expression on his face had become petulant.

“Jamie, that couch is perfectly comfortable, and I do not like your tone.” Her own had become sharp. “Just for that, we are going to leave. Right now.”

“Amanda,” said Sarah gently. “Jamie can stay with us tonight if you’d like. Andy’s room has bunk beds in it.”

She looked around at the houses, the trick-or-treaters, the entire neighborhood, and as she did so a ringing sound filled her ears. It was as though all the windows had

become eyes, peering at her and watching every move she made, judging when her son misbehaved and she couldn't handle it, taunting her with all the families inside when hers had been all but destroyed...

Her breath was coming in short bursts, and the only thing Amanda could think was that they had to get out of there. Now. And stay out. "No, Sarah. Thanks for offering, but we're both going to be leaving now."

"You've let me stay over at Andy's a dozen times."

"Now, James Richard!" Her voice was so shrill that she barely recognized it, and Jamie paled in response to hearing his full name. Tossing a sullen look back toward the pack of children that had gone to the next streak, he closed his candy bag and started walking toward where she'd parked. His back was stiff, and his steps were short and choppy, just like the way everything around her seemed to have become.

"Amanda?" asked Sarah. "Are you all right?"

"I..." she trailed off, trying to take a full breath. "No, Sarah, but I'll be fine." At some point, she hoped, even if it wasn't now. "Thanks for asking."

"All right. You just remember to call me if you need anything. Okay?"

"Yeah," she muttered. "Okay." Then she sprinted back toward the car.

## 10. Francine: Going South

Action movies weren't usually Francine's style. Neither were heavily muscled men, but she had to admit she was enjoying watching Arnold Schwarzenegger's acting this evening. He actually was showing some range, although the premise was still ridiculous. Who would ever think that the American people would fall for metaphorical bread and circuses? Besides, television shows that featured actual contests tended to fail miserably, unless they were one-time events.

At least the movie claimed to be science fiction, set about thirty years into the future.

Jonathan squeezed her hand, bringing her out of her thoughts, and she scanned the movie theater again. A tip had come in from one of her janitors, who was certain that this particular movie was the one chosen for the hand-off. It had parts that were loud enough to cover up a conversation held in normal tones. Unfortunately, they tended to be the darker-lit scenes. At least they'd been able to sit toward the back without worrying about amorous teenagers; *The Running Man* was rated R.

A glance at her watch told her they were about two-thirds of the way through, but she hadn't yet noticed anything remotely suspicious. They were apparently coming up on another loud scene, though, and nervous anticipation skittered up Francine's spine. This could be when the asset made his move.

Two or three minutes later, she heard the rustling of cloth as a man behind them stood up. A discreet glance indicated he had one hand inside his jacket as he made his way toward the aisle, and there was a suspicious bulge near his waist. Francine tapped Jonathan's knee, flicking her eyes toward the potential target. He nodded in response, reaching for the small camera located in an inside pocket of his jacket.

After counting to a hundred, she stood up and made her way toward the aisle. Jonathan followed her. "Wait a minute," he said, loud enough to be heard a row or two away. "Come on, sugar, I didn't mean it! Sit back down and let's finish the movie."

She turned long enough to give him a scathing look as she stalked out of the theater toward the hallway. The other man, the one from behind them, was just exiting the hallway going toward the lobby, and she thanked her lucky stars for the thick carpeting that hid the sound of their footsteps. There was a faint flicking sound behind her, just before she heard the unmistakable ratcheting of film being advanced. Good;

Jonathan had seen him too.

It was nice, she reflected, not to have to hide what she did for a living.

In the lobby's brighter light, she was able to recognize the man from the theater: Yulian Olegovich Balakin, who sometimes used the name "Julian Bracken" in the United States. He was a fairly low-level operative, but young and ambitious. Exactly the kind of person that would gladly take on a simple courier assignment.

"Get ready," she whispered.

Balakin wandered around the lobby, seemingly looking at the various movie posters. She stayed just inside the hallway, lest she be recognized, but waved Jonathan past her. Her date crossed to the middle of the lobby, staring at the concession menu. From his position, he could easily follow the Russian operative's movements and have cover from several different angles.

Francine smiled; he was good. No wonder the CIA had been interested in him.

There was a third man looking at the movie posters, carefully keeping his face turned toward the wall. Balakin's wanderings led him behind that man, and he pretended interest in the same poster, stepping closer to take a better look and inadvertently bumping into him.

*Oh, come on,* thought Francine. *I've seen rookies do a better job than that.* Although they were quick, the envelope passed between the two men was in plain sight for a couple of seconds. She watched Jonathan for several minutes before he lowered the camera and scratched the back of his neck, the signal for success.

*Got him,* she thought triumphantly. If Lee could catch enough of the other man's face after he was outside, they'd also be able to get enough for an ID. She leaned down to fiddle with one of her sneakers as though the laces had come untied. Balakin passed right by her without a second glance. A minute or so later, Jonathan made his way back to her side with a pleased look on his face.

"Good work," she told him quietly. "And thank you."

"That," he answered, "was almost fun."

After another hundred-count, they joined hands and made their way through the lobby themselves. She vaguely wondered how the movie would end, but it wasn't worth the cost of another ticket in order to find out. Right now, they needed to make themselves scarce as they headed out to the parking lot.

Lee's Corvette was in the second row, backed into a spot some distance away

from the nearest light pole. The unidentified man had passed right by it before getting into a nondescript car of his own.

Pocketing the camera that Jonathan had given her, she went up and tapped the driver's side window. "Hey. Scarecrow."

No response.

"Lee."

There was a sudden burst of movement in the car before the window rolled down. Lee was blinking rapidly. "Francine."

"Did you get him?"

"Get who?"

"The man who just walked past your car. Julian Bracken's still in the movie, but he just passed off an envelope."

His eyes widened briefly, but then he turned away, running a hand through his hair. "I, ah, I must've nodded off."

"Damn it, Stetson!" she yelled. "You had the perfect shot! Now we have to hope that Ernie can identify someone based on a profile —"

"Francine?" Jonathan, who had initially stayed back beside their own car, came up to the Corvette. "Lee? Is everything okay? I got his license plate number if we need it."

"Yeah," she snapped. "We're going to need it."

Lee at least had the decency to look embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Francine."

"I'll just bet you are," she fumed. "And I'm not done with you. But this isn't the time or the place." She clenched and unclenched her fists. "Are you okay to get home?"

He sighed. "Yeah."

"Then go. We'll talk tomorrow." She'd have plenty to say then.

• • •

Lee appeared at her desk around 10:30. "Early lunch? I'll buy."

Francine frowned. "You're not exactly on my nice list right now, Scarecrow."

"That's why I'm offering and making it early, too." He scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Give us both a chance to get it over with."

That wasn't exactly how she would have phrased it, but she'd never been the kind to turn down an offer of lunch. After closing her files and locking them in her

desk, she shut down her computer and grabbed her purse. "Somewhere nice."

"How about that new place, Café Leopold? Claims to be serving European-style meals, and it's in walking distance."

It didn't escape her that he hadn't chosen one of the Agency personnel's usual haunts, although she kept her silence as he escorted her out of the building and down the street. Lee wasn't the type to talk much, but his absolute lack of conversation on the way was telling.

After they were seated, he sighed and leaned forward. "All right. Let me have it."

Her lips thinned. "Kind of hard to get worked up when you're buying."

"You can do better than that, Francine." He met her eyes. "Give it your best shot. I can handle it."

"Can you?"

He started to reply, but she waved it down.

"No, Scarecrow, I mean it. Can you handle it? Because you're not the type who'd foul up a simple mission that way. And after the last time you seemed to be a burnout, I don't know whether to be angry with you or concerned about you." She paused. "Last night wasn't a fake. Was it." It wasn't phrased as a question because she already knew the answer.

With a sigh, Lee shook his head. He'd dropped his gaze away from hers.

"Look at me, Stetson."

His eyes flicked up briefly before dropping to the table again.

"Damn it, Lee."

Something in her tone must have gotten through, because this time he met her eyes long enough for her to see the pain in his. Her anger began fading into worry. Francine sighed. "You know, I'd thought up half a dozen insults to throw at you, but it looks like you're already doing that for me. So why don't you tell me what the hell's going on. I mean, I know that you and Amanda are going through a lot right now, but you've both been through stuff before. What's different?"

"It's never been this personal before. Not like this, anyway."

The waiter chose that moment to come take their orders. He chose a steak salad; she opted for a croque monsieur.

"Now do you want to tell me what's going on?" she asked afterward.

"I, ah..." he trailed off. "It's just difficult right now, okay?"

“No,” she told him. “It’s not okay. Last night wasn’t a complete disaster since Jonathan got the pictures and the license plate, but using a civilian to get work done is more your style than mine. And I’d have to be blind and deaf not to notice how nas —” Francine caught herself. “Amanda’s been pretty difficult to work with lately. Some people are actually *avoiding* going up to the Q-Bureau with their filing if they think she might be up there.”

That got his attention. “Who?”

“Well,” she temporized. “I have. I’ve been saving mine for when you’re both out in the field. When you’re not there, she’s like a buzzing hornet’s nest just waiting for a poke.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“Will that actually change anything?”

He glanced away. “Look, whatever’s between Amanda and me needs to stay there, all right? Just tell me how badly things could have gone last night, how much of a screw-up that was, and that I need to get my act together.”

“I think you’ve bashed yourself enough for right now.” She reached across the table toward his hand. “Come on, Lee. This is me, and you were there for me when I got hit with the Déjà Vu Two. Why won’t you let me return the favor? You know I won’t talk about it with anyone, not when it’s something like this. How are things at home?”

With a sigh, he closed his eyes. “Not good. But that doesn’t excuse —”

“No, it doesn’t, but *you know that*. There’s no need for me to try and beat that into your thick skull.” She let her concern seep into her voice. “Are you sleeping?”

“Sort of,” he mumbled. “I can’t say it’s restful.”

“Obviously. Are you guys still at your apartment?”

Another sigh. “Yeah. Jamie’s been staying with Joe and Carrie most weekends, but during the week he’s been sleeping on the couch.”

“That can’t be comfortable for anyone. When do you think they’ll be able to go back to her house?”

He gave her a look. “You mean when *we’ll* be able to go back. I’m not even sure that’s going to happen at all. But Amanda keeps saying it will, and that she just needs more time. Jamie’s about to explode, though. I can see him fuming every time I so much as kiss her cheek, or whenever she takes my hand. She’s also keeping a really tight rein on him. They came home way too early on Halloween. Whenever I try to start

a conversation, he just says he has homework and stomps off. I've never seen a kid with that much 'homework' before, but Amanda just says it's nice not to have to nag him."

"Amanda says," parroted Francine. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What do you think of all this?"

A slight edge crept into his tone. "Francine, you're my friend, but Amanda's my wife. I'm not going to get into every little detail."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you what the hell's going on that left you making such a *stupid* mistake last night!" She had to work to keep her voice down. "You're one of our best agents, but that was something even a rookie wouldn't have done. Or, hell, a civilian. Jonathan noticed, by the way, but I told him it was because you'd gotten a call on your car phone. And since we got enough to identify Tariq al-Sayfawi as the other person last night, there was no need for me to say anything to Billy. But I'm not going to keep covering for you, Scarecrow."

"You don't have to!"

"Then tell me what's going on! I want to help!"

The conversation paused as their food arrived, and then they segued into more neutral topics as if by mutual consent. Perhaps, Francine mused, Lee didn't want to upset either of their digestions. They'd argued during meals before, but the food here was unusually good and she didn't want to ruin the experience.

After they finished and Lee paid the bill, they went outside. On the sidewalk, Lee drew her into a hug. "Thank you for going easy on me, and for letting it drop when you did. I really appreciate that."

"I love you, you know," she said into his shoulder. It was something she'd wanted to say for a long time, but she'd been waiting for a moment when she knew the statement couldn't possibly be misinterpreted.

"I know," he told her. "I love you back. Don't worry. We'll find our way through this."

She leaned back. “I can’t help but to worry about both of you. Amanda’s good for you, Lee, but you can’t let losing her family turn you into a true burnout case. You know those guys almost never make it back. As for her...” she shook her head. “I don’t want to see her career go south before it even begins.”

He bent over and kissed her cheek. “It won’t. I promise.”

## 11. Lee: Frustration

There was a brand-new minivan in front of the apartment when Lee got home. He chuckled as he walked around it; Amanda had once again gone with woodgrain-on-white. What was this, the fourth vehicle in a row now? He'd have to be sure and tease her about that over dinner.

Inside, the smell of meatloaf made his mouth water. After placing his keys on the entryway table — doing so really did make it easier to grab them on his way out — he went into the bedroom and changed out of his suit. Jamie had been on the floor behind the coffee table the whole time, papers spread out in front of him, and hadn't said a word or even looked up.

Lee sat on the couch. "Hey, sport. Smells like your mom's almost done with dinner."

"She said a few more minutes, and then I'll set the table."

"Okay." He paused. "What're you working on?"

"Just stuff."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"No."

Jamie had been silent and sullen more often than not lately, but it wasn't like him to be openly rude. After a moment of thought, Lee decided it wasn't worth the argument. "You, ah, you see your mom's new car yet?"

"She used it to pick me up from the Carlisles' after school."

"What do you think about it?"

The child shrugged. "It's all right."

"You know, Jamie," he observed, keeping his tone as conversational as he could, "it's usually polite to look at someone when you're having a conversation. And you're usually done with your homework by now anyway."

With an exaggerated sigh, Jamie finally looked up, and Lee did a double take. "What in the world happened to you?"

"Nothin'. Just messin' around with Tad."

"And that gave you a black eye? Yeah, right. Someone socked you but good. Has your mom seen that yet?"

"I told her the same thing. We were just messin' around."

“Messing around doing what?” He slid forward to take a closer look, wincing in sympathy when he saw just how deep the bruising went. And was that the shadow of another bruise on his left jaw? “What were you fighting about?”

Jamie looked down again. “We weren’t fighting. Just passin’ some licks.”

“Uh-huh. What’d your mom say?”

“Nothin’. She just told me to get in the car, and we came here.”

Pushing to his feet, Lee strode into the kitchen where Amanda was just taking the meatloaf out of the oven. “Hey,” he said as he kissed her cheek. “I saw the new car outside. But did you see Jamie’s face?”

“Yeah, and Tad looks about the same. Now that I have a car, I think I’ll pick him up from school directly, at least for next week. I want to talk to Lisa, that’s Mrs. Carlisle, before sending Jamie back over there after school.”

“They wouldn’t tell you what it was all about, either?”

“No, but they were getting along by the time I got there. Teasing his little sister about some friend of hers at school. So it couldn’t have been that awful.”

“Amanda,” he exclaimed, “didn’t you see how bad that black eye was? Or how many other bruises he has? There are probably more underneath his clothing. I’ve looked better than that after going a round with a KGB agent. They weren’t just ‘passing licks,’ no matter what Jamie says. They were fighting.”

“Jamie’s not a fighter.”

“Yeah? Then how else would he be looking like that?”

She shrugged. “Boys are going to be boys, Lee, and bruises happen. Jamie,” she called. “Time to set the table.”

His lips thinned, but Lee let it go. He wasn’t Jamie’s father, after all, which meant — as hard as it sometimes was for him to accept it — Amanda’s word was final. But he wasn’t imagining the pain in his stepson’s eyes, nor was he imagining the stiffness in Jamie’s movements or the fact that he was even more reticent than usual. By the end of the meal, he wasn’t offering any more than monosyllabic answers. When he asked to be excused, Amanda gave him a long look, but she didn’t actually say anything before releasing him.

“Hey,” called Lee as he left the room. “A hot shower will help the aches and pains. As hot as you can stand it.”

There was no response.

Amanda had already started clearing the table. He stood up, gathering plates and silverware for the dishwasher. They worked in silence, quickly and efficiently, but the air in the kitchen and dining room was almost vibrating with all the words left unsaid.

Finally Amanda sighed. “Thanks for suggesting the hot shower. I’ll make sure he takes some Tylenol tonight and maybe again in the morning.”

“I still think he got into a fight.”

“There weren’t any witnesses, and both he and Tad said it was just roughhousing. So unless they admit it, there’s no way to know for sure.”

Exasperation crept into his tone. “Come on, Amanda, you don’t look like *that* after a minor scuffle.”

“I know.” Now she turned to face him. “That’s why I’m going to talk to Lisa on Monday, to see if Tad says anything more to her. But unless one of them does, we have to take their word for it!”

“Why?” It came out harsher than he’d meant, but the question was valid enough.

She began to stammer, but then cut herself off and turned back to the sink, plunging her hands into the water where she’d been working on the pans. A healthy amount of it splashed backward onto her blouse. “Oh, blast it. I didn’t have time to change clothes after work and have dinner ready at any decent hour.”

Lee crossed over to wrap his arms around her shoulders. “It was ready in plenty of time. You did good, especially given that minivan outside.” It occurred to him that he’d meant to tease her about the color, but right now it didn’t seem like a good time. “They give you a decent deal?”

Amanda sighed, a long exhalation. “Decent enough. It could’ve been better, I suppose, but I got them to throw in a maintenance agreement for the duration of the warranty. I figure that’s worth at least a thousand dollars or so —”

“I’m sure you did fine,” he replied, inhaling the scent from her hair. “I can still smell your perfume from this morning.”

“Some of it’s probably on my blouse. Which I need to go change.”

“I could help with that,” he pointed out softly, putting a lilt into his voice.

She disentangled herself. “It’ll only take a minute, and then I need to finish these pans before the food dries. I want to check on Jamie, too. I don’t hear any water

running.”

Standing alone in the kitchen, he let out a sigh that was as long as hers had been. If not longer.

• • •

“And how did the weekend go after that?”

Lee scrubbed his hands through his hair. “Downhill.”

“Hm.” Pfaff took a bite out of his latest ice cream bar. Lee wondered how he kept himself within the Agency’s physical standards eating like that. But he must be doing something right, since nobody at the Agency was exempt from them. “This is the first weekend Jamie had spent with you since the accident, wasn’t it?”

“Not the first. But yeah, he’s usually over at his father’s. Joe was prepping for a trial or something, or maybe out of town.” He shrugged. “I don’t keep track.”

“How did Amanda do with him?”

“I don’t know. We barely exchanged half a dozen sentences the whole weekend.”

“What was she doing?” asked the psychologist.

“Damned if I know. But they were in and out.”

“Did you ask?”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t going to answer, and Amanda just said they were taking care of some things.” He heard the irritation in his voice, meaning to check it, but then decided that it was better to let it stay. As long as he was stuck in these mandatory sessions, he might as well try and get something from them. “Tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife last night.”

“Maybe Amanda is trying to deal with whatever had happened when she picked him up on Friday.”

Lee rolled his eyes. “Look, if all you’re going to do is tell me to give people the benefit of the doubt —”

“I’m not, actually.” Pfaff sat up from where he’d been reclining on his couch. “But I’m also not going to focus on Amanda’s behaviors right now. We’re here to talk about how you’re feeling, and it sounds to me like you’re pretty frustrated.”

“I am!” He shook his head. “They’re not dealing with things.”

“How do you know?”

“Because nothing’s being done!” he finally exploded. “And nothing’s happening!”

Hell, Doc, we haven't even made love since —" Lee cut himself off abruptly. Did he really want to get that personal with the Agency shrink, knowing that it might end up in his records? "She's not dealing with this, and that means none of us can, either."

"Why not?"

"We're supposed to be doing this *together*, damn it! I can't do it all by myself! It's so blasted obvious that Jamie's having trouble, and hell, doc, I would be too after six weeks of having to sleep on a couch when I could be in a bed. At least I assume that's part of what's wrong with him, since he won't speak more than two words to me without being spoken to first. Amanda doesn't even seem to notice half of what's been going on around her or between us or even with Joe and Carrie and..." he realized he'd begun to rant and forced himself to take a breath. "It's like she's lost in her own little world, and I can't break into it."

"Maybe she's just not ready yet, even though you are."

"What the hell am I supposed to do about that?" he growled.

"Well," began Pfaff, "you can begin by acknowledging your own anger and pain over what happened."

At that, Lee dropped his gaze. "I'm not the one who lost half my family."

"Aren't you? You're married, and that makes her family your family. Hadn't you already been watching over them for years before you officially met them? Word gets around, Scarecrow. There was scuttlebutt about that toy you got one of them from overseas, and about the time you helped the other with his birthday."

Lee looked at him, surprised.

The doctor smiled and took another bite of ice cream. "The grapevine finds its way down here as much as it does anywhere else. But that's not really the point. Whether you've known them for as long as Amanda did or have been as involved in their lives as she was, they became your family too. Maybe it's your way of trying to regain some part of what you lost as a child. Maybe it's something else. The point is, you still cared about Phillip and Dotty. You'd been listening through the window for, what, three years before you finally officially met them?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "But it's not the same."

"No," said Pfaff. "It isn't. But that doesn't mean you're not going through your own grieving process, and you are, Lee. You've got to acknowledge that before you can start dealing with it, and you'll need to keep doing that if you want to be strong for

Amanda and Jamie. Because I guarantee you, when things finally do start coming out with them, you're going to need all your coping skills to handle that."

"Come on, Doc, I've known Amanda for years. I can handle her."

"You've never seen her like this. Like I said, we're talking about you, anyway." He leaned forward. "What have you been doing to work through your own feelings?"

He lurched to his feet and prowled around the room. "I haven't had time to deal with any of that."

"You're going to need to make time, Lee, and right now's a great time to get yourself level set before the next thing happens."

"Which is?"

"It could be one of several different things," he replied. "There's no way to know for sure until it happens."

"As if that isn't adding to my frustration! I know grief, damn it. I lived it for too long. I can manage."

"Can you? Because all I've heard you do in here so far is deny it."

"*Damn it, Doc!*" It came out at something close to full volume.

"What?"

Lee opened his mouth to reply but found that he didn't have the words. His hands were shaking, and his skin was crawling so badly he thought he might be flying apart. He could no more have kept still than he could have pulled out his service weapon and shot Amanda.

*Bad example, Stetson,* a part of his mind responded.

The shaking got worse, and some nausea was starting too. "I, ah, I..." he trailed off.

"All right," said Pfaff. "We're at our time limit for this session anyway. Go to the workout rooms."

"What?"

"Go to the workout rooms, here at the Agency. Right now. No, don't argue. You're in no shape to go back up to the Q-Bureau anyway, especially if Amanda's there. Change clothes and run through some drills or whatever you do in there. You need to calm down, and after that, I want you to think about the answer to my question: how are you handling your own anger, denial, resentment, and all those other things you're feeling? Because you are feeling them, whether you want to admit it or

not.”

He stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him, but realized that Pfaff was right about at least one thing: he was in no shape to head back up to the Q, and yelling and screaming and hitting something sounded like it might actually be a good idea. Detouring to the locker room, he took his martial arts gear out of his locker and stripped down, letting his street clothes land haphazardly. Once he had changed, he stomped out and glared around until his eyes fell on the heavy bag.

That would be perfect.

Without bothering to wrap his knuckles, he charged it full tilt, attacking it with furious punches and kicks. At one point it swung back hard enough to clip him on the left ankle. He tumbled to the mat but was up again almost immediately, hitting it even harder than before despite the pain in his hands. He wasn't even close to being ready to stop yet! Dimly, Lee realized he was also yelling wordlessly at the top of his lungs.

Despite all his anger and frustration, though, he could feel the adrenaline of unarmed combat beginning to take hold and lift his mood. He kept at it, pushing himself to the limit. He'd be sore afterward, but that would be a good kind of pain.

“Lee?”

A step back onto his left ankle resulted in a sharp pain, and he quickly switched to his right leg. Was that blood on his knuckles? No matter; he'd been hurt worse.

“Lee!” Amanda's voice finally penetrated his awareness.

Gasping, he dropped to his elbows and knees, his body screaming in half a dozen places. After only a few minutes?

But it had been longer than that, he realized as his breathing began to slow. The clock on the workout room's wall showed he'd been at it for nearly an hour.

His wife came up, took one look at him, and then turned toward the first aid kit. “You're bleeding. Let me clean you up.”

“I'm fine.” His voice was hoarse and scratchy. “I will be, anyway.”

“You're going to need help wrapping your hands. And I'll bring you a towel. You probably should take a shower before you get back into your regular clothes.”

“Yeah,” he acknowledged, rolling his head around his neck. “Thank you.”

She paused and turned back to him for a long moment, and while she seemed to be nearly expressionless, there was something in her eyes. It was as though all the

anger and frustration he'd been feeling was being reflected back at him, and he took a long, shaky breath in response. It wasn't going to be very long before things started "coming out." It wasn't going to be very long at all.

## 12. Amanda: Rusty

Amanda knocked on Mr. Melrose's door sill. "Sir? You said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes," he answered, shortly but not unkindly. "Come in, Amanda, and shut the door behind you. Have a seat when you're done."

She complied. "What's going on?"

He extracted and opened a file folder from the pile on his desk, but looked away for a long moment before asking, "How are you doing?"

"Fine," she replied. "A little tired sometimes."

"Mm," he responded, looking back at the file folder. "I, ah, I'm not really sure how to start this." Then he sighed. "I suppose I should just give it to you straight. I've had some recent reports about you that are a bit concerning."

"Sir?"

"Yes," he replied. "Dr. Joyce says you've missed your last two appointments."

"That's because I don't have anything to talk about with her."

"Well, it seems she has things to talk about with you. Is there a reason you haven't been going? Is your case load too heavy?"

"Oh, no, sir. It's just that..." Amanda trailed off. "We seem to be discussing the same things, over and over. All it does is upset me. I don't think I'm actually getting anything out of the sessions." She paused. "Are you ordering me to go back?"

"Do I have to?"

"No," she muttered, dropping her own gaze. "Was there anything else?"

"Yes, unfortunately." He extracted a few more sheets of paper from the folder. This time, he handed them to her. They were her most recent transcripts of the Middle Eastern intercepts, and she could see where someone had gone through and circled several items in red ink. Corrections were scribbled in the margins.

"Sir, I don't speak Arabic or French, and —"

"These calls were originally in English, Amanda. You weren't listening to translations." He shuffled some more papers. "This is the third transcript you've turned in with less than a 90% accuracy rate on review. The Middle Eastern desk has asked about pulling you off the project."

Amanda felt herself paling. "I'm sorry, sir. I got a little rusty while I was out. But I'll work on it."

“That’s not all. Leatherneck says he hasn’t seen hide nor hair of you since you got back. Your firearms qualification is about to expire for lack of range time.”

She frowned. “Lee and Francine haven’t been going there that often.”

“This isn’t about either of them. It’s about you.” He leaned forward, and while his words were firm, his tone was tinged with worry. “Your scores were low enough that you needed to log more range time than they did, and show some improvement as well. Amanda,” he continued before she could protest, “what’s going on? That’s three different issues with poor performance, and you’re usually one of the best in this section. Even one would ordinarily be a surprise. I’d give you a break based on what’s been going on with your family lately, except that you tell me you’re fine.”

“I am fine,” she answered with an edge in her tone. “I’ve just made a few mistakes, that’s all. I’ll make sure they don’t happen again.”

He shook his head. “Failure to show for your therapy sessions or at the range time isn’t a mistake, Amanda. That’s something someone does on purpose.”

“I just...” she trailed off. “Every time I go to the range, I feel my heart just pounding, and I don’t really know why except that I know Lee is looking into the possibility that someone shot out one of Mother’s tires.” She sighed. “Every time I get ready to fire, I think about it, and it spoils my aim. Since my scores were already just barely passing, the last thing I need to do is lower them. Not to mention it’s loud in there, which has been bothering me more than usual. It’s been something of a blessing that you’ve mostly had me working on transcripts lately, and that was just me being a little distracted and out of practice.”

“Uh-huh.” He didn’t sound convinced. “And it never occurred to you to talk to Claudia about the trouble you’ve been having on the range?”

“What good would it do?” It was an effort to keep from raising her voice in frustration. “She just wants me to talk about my feelings, and I feel fine. That’s not going to solve the problem anyway!”

“You’re not performing ‘fine,’ Amanda,” he answered. “And that’s part of the reason we have mandated therapy for our agents anytime they’ve been through a trauma. It doesn’t have to be work-related for it to affect you.”

She dropped her eyes. “We’re supposed to leave our personal lives at home.”

“You and Lee have never done that,” he remarked with a pointed look at her left hand. “But it’s never been a problem, which is why I’ve never needed to come down on

either of you about it.” He paused. “I was dropping a hint the other day, when I told you that it was okay if you needed more time off. Amanda, you’re not working up to snuff. Some loss of performance is normal, given the circumstances, but I can’t keep looking the other way. Especially when people are complaining about you.”

“Sir, please, let me have another chance. With the transcripts, too. I’ll bring my numbers back up.” The last thing she needed was to lose her job, especially right now!

Closing the file folder, Mr. Melrose folded his hands. “With a lot of other agents, I couldn’t do this. But I want to believe you, Amanda, and I know how well you did before all this happened. I’ll give you another chance. But I can only give you one, and I’m going to have to see a significant reduction in the number of complaints I’m getting about you. I also expect you to comply with the requirements for firearms training and mandated therapy.” He paused. “Is any of this going to be a problem?”

“No, sir,” she said.

“One other thing. I’ve been hearing some people say you’ve become difficult to work with, to the point that at least some are avoiding you. That interrupts the flow of information and response times. I don’t want to put that in your file either, but I have a responsibility to *everyone* in this section.”

“I’ll work on that, too.”

“If you need some more time off before —”

“No, sir. I don’t need any time off. I just need some time to prove myself again.”

“Amanda, nobody’s asking you to prove yourself! Just to pull yourself together, follow the therapy guidelines, and do your job. If you can do that, I’ll take care of the rest.”

“That’s all I need,” she repeated, putting every ounce of conviction she could into her tone. Her insides were shaking with embarrassment, but she was long practiced in keeping that from showing. In fact, it would probably be better if she didn’t show any emotion at all right now. She had her second chance. She knew what to do with it.

• • •

One foot in front of the other.

As the days passed, it became one of Amanda’s mantras. If she just kept putting one foot in front of the other, just kept up with all the things she needed to do, she could get through a day. If she could get through five days, that would be a work

week. Two more and she'd have a calendar week. And each successive day was a tiny victory, a small reason to celebrate.

Mr. Melrose had released Lee back to field work, but he hadn't yet been willing to release her. After the conversation in his office last Friday, she supposed she understood why, even if it sometimes got a little too quiet in the Q-Bureau's office.

This afternoon, the quiet had finally gotten to her, and she'd decided it was time to make good on her promise for more range time. Leatherneck had been delighted to see her, but his expression had become a frown after her first series of shots. The frown had only deepened as she completed several more series, until he'd finally stopped her halfway through.

"The only thing worse than a firearm being used by a bad shot," he'd told her, "is one being used by someone who's distracted."

"I'm not distracted! I'm just a little rusty after so much time away." It seemed to have become a familiar refrain over the past several days. She didn't want to admit that it wasn't her mind that had wandered, anyway; it was her hands and arms that were shaking. Again.

"Mrs. King — er, Stetson," he'd begun. "How many times did you fire in this last series, before I stopped you?"

She'd started to answer before realizing she honestly hadn't known. Her heart began pounding even harder than it already had been.

"That's what I thought," he'd answered after looking her over. "I'll tell you what. You've still got a couple more weeks before I have to decertify you. Why don't you knock off for today, go talk to Scarecrow or maybe someone else, try and settle down a bit. Then come back tomorrow and we'll try it again." He'd torn up her used targets. "I'm going to pretend that these never happened. I can get away with it, once, anyway."

He'd couched it as a request, but she'd known an order when she heard one. She supposed it was a good time to go see Claudia Joyce, but instead of doing so she'd dragged herself back up the stairs to the Q-Bureau and its suddenly welcome quiet. She'd corrected the errors on her earlier transcriptions, and in the process had begun to recognize the beginnings of a pattern. There was clearly some sort of activity involving a planned response to the recent Battle of Maaten al-Sarra, for which Muammar Gadhafi was apparently blaming the French instead of focusing on the Chadian military's own intelligence sources. Somehow a Syrian called Abu Jihad also seemed to be

involved, but she couldn't quite figure out his role in any planned response. That was assuming there would be a planned response at all, which couldn't be confirmed using available sources.

Then again, she knew enough about Arabic names to recognize "Abu Jihad" as a *nom de guerre*, so his involvement alone was enough for her to alert Mr. Melrose about a need to track his movements more closely. He'd passed on the alert to operatives in Beirut, Tel Aviv, and Ankara. At least one of those had slipped into Damascus to obtain whatever intelligence they could, but they'd ironically been stymied by CIA agents who were trying to plant someone into Hafez al-Assad's government. Amanda had drafted the first version of Mr. Melrose's recommendation for an inter-agency task force, but she didn't know what had happened after the report had been submitted.

Assuming anything had happened to the report all. She didn't even know if Mr. Melrose had rewritten any parts of it.

Until she heard otherwise, it was safe to assume that she needed to keep collating and analyzing the translated phone tap receipts, so she had gotten to work on that after taking an ibuprofen to appease her screaming muscles. Then, a couple of hours later, her desk phone rang.

Amanda frowned; her direct extension rarely rang. Most of her calls came in rolled over from Lee's line, but she hadn't heard his phone ring first this time. She answered it cautiously.

"Mrs. King, this is Alma Dennis."

The name got her complete attention. "Oh, my gosh! What's wrong with Jamie?"

"Well," said the assistant principal, "he's been in a fight. And, ah, this isn't the first time something like this has happened recently, but —"

"It *what?* Why haven't you called me before now?" She'd known there'd been trouble at school, but not like that!

"It's the first time an adult has witnessed anything other than shoving, although we've seen some indicators that things might have happened off school grounds. Both boys are all right and are being treated by our school nurse, but we need you to come in."

She was already out of her chair and had her purse. "I'm on my way. Let me just..." she trailed off. Lee was out of the office, overseeing the security set-up for a new safe house. Her new minivan had needed some fine-tuning and adjustments, so

she'd taken it back to the dealership yesterday afternoon, and she'd ridden in with him today. But Lee had later driven the Corvette out to his appointment at the safe house.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, okay?" she finished. Then she hung up and grabbed her address book, flipping it open to pull out Joe's office number.

### 13. Joe: Defiance

Jamie was slumped in a waiting room chair when Joe and Amanda rushed into the school office. There were bandaged cuts and bruises on their son's hands, and the left hinge of his glasses had been repaired with tape. The anger and worry on his face became a full-fledged scowl when he saw who was there.

Joe knelt in front of his son. "What's your explanation for the phone calls your mother and I got?"

His voice was surly. "Bobby Boyd is a jerkface liar."

"Jamie," chided Amanda. "That's not good enough to justify getting into a fight. You know that."

The only response was a shrug. He'd focused his gaze on a spot in the carpet, as though he were attempting to glare a hole into it.

Joe sighed. "This is your chance to give us your side of things before we talk to Mrs. Dennis. What were you trying to accomplish?"

Jamie glanced up for a second, but it was too fast for either he or Amanda to get a good look at his expression. "I just wanted him to shut up already, that's all."

"Shut up?" asked Amanda. "What was he saying that was so terrible?"

Jamie shrugged again. "Just stuff. Stupid stuff. I'd told him to shut up earlier, but he got in my face when we were comin' back from lunch. Wouldn't go away." He paused. "So I told him I'd make him go away if I had to, and he said I was too chicken." A faint undertone of triumph crept in. "I proved him wrong."

"Are you saying you threw the first punch?" Oddly, Amanda didn't seem to share his horror at their son's words. If Joe had had to guess, she seemed resigned.

Jamie didn't respond to the question.

"James," Joe repeated, his tone firming. "Were you or weren't you the first one of the two of you to get physical?"

He squirmed. "All right. I was."

"Well," began Amanda, and despite the lack of surprise it was still clear that she was upset. At least she was taking this as seriously as it seemed to be. "We appreciate your honesty, but it's still not okay that you got into a fight. When we get home, we're going to have to discuss consequences."

"I already got in-school suspension! Isn't that enough?"

“Do not,” said Joe, “interrupt your mother. Or me.”

“And the answer to your question,” replied Amanda, “is no. That’s not enough. If nothing else, you’re going to have to help pay to fix your glasses. Your father and I are going to go in and talk to Mrs. Dennis now. Is there anything else you want to tell us first, before we find it out from her?”

He slumped lower, deepening the scowling glare. Joe waited for a long moment before getting back to his feet and escorting Amanda into the assistant principal’s office. Mrs. Dennis offered them both water before inviting them to sit down, not on the other side of her desk, but next to her in the conference area. “Mr. King, Mrs...” she trailed off. “King? You answered to that, but I think Jamie said you’ve remarried.”

“I have,” said Amanda. “It’s Stetson, but I haven’t corrected Jamie’s records yet.”

“We’ve both married again, actually,” Joe interjected. Record keeping could wait; he was ready to get to the bottom of the reason they were there. “What does that have to do with him fighting? Just who is this Bobby Boyd person, anyway? How come he can’t get along with people?”

“He’s actually very astute with people. Unfortunately, the way he applies that understanding isn’t always the best. He’s particularly good at finding his classmates’ biggest weakness or reason to be upset and then teasing them about it.”

“So he’s a bully. Why haven’t you and the teachers done anything about that?”

“We have tried, and Bobby has been improving, but until today there had never been a physical altercation. Not to mention, Bobby’s a small kid. Jamie is larger and stronger, and he did a lot more damage to Bobby than Bobby did to him.” Mrs. Dennis rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Bobby’s parents mentioned going to the school board. I was able to talk them out of that by explaining how it started, but they’re still terribly upset.”

“I can imagine,” said Amanda, and Joe was startled to hear sympathy in her tone. “But this isn’t like Jamie. He’s always been quiet and thoughtful, and at home he’s more prone to verbal outbursts and sulking. It’s his — it *was* his brother who had the tendency to be physical.” Her voice shook a little. “Whatever provoked him had to have been more complicated than just a few words, no matter how mean.”

“I’m afraid it does look like just teasing or taunting. But you just said there are two new stepparents, and Jamie himself has mentioned you’re also not staying at your

house right now. I certainly understand why not, but that's a lot of changes to go through in such a short period. It could be that this is one of his ways of lashing out. It's only been, what, a year and a half since you came home from working overseas, Mr. King? He hadn't completely finished adjusting to that, and the new parenting schedule, before..." she trailed off awkwardly.

"We're all adjusting right now." Amanda's voice had become quieter. "He's seemed to be handling things as well as any child could." Then she took a deep breath and let it out in a long exhale. When she spoke again, she sounded more like she normally did. "But I guess he isn't, is he. That's what you're trying to tell us."

Any reply that might have come was drowned out by Jamie's voice, which had risen to a shriek. "What are you doing here! Mom and Dad are already in Mrs. Dennis' office and they don't need you!" There was a pause and the sound of another, lower voice. Joe jumped up, heading back into the waiting room. Just as he opened the door, Jamie yelled again. "Well, I *don't!* So go away already!"

In the room beyond, Lee Stetson was standing stock-still. There was no misinterpreting the stricken expression in his eyes.

Joe jumped in before Amanda could speak. This needed to come from him. "*James Richard*. What was that all about?"

If Jamie had been taller, he would have been nose-to-nose with his stepfather. "I don't want him here!"

"That," he informed his son, "is not up to you."

"Why not? I deserve a say!"

It had never been like Jamie to be openly defiant before. "Lee is here," Joe explained, trying to keep his voice calm, "because he's married to your mother, and she wants him here. The only reason Carrie isn't, is because she can't just walk out of her classroom. But I've already called and told her what's going on, and she will be meeting us in a couple of hours."

"I don't want them there! I only want you and Mom!" He was shouting and his tone was angry, but his face was red, and his eyes were suspiciously shiny.

Lee, thankfully, had remained silent after exchanging a series of looks with Amanda, the two of them having an entire conversation without saying a word.

"As I said," repeated Joe. "That is not up to you. Whether you like it or not, Lee and Carrie are your stepparents, and you *will* behave respectfully toward them."

“I can be respectful! But I don’t want ’em buttin’ in to everything all the time.” A few tears broke free and began sliding down his face.

“It’s not butting in,” said Amanda. Her voice was as artificially calm as Joe’s had been. “They’re involved because they care about you. Jamie, we had this conversation. Just because your father and I love other adults doesn’t mean we love you any less.”

Now he turned on her. “You don’t get it! They’re not my parents and *I just want my own family!* Everyone’s leaving or *dying* and there’s nobody left except me and now all my friends are saying awful things about it and everything’s all different and —” he gulped, the tears flowing freely now. “Why does it gotta be like this?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” breathed Amanda. She reached for him, but he jerked away, making a beeline for the furthest chair from them. He dropped into it and curled into a ball, openly sobbing.

“I can, ah...” Lee spoke softly and gently, but his hands were twitching. He didn’t quite seem to know what to do with them. “I can meet you outside, or even back at the apartment if Joe’s willing to give you a ride.”

“No,” said Amanda. “You need to stay.”

“Yes,” confirmed Joe, “you do. Let us do the talking, but I meant what I said. Carrie’s my wife; you’re Amanda’s husband. That’s not up to him.” He took a long breath, turning back to his son’s mother. “We’ve got to get to the bottom of this and take care of it right now.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“Is everything all right?” He hadn’t even heard Mrs. Dennis come up.

“No,” Joe groused. “But it will be. We’re going to take him home and talk through this tonight. And,” he continued, raising his voice a little so that Jamie would hear him, “we’re going to take as long as it takes to finish talking through it. Jamie’s old enough to stay up for however long that takes. If that means he doesn’t make it to school tomorrow, I’d appreciate it if you could mark the absence as excused.”

“I think we can do that,” she replied after Amanda nodded.

“All right, Jamie,” he instructed. “We’re going to our townhouse. Carrie will probably be home by the time we get there.”

His son uncurled enough to show his eyes. “Can’t I just eat dinner, take some medicine and go to bed? Some of these bruises really hurt.”

Joe prided himself on having a relatively long fuse, but he was getting toward the end of it. “You’re just now bringing that up?”

“Sounds like an excuse to me too,” observed Lee. Amanda shook her head at him. He gave her another look full of meaning but did as she’d asked.

“Well?” asked Joe. “Are you going to answer me?”

Jamie shrugged, his eyes focused back on the carpet. “I guess it’s not so bad.”

“You can have some medicine when we get over there, sweetheart,” said Amanda. Her tone was still even, but Joe could hear the tension underneath it. “But we do have to get there. Which means you have to get out of that chair and come with us.”

He slowly pushed to a stand.

“Now, Jamie.” Clearly, Amanda’s patience was also starting to wear thin. “Where’s your backpack?”

“In my locker,” he mumbled. “Put it there when we went out for P.E.”

Mrs. Dennis spoke up again. “I’ll get it. Is there a lock on the locker?”

“Yeah, but it’s standard,” he said, meaning that he’d bought it through the school. He had been able to set his own combination, but there was a supplemental keyhole on the back of it. “Your pass key’ll open it.”

“Then I’ll just be a few minutes,” she answered before exiting. Jamie began rocking back and forth on his feet, but when Amanda reached out her hand, he shoved his into his pockets.

She sighed. “We’ll wait for her in our cars. You’ll ride with your father, and if you want, Joe, the two of you can go ahead, and we’ll wait for his backpack. As for you, young man, I expect you to answer any questions he asks while you’re in the car.”

“Aw, c’mon Mom, that’s not fair.”

“Neither is life,” replied Joe. “But we’ll wait and deal with the heavy stuff after dinner. For now, let’s get a move on and get out of here.”

## 14. Lee: Fighting Words

After Mrs. Dennis gave her the backpack, Amanda landed hard in the Corvette's passenger seat. Her hands were twisting together. "We have problems."

"Do we ever," agreed Lee. "What happened?"

She gave him a brief recap. "Mrs. Dennis doesn't think it's the first time Jamie's been in a fight, either —"

"It wasn't."

"— she just thinks it's the first time it happened on school grounds or where an adult...wait. How do you know it wasn't the first time he'd been in a fight?"

"Don't you remember that black eye a couple weeks ago?"

She shook her head. "Neither he nor Tad ever changed their story."

"So they lied to stay out of trouble. I'd hoped it was a one-time thing. Most kids get into a fight at least once in their lives. Even the quiet ones like Jamie."

"Yeah. I guess so." Out of the corner of his eye, Lee could see her turn her face away to look out the window. "She thinks Jamie's acting out about all the changes the past couple months, and that it's been developing slowly ever since...well, she thinks it started when Joe came back into town, actually. It's just kept on building since then. She also thinks he can't talk to me about because I'm just going to tell him that he has to accept all these changes." Her voice had begun to shake again.

"She's not wrong."

She was still staring out the passenger window.

"But that's not news," he continued, "and it's not what's really upsetting you."

"What do you mean, it's not what's upsetting me?"

"Amanda."

"It's upsetting to get called into the school because my son was fighting!"

"*Amanda*. Repeating questions back to me?"

At that, she shook her head, lapsing into an uncharacteristic silence. She kept her face turned away from him, answering him in monosyllables when he tried to re-start the conversation. Her shoulders were shaking, and he thought he heard a sniff a couple of times. Unfortunately, traffic had picked up for rush hour which kept him from pursuing it the way he otherwise might have done.

Despite her obvious feelings, she accepted his assistance getting out of the car

after he'd parked in a visitor space near Joe and Carrie's townhouse, and even took his hand as they walked up the sidewalk.

Lee perused her profile. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and her face appeared flushed under her makeup. He'd bet it was also blotchy. Something had hit the mark, although he wasn't sure if it was the situation or the question she'd refused to answer.

He felt his own temper rising. He'd been trying to let Amanda deal with things in her own time, but it wasn't working, especially if he also considered the questions he'd gotten from a number of people around the Agency. Although he dreaded doing it, he was going to have to confront her, and soon. Unfortunately, there wouldn't be time in the next few minutes. He made a mental note not to forget about doing it later.

As they entered the living room, Amanda caught his elbow. "Thank you for backing down earlier," she murmured, as if she'd read his thoughts. "But don't do it now. Joe was right: you're my husband and Carrie is his wife. Jamie needs to respect that. We'll work on the 'accepting' and 'liking' parts later if we have to."

He sighed, releasing as many of his own churning feelings as he could. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

"Joe and I will do the talking. The important part is that he sees you and Carrie with us when we do." She sat down on a love seat, indicating he should take the place right next to her. Around them, the other family members had also settled into seats.

"All right," began Amanda. "Why don't we start with you, Jamie?"

"I told you. Bobby Boyd got in my face and wouldn't stop when I told him to."

"That's right," acknowledged Joe. "You did tell us that. You also said he was saying things that upset you. Why don't you tell us what they were?"

His eyes dropped to the toes of his sneakers. "Just stuff."

An awkward silence followed.

"Jamie," said Amanda finally, "we can't decide what we're going to do next unless you tell us why you've been fighting in the first place." Lee felt her hand slide back into his. "We know this wasn't the first time. It was only the first time on school grounds."

Joe shot them both a look, but Lee shook his head. His eyes narrowed, but he kept his voice even as he picked up the thread of conversation with his son. "Mrs. Dennis told us that this Bobby Boyd character is really good at pushing people's buttons, too. But I'll bet that every time someone pushes back, he goes running to a

teacher acting like he's the victim. Am I right?"

"Yeah. Like I said. He's a jerkface."

"That doesn't excuse starting a fight," his father replied. "You still haven't told anyone what he was saying to you. Just so you know, Bobby hasn't yet, either. We also," and his voice became firmer, "need to know exactly how long all this has been going on."

"A while. Ever since —" Jamie broke off, looking around wildly. "Why can't I just talk to you and Mom, Dad? Why do they have to be here, too?"

"Because they need to know what's going on. Besides, Carrie lives here. She has a right to a say in what goes on in this house, just like Lee has a right to say what goes on over at your mother's and his house."

"What house? We're still staying at his apartment!"

"Jamie," warned Amanda, but Lee felt himself stiffening. The kid had a valid point.

Now, though, Jamie flopped back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. His face flamed in what Lee suddenly realized was embarrassment.

"We're getting off track," said Amanda firmly. "What did Bobby say to you?"

Jamie shook his head. "Nuh-uh."

The words came to Lee in a flash. "Look, sport, if they don't know what the fight was about, your mom and dad will have to assume it was something stupid. But if there was a good reason for it, and you tell them what it is, that could mean they'll go easier on you." He paused. "Is your right to silence really worth the maximum sentence?"

The boy responded with a truly venomous scowl, even as Amanda squeezed her husband's hand gently in thanks. "Lee's right, honey. If you were defending yourself or someone else —"

"I was!" he burst out. Then he closed his eyes, shaking his head.

"Who?" asked Joe. "And from whom?"

He clamped his mouth shut again.

Carrie looked at Joe, waiting for his nod before she started speaking. "Amanda, you said this isn't the first fight he's gotten into lately. Do you know if Bobby Boyd is the only one Jamie's been fighting with, or have there been others?"

"Others," she answered immediately, and Lee dropped his shoulders in relief.

Hers, though, had become more rigid. “I don’t think Bobby’s been at the Carlisles’ house in the afternoon, which is the only other place Jamie should have been going.” She lightly emphasized the word *should*.

Jamie mumbled something toward the floor.

“What was that?” asked Joe.

He gave an exaggerated sigh. “I said Bobby’s the one who started it.”

“But is he the only one who’s been after you?” his father continued.

Jamie shook his head.

“Who else?” asked Amanda.

“Katie.”

“Tad Carlisle’s younger sister? Isn’t she only in fourth or fifth grade?”

“Sixth. But she’s only ten. She got moved up a grade last year.”

“What does she have to do with any of this?”

“She’s...” he trailed off. “She’s sweet on Bobby, since he’s about the only one who’ll even talk to her since she got made teachers’ pet. So everything he says, she repeats, and she’s good at making up little rhymes and stuff.”

“Let me guess. She came up with something, and it started going around. Which eventually included Tad, who repeated it to you.”

He slumped even further down in his chair. “Yeah. And since it’s Katie, Tad doesn’t like it when I tell her to shut up. He clobbered me somethin’ good after I got mad enough to tell her it took one to know one, and I wasn’t about to take *that*, so I hit him back. He finally admitted she doesn’t know what the word means and was just bein’ stupid, but he also told her not to say it again.”

“What word?”

Jamie sighed again. “Whore.”

Joe’s eyes opened wide. “*What?*”

“Whore,” repeated Jamie. His expression had segued from angry to miserable. “I had to look it up, but that’s what Bobby called Mom. And Katie, she —” he choked up a bit. “I’m not gonna say that one out loud, okay? Bobby started singing it to everyone, and when I said it wasn’t true, he said Mom must be a really good one to catch someone who drives a car like Lee’s.” His eyes met Lee’s own. “Then when you drove me in this morning, he started in again and...well, you know.”

Lee felt his face flush. “That little —” Amanda squeezed his hand hard enough

to hurt. "I'd have hit the punk too!"

"No," said Joe. "You wouldn't have, because you know when someone's just trying to trick you into starting something." His eyes flashed a warning, communicating the intent behind his statement. "Thank you for telling us what Bobby said. It does change things. A lot."

Lee took several sharp breaths before nodding his agreement, reminding himself that it wasn't about what he himself would or wouldn't have done. The point was that Jamie shouldn't have started the fight.

"That changes things? Really?" Jamie's voice went up. "I did the right thing?"

Now Joe's gaze went to Amanda. After all, she was the one who had been insulted.

"No," she told him. "You should've gone to a teacher and asked them to call in both Bobby's parents and us. And if that didn't work, you should've told one of us directly. But you're right that it's not okay for him to have said that, and I'm going to call the school tomorrow to talk about it. I won't make you go for the rest of the week or even next week since it's a short one for Thanksgiving anyway. But you're going back after that, and you'll do your in-school suspension then. I'll also need to cut your allowance in half for...oh, the rest of the year, I think, to help pay for your glasses."

"No," said Joe. "I'll cover that. In-school suspension's enough."

"Actions have consequences, Joe. I'm cutting his allowance."

"That's not fair!" Jamie jumped to his feet. "Dad already told you in-school suspension's enough! Why do you always gotta be so mean?"

"Do not use that tone with me, James Richard King. Until the end of December, and I'd better not hear about another fight, or it'll be longer. Have I made myself clear?"

"Amanda." Carrie's tone was hesitant. "It's your decision, but...but isn't that a bit harsh? Especially since you told Jamie what to do if something happens again?"

"*Oh, for God's sake!*" Now she was the one who jumped to her feet, not noticing the shocked looks that followed her use of the epithet. "I raised that child almost by myself for years before any of you were in the picture. Any of you! And *now* you're going to try and step in? *Now* you're going to second-guess me? What gives you the right to any opinion at all? You should have been here earlier if you wanted that. Jamie's my child, do you hear me? The only one I have left, and I will handle him my way! I

don't need any of your — your —" she began to sputter as tears rolled down her face. "I'm cutting his allowance, damn it. I am."

Jamie, visibly quaking, sat back down. "I'm, ah, I'm sorry, Mom. I — there won't be any more fights. I promise. And you can take my whole allowance if you want."

"No," said Joe gently. "She won't. Amanda, why don't we have something to eat and talk about it later?"

"No!" she cried. "I don't want to eat. I don't want to calm down. I want — I just want — oh, dear God, I just want —"

"Amanda," said Lee as he, too, got to his feet. "Let's just go home. We'll come back tomorrow night, after you've had a chance to talk to the school again."

She shook her head but offered no resistance as he pulled her against him, instead beginning to ramble. "It's only six weeks or so until the end of the year and less than that until Christmas and I haven't had the time or the energy to decorate or even do any shopping and it's not going to be *right* anyway because Mother and Phillip aren't here and I can't believe I didn't know what was going on with my own son and it's just that...that..." her crying became too hard for her to continue.

"Shh," he said, stroking her hair. "All of us are tired and upset. Look, Jamie can stay here tonight, can't he?"

All three of them — Joe, Carrie, and Jamie — nodded.

"And Joe can call the school in the morning, if you're not feeling up to it."

There were more nods.

"That'll give you a chance for some really good rest," concluded Lee. "Come on. We're going home now, but it's just for tonight. Just for tonight," he repeated, wanting his meaning clear before she started to argue. "We'll pick this back up after you've gotten a chance for some sleep."

She mutely accepted her purse when Carrie handed it to her, and listlessly let him tug her out the door. At least he wasn't going to have to confront her to find out what was really upsetting her. He already knew.

## 15. Amanda: Connection

They'd stopped for some take-out sandwiches on the way back to the apartment, but Amanda had stayed in the car. She couldn't stop crying. Every now and then, she managed to calm down, but it would only last a few minutes before an errant thought left her in tears again. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a part of her was beginning to get frustrated and even disgusted: wasn't it time to start working through this instead of crying over it? But that little voice was drowned out every time something new set her back off.

"I'm sorry," she finally managed as they laid out their meal in the dining room. "I know you don't like tears —"

"Stop it," he answered, cradling her face in his hands.

"That's just it! I can't seem to stop. Even when I think I've managed to —"

"Amanda," he interrupted, leaning down to drop a quick kiss against her lips. "If anyone has had reason to cry the last couple of months, it's been you. I've wondered if you've done it enough."

"If I've..." she trailed off. "I don't understand. You want me to cry?"

"I want you to feel." One of his hands traced her cheek. "You've been trying too hard to either be strong for everyone else or push yourself to get through things you insist need to be done. When have you taken time to think about your own grief? Even though you're the one who lost both a parent and a child?"

*Lost both a parent and a child.* Tears again began at that phrase.

He wiped them off her face before continuing. "I had been going to suggest that Jamie spend Thanksgiving with Joe and Carrie anyway. I just hadn't gotten around to it. He can use the time with his father, and we need some time to ourselves. You need some time without any responsibilities."

"By getting away from my other child? The one I didn't notice was —"

"No," he interrupted again, a little firmer. "First off, you did notice what he let you see. Second, you need to take the time you need to take care of yourself so that you can keep doing all those wonderful things you do. You haven't stopped, Amanda, since before the funeral, even though nobody's hurting more than you. We've all done things to take care of ourselves. Remember that time in the gym?"

"Yes," she answered. "And that wasn't the only time."

“No.” He’d been late from a few other sessions since she’d found him that day. He’d also posted a new personal best on the firing range. “And I’m sure there are going to be others in the future. But you’re changing the subject. Right now, we’re talking about you. Have you gone back to Claudia yet?”

Amanda stiffened. “There’s no point going. We just keep having the same conversations, over and over again.”

“Because you’re not processing anything! You’re spending so much time trying to take care of everyone else that you won’t let anyone take care of you!” Turning away from her, he scrubbed his hands through his hair. “Look, I don’t care what you need to do. Cry it out. Scream it out. Run around in circles if that’s what you need. But you’ve got to do something besides pushing all your anger and grief down. Or else you’re going to keep doing the wrong things like unloading it on Joe and Jamie!”

“I’m —” she tried to take a long, steadying breath, but it came out uneven and hitching. “If I start, I...I don’t know — I don’t think I’ll be able to-to stop. I’m just —” she couldn’t keep her voice even, no matter how hard she tried. “All I can th-think to do is —” She had to take another breath. “Tr-try to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Because — because eventually, it’ll go numb enough to d-d-d-d...” she couldn’t get the end of the sentence out because she’d started crying. Again.

“Okay.” With shaking hands, he pulled her back against him. “All right. Let it out.”

“But — but dinner — it’s —”

“— just sandwiches.” He brushed her temple with his lips and tugged her toward the couch. “It won’t get cold or go bad, at least not right away. So it can wait. You can’t. Not right now.”

At that, she dissolved completely, and her knees buckled. He guided her down onto the couch, rocking her gently. She had no idea how long she stayed curled against him, but she’d given herself a headache by the time she finally got the sobs under control. She rubbed her eyes as she sat up. “I’m sorry. That was — I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” he told her. “You shouldn’t be either.” Cupping her chin, he wiped her face with his palm. “You’ve needed that for a long time.”

“I guess.” Now that she’d wept herself out, she could feel the numbness creeping back in, and with it came relief. “We should eat now.”

“Hey.” He took her hands. “Uh-uh. Don’t go away.”

“What makes you think I’m going to leave? I don’t have anywhere to go any—”

“I don’t mean physically.” He stood up, pulling her up alongside him. “Don’t disconnect. That’s what got us here in the first place.”

“I’m not disconne — what are you talking about, not disconnecting physically? I’ve been right here the whole time!”

“You’re answering with a question again. Don’t go numb, or shut down, or whatever it is you’re calling it. It doesn’t work. All you’ve been doing is just pushing everything down and then it starts building up to come out the wrong way again.”

She certainly wasn’t numb anymore; that had vanished as quickly as it had come. Instead, she was annoyed, and badly enough to pull her hands away from him before stalking toward the dining room. “If you’re not going to eat, I am.”

“Damn it, Amanda —” he grabbed at her hand, pulling her around so hard that she staggered against his chest, forcing him to throw both arms around her waist to steady her. There was no mistaking the disappointment and anger in his expression. “I told you to *stop* disconnecting and running away!”

He wanted connected? Fine; she’d give him connected. Her arms slid up his chest, linking around his neck, and she pushed up into him. Their mouths crashed together, teeth clacking before he realized what was going on and began to kiss her back. She felt his hands tangle into her hair, pulling at it, demanding that she tilt her head back and open her mouth fully to him. It was angry, greedy, biting. Fiery, vehement, passionate, and full of every emotion she could name right that second, and when they came up for air, they were both gasping.

Lee found his voice first. “Is this what you need?” He was as hoarse as he’d been that day in the gym. “Is this what it’s gonna take to keep you here with me?” Before she could reply, he kissed her again, hot and ardent, and she gave as good as she got. That was all the answer he needed, and she knew it. A second later his hands slid out of her hair, down her back and under her rear so that he could pull her up, off her feet. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her to the bedroom.

They came together sloppily, messily, urgent and needy and totally without finesse. It wasn’t gentle or tender; Amanda suspected she’d have a couple minor bruises. But she didn’t care, and as they finished, their heart rates began returning to normal, she realized she *had* needed this. They both had. It wasn’t the first time they’d used sex for comfort, and it likely wouldn’t be the last.

The important thing, she realized, is that they had finally turned toward each other instead of heading down a path that could end with them tearing themselves apart.

Lee pulled her into his shoulder, kissing her forehead gently. “That didn’t take long.”

“Well, we were both pretty determined, and it’s been a wh—”

“That’s not what I mean.” He dropped another gentle kiss, against her hairline this time. “Those wheels in your head are starting to turn again. I can hear them.”

With a long sigh, she wrapped her arms and legs around him. “What are we going to do about Jamie? And those awful taunting kids?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But we don’t have to figure it out tonight, or tomorrow, or even over the weekend.” His fingers began to comb through her hair. “We have time to work out the priorities before we make a final decision.”

As if in response, her stomach growled, and when he answered it, she started to giggle. He responded with chuckles of his own and after a few minutes both of them were laughing outright. Amanda shifted to give him a long kiss — a real one, this time — before pushing herself up and off the bed. On the other side, Lee did the same, going into the bathroom to get their robes before they headed into the dining room.

They ate in silence, but it was a comfortable silence. At least at first, anyway. But as they were cleaning up, she noticed a bruise on Lee’s neck. “Oh. Ouch.”

“What?”

She brushed a finger against it. “I suppose that was my doing.”

He shrugged. “Not the first time, and I hadn’t even noticed.”

“Yeah, well, you’re going to have a hard time covering that one up with your collar.” She shook her head ruefully. “I should have been more careful.”

He put the dishes he was holding into the sink and turned back toward her, taking her hands. “Hey. Don’t ever apologize for wanting me.”

“Say that again after we go back to work next week, and it finds its way onto the rumor mill.”

“Actually,” he said, “I have a question. What if we didn’t go in to work next week?”

She blinked. “Did you just suggest we ditch for *an entire week*? I mean, I know it’s going to be Thanksgiving, and we don’t really have any plans yet, but that doesn’t

mean that there'll be nothing for us to do."

"No. I'm suggesting we take some of that sick leave we both have built up."

"Sick leave? I'm not sick and neither are you!"

An exasperated expression reappeared as he dropped his shoulders. "Not physically, no. But we'd both benefit if we took some time away, just by ourselves. Why don't we go somewhere while we're at it? That way there'd be no reminders of anything at all. I know a couple of places —"

"I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Lee, we have responsibilities! Both at work and to our family!"

"If Jamie stays over with Joe and Carrie, that's taken care of," he pointed out. "And I'm not aware of anything in either of our caseloads that couldn't wait for a few days. Amanda," he continued, and now his tone became softer and more persuasive. "It's not just you. I need some time away too. I'm not talking about a long time or going very far. Nobody would blame us for taking a few days." His mouth quirked into a grin. "That would also mean this bruise'll be gone before we get back."

She felt her lips twitch. "Oh. I take it that's your real reason for wanting to take time off, right?"

"No. I've gone in with worse." He took both of her hands, pulling them up to drop a kiss on each one. "Please. Let's go somewhere."

Was he begging? Guilt settled onto her shoulders. "Don't," she told him. "I'm not made out of glass. I'm stronger than that. You are, too."

"And I'd like to stay that way."

Amanda turned away, shaking her head. "I've already disappointed everyone. Mr. Melrose, Francine, you, Joe, Carrie," her voice caught. "Jamie. No, Lee. I owe you all — I can't believe I never noticed how bad things were getting with my own son. And he's not the only one. The least I can do is try to make it up by doing better." Not that she hadn't already been trying, of course, after the meeting with Mr. Melrose, but this was that much more incentive. "I'm not going to just run away from my problems."

"Think of it more like a strategic retreat," he suggested from behind her. "Time to bind up your wounds so you can come back out strong."

"I've already let everyone down enough!"

With surprising swiftness, he crossed back around in front of her. "You're right.

You have. That's what I'm trying to tell you, Amanda. And you're going to keep right on doing that if you don't take some time for yourself!" He made a frustrated gesture. "Look, it's not entirely my idea. Both Billy and Pfaff have been dropping hints, and now would be a perfect time. It's not too busy, and Jamie's off from school, and most places are going to be quiet because people will be with their families, and —" At the look on her face, he cut himself off with a soft curse. "I'm sorry."

She took several deep breaths, and for once, they actually helped. "It's all right."

"No, it's not, but it will be. That's exactly what I mean. It's not over! I'd like to spend some time with you, some real time, and not just in bed, either. Pick a place or a direction. It doesn't matter to me." The expression on his face was earnest and woe-begone at the same time, and it was all she could do not to turn away again.

But she'd said it herself. She wasn't going to run away from her problems.

Amanda sighed, realizing she'd run out of arguments. "All right."

## 16. Francine: Details

If someone had told her, five years ago, that she'd actually be missing Lee Stetson, she'd likely have punched them. Of course, if that person had gone on to clarify that she'd be missing Lee Stetson *and his wife*, she'd likely have been laughing too hard for the punch to land true. But Francine wasn't laughing today. Instead, she found herself wishing that the vault really was soundproof, because that would explain why it was so quiet in here. She wouldn't be reminded that the Q-Bureau's office itself was equally quiet. She'd actually gotten used to overhearing Lee and Amanda bantering and discussing cases whenever she was working in the files.

Still, the quiet beat the current state of the bullpen, where the newly certified Agent Nancy Zusterakos — one of the candidates who'd come on board during the Sal-lee case — was busy orienting a newly-arrived consultant from MI6. How was it possible that any adult female could giggle that much? Francine wanted to like Zusterakos, as she was the most promising of the new agents, but the giggling and blushing had finally gotten on her nerves.

*She's just nervous*, Francine reminded herself, but she still sighed as she closed one drawer and opened the next. *Or I'm becoming jaded. I suppose worry can do that to you.*

When Amanda had first come back to work, her snippy demeanor and careless mistakes had been so unlike her that Francine had found herself actively avoiding her again, staying in the bullpen when she needed to be up in the Q-Bureau's files. As a result, the box next to her desk was full to the point of overflowing.

She'd asked Zusterakos to help with it; the younger agent had said she would, but she almost always seemed to be busy with something else instead. Or someone. It had only served to add to Francine's annoyance, and the whole situation was wearing on her. Last night, she had snapped at Jonathan over dinner. To his credit, he'd calmly answered by telling her not to take out her distress on him, and she'd apologized. But she was still embarrassed that it had happened.

Then Billy had called her into his office yesterday morning. *Lee called in*, he told her. *He and Amanda are finally going to take that mental health time they've been needing. I know you're scheduled off for Thanksgiving —*

*Of course*, she'd interrupted, surprised at how relieved she'd felt. *You don't need*

*to ask twice. Well, as long as they'll be back afterward.*

He'd confirmed they would be, and in the meantime, she knew there wasn't likely to be a lot of activity. Even international relations and intrigue tended to die down during winter weather and holiday seasons. She'd pounced on the opportunity to get the teetering stack of folders off of her desk for good, especially since it got her away from Zusterakos' constant prattle. Was the child too dense to realize the effect of some of her comments, or did she just not care?

Francine shook her head. It didn't matter; she'd eventually learn better, either by being shut up or by being shown up. It would only be a matter of time. And at least it gave her something to focus on besides the obvious tension between Lee and Amanda. *I love you*, she'd finally been able to say to him. Lee was more than a friend; he'd become the older brother she'd always wished she had.

That thought brought another laugh to Francine's lips. If, five years ago, you'd told her that was how things would go, she would have considered it at least as ridiculous as the idea that she could miss his presence.

It was funny, sometimes, how things could go ways you never imagined, and how that was often best in the end. *Now if that could just keep being true*, she thought. This mental health break boded well for her friends, but long experience had taught her that it might not necessarily be enough to stave off disaster.

Grimacing, she closed the file drawer with more than the necessary force, causing the cabinet itself to rock. Enough dust kicked up into the air to make her sneeze. When was the last time anyone had done anything more than just pick up in here, anyway? Maybe it was a good time for a thorough cleaning, which would give her a convenient excuse to spend even more time away from the bullpen. She wondered if there were cleaning supplies on this floor or if she'd have to go back down into the basement to retrieve them.

That line of thinking caught her off-guard. Amanda, too, had rubbed off on her more than she'd realized.

Shaking her head, Francine went back into the Q-Bureau's office and sat at Lee's desk, which she'd cleaned and straightened yesterday afternoon. Someone had left a sealed inter-office envelope in the middle of it since then, and she stared at its large red confidential stamp for quite a while, debating. Confidential was confidential, of course, but what if it was also time-sensitive? Lee's cases hadn't stopped just be-

cause he was taking time off, and he'd want to know if something important had come up.

It was a rationalization, she knew, but Francine broke the seal and opened the envelope anyway. She'd just look at the first couple of pages to make sure the contents could wait. If they could, she'd put them back.

There was no explanatory note on top, but that didn't matter; she recognized an investigative report right away. Oddly, though, the format wasn't typical for the Agency and there was no attribution. She'd just begun to straighten the papers to put them away when a notation caught her eye: *The tire fragments were too deformed to show conclusive evidence of the reason for destruction, but a rifle round cannot be ruled out.*

Lee was investigating a motor vehicle accident? She wasn't familiar with any of his cases that included anything like that. Flipping forward, looked for the longer version of the conclusions.

*Tread wear or poor maintenance can be eliminated as potential reasons for destruction, it read, as the tires were approximately three months old and had 98% of remaining tread remaining. In addition, the vehicle's owner is known to conform to proper preventive maintenance schedules. Regardless, evidence shows that the left front tire either exploded or disintegrated at speed. Tire fragments severed the front CV axle, which showed signs of previous mechanical tampering. Axle fracture at a speed consistent with the tire fragment evidence could potentially have led to loss of vehicle control and a rollover.*

Another flip forward revealed a page with pictures of the vehicle in question, and Francine caught her breath: it had been a white 1986 Jeep Grand Wagoneer.

It had been *Amanda's* white 1986 Jeep Grand Wagoneer, the one her mother was driving when she and her oldest grandson had been killed.

Flipping more pages, Francine checked to see if there were any ballistics findings, making a sound of disgust as she read the Arlington Police Department's initial report. They hadn't even done a proper search, instead simply starting with the assumption that the tire had blown out after running over road debris.

However, this mysterious second investigator had done one, and had found two spent 7.92 x 33mm Kurz jackets about three hundred yards back from the accident scene. One had been too damaged to analyze, but the other had markings suggesting the use of a Sturmgewehr 44. Both bullets had been fired sometime in the last three

months.

Shaking, she dropped the report. It couldn't be, could it? Whoever had fired those bullets had used the same kind of old assault rifle as one of the goons at Mrs. Welch's property, during the case when she'd been drugged to reveal information. They'd found the ballistic evidence in the helicopter once Lee and Amanda had managed to bring it back down. *And StG 44s weren't usually used in the United States...*

She had no idea how long it took, but Francine read through the entire report. It was thorough and well-done, but there was no indication of the investigator's identity. There was no signature, no cover, nothing at all to indicate the source of the information in the report. Presumably, though, Lee knew who had done it, and when he saw this report, he, too, would come to the obvious conclusion.

Phillip King and Dotty West had been murdered, in what looked for all the world like a botched hit aimed at Amanda, Lee, or both of them. Or even, Francine realized with a swallow, the entire Agency as a whole.

• • •

"East Germans," recalled Billy after listening to her report. "But we never did figure out exactly who it was, did we? Other than confirming it wasn't a Stasi op?"

"No," she answered. "We were able to find everyone who was carrying out the agent murders and shut down their conduit to the KGB, but the contacts all suicided before we got any more useful intelligence."

"Which means we have no idea who or what's behind this," he finished. "Damn! Get me everything we have on the Welch case and —" Francine dropped three file folders onto his desk. They didn't have much inside of them. Billy swore again, turning back to the investigative report. "Where did this come from, anyway?"

"It's not attributed, and the format isn't Agency. There was nothing to identify the source of the inter-office envelope." She paused. "Billy, you weren't letting Lee investigate this on his own, using his own network, were you?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "I was." With a sigh, he leaned back and rubbed one of his temples. "Both of us felt like it was hinky, but Arlington PD had closed the case as an accident. I couldn't justify officially re-opening it without additional evidence."

She nodded; that explained why it had taken several weeks to get the investigative report back. It had been done informally, and probably outside of work hours.

“Well, it looks like we have justification now.”

“Yeah, I know. Even if it still circumstantial. But since this came in after Lee and Amanda left...”

“...they have no idea they’re in danger,” she finished.

“Are they, though?” asked Billy after a moment’s thought. “There’ve been no attempts on either of them since the accident — er, murder.” He shook his head. “They were headed out of town for a few days. He didn’t say where, and I didn’t want to ask. But it’s just the two of them. Amanda’s son is staying with his father for Thanksgiving.”

“Thank goodness for small favors.”

“Assuming he’s safe there.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” answered Billy. “But this isn’t unofficial now. Nor is it going to be worked off the books. Not anymore. Go hit the computer and run all the information we have about East German groups in the area. Get Zeta to help you collate the details; she’s almost as good as Amanda when it comes to seeing patterns.”

“Zeta?”

“Zusterakos. I thought you knew about that.”

“She’s already got a code name?”

“Not officially. But that’s what they’ve been calling her.”

She suppressed a shudder. “I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Francine.” He met her eyes. “That wasn’t a suggestion, no matter how embarrassed you are about being —”

She cut him off. “That’s not it. But isn’t she still babysitting that MI6 agent?”

“No, he’s off on his own right now. Working on that computer crime task force with State and the Office, so he’s not going to be around here much. She needs something to do.”

“I’m sure there are other things that are just as important,” replied Francine. “I just — Billy, really. I can work this one on my own. Zusterakos — Zeta — doesn’t know Lee or Amanda as well as I do, and once they’re back, I can talk directly to them about this report and what it’s suggesting.”

“No,” he replied evenly. “You can’t. And that’s exactly why I want you with someone else, Francine. Use Fielder or Beaman, if you don’t want to ask Zeta, but

do *not* work this alone. There'd be too many suggestions of favoritism if you did."

Her mouth dropped open. "I would never —"

"You know that and I know that, but the auditors don't. I'm not going to argue with you about this. Who's it going to be? Zeta, Fielder, or Beaman?"

Francine thought for a long moment before sighing in defeat. "I guess it'll be Zuster...Zeta. She has the best organizational skills."

"Think of it like a mentorship," he suggested.

He was trying to be helpful, she knew, but this was going to be more like a jail sentence than a mentorship. Of course, Billy had been hinting at partnering her up recently, and she knew she needed to do some more work in tandem with junior agents if she wanted to be promotable when the time came. But with someone as green and bubbly and *silly* as she was? Who asked all kinds of irrelevant questions and had a knack for making tactless comments without meaning to?

She wouldn't be able to close this particular investigation fast enough.

## 17. Lee: Good Ideas

He found Amanda outside on the porch, wrapped in a blanket and staring out at the ocean from one of the chairs. Although the hotel's oceanfront porch was shared, the lack of other patrons this time of year had given them complete privacy. In the dim light, the breakers' foam took on a gray hue, contrasting with the inky black of the water, and the beach sand appeared nearly white.

Since it was winter, the night breeze was blowing in from the sea, tossing her hair as she stood up to greet him. Taking the blanket, Lee wrapped it around them both as he drew her into an embrace from behind, his chin coming to rest on her shoulder.

She slipped her forearms beneath his. "I'm glad we came here."

"So am I," he murmured.

By unspoken agreement, they'd declared a no-shop-talk, no-problem-solving trip, but the hotel had passed a message to Lee just before sunset: call Billy right away. It had taken his section supervisor three days to track him down.

He'd gone out to his car immediately, and they'd spoken for an hour before he'd hung up. He'd called Joe afterward, speaking in French to alert him about the situation so that Jamie wouldn't overhear anything he shouldn't. Joe had been concerned, but had ultimately concluded that there was no need to change plans. It was just going to be the three of them, and he hadn't seen or heard anything suspicious.

Lee had made a couple of other phone calls anyway. It never hurt to set up extra precautions. But he'd kept that to what was absolutely necessary, since there didn't appear to be any new threats. Virginia law had no statute of limitations for premeditated murder. The case would keep until they got back. Right now, there were more important priorities.

Amanda inhaled deeply. "I'd love to know what you're thinking about."

He kissed her cheek. "Not a whole lot. Just enjoying our time here." They had to leave in the morning, although the five-hour drive meant they could fit in a leisurely brunch on their way out. "I'm debating going back home through the Bridge-Tunnel and Salisbury tomorrow, instead of using the Interstate."

"How much extra time would that take?"

"Little over an hour, mostly because of speed limits. There'll be a lot less traffic,

though.” He paused. “We’d be on or near the water for most of it.”

“Then let’s do it,” she answered. “Would you believe I’ve never gone across the Bridge-Tunnel? Every time I’ve been down this way, we’ve always ended up detouring south. I’ve seen the signs more than a few times, but for some reason we never had time to try it.”

“Does that mean you’ve never been to the Eastern Shore?”

“We crossed over from Sandy Point to Kent Island once, when I was a really little girl. But that was only to go to Matapeake. After that we went back the way we came.”

He smiled. “Then you’re in for a treat. We’re going to go through some of the most beautiful country I’ve ever seen. It’ll be a perfect way to end our trip, Mrs. Stetson.”

Chuckling, she tapped her wedding ring against his. “That means it’ll have been a perfect trip, Mr. Stetson.” Then she sobered, and he knew she was thinking about his absence this afternoon. “Unless there’s something I don’t know about.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “You know I had someone looking into the...into what happened. Right?”

Her shoulders tensed. “Did they find something?”

“Yes, and the Agency’s opened a case.” He quickly filled her in, including his conclusion that there was no reason to cut their trip short.

She had begun shuddering, but then she inhaled deeply, holding the breath for a three-count before letting it back out. The tension in her body went out along with her exhale, and for a long while after, they simply looked out at the waves together.

They’d never heard of this place before, but when he’d seen an advertisement for it on the bulletin board in a restaurant, they’d decided to try it. Now, he knew, the Cavalier Motor Court was going to become one of their regular vacation destinations. They’d already discussed bringing Jamie down the next summer when the beach town’s activities would be in full swing.

“Thank you, Lee,” Amanda finally said softly.

“For what?”

“Bringing us here. Standing beside me. Confronting me when I...went into a tailspin, I suppose. I’m not happy to hear about the investigation, but I’m...” she trailed off. “I’m all right. Okay, well, no, I’m not. But I’m — I’m managing, and I wasn’t

before. You were right. I needed the time away, without any responsibilities or worries. To just think, and feel, and be.”

“Correction.” Freeing one hand from under the blanket, he used it to turn her chin toward his. “We needed the time away. I just wish it could’ve been longer.”

“It’s not over yet,” she pointed out as she leaned forward to brush her lips against his. “We have enough time for at least one or two more things. What do you think?”

“I think,” he answered, as he moved in for a longer kiss, “that is an excellent idea.”

• • •

There was a cautious, wary look on Carrie’s face as she let them into the townhouse. Lee thought he might have felt the hair on the back of neck stand up, but her voice had its usual pleasantly cheerful tone. “How was your trip?”

“Fine,” answered Amanda. “How was Thanksgiving?”

She was answered by a thunder of footsteps coming down the stairwell. “Hi Mom! Hi Lee! It was great! Carrie made us a stew called tee-cha — um, cha — um, how do you pronounce that word again?”

“Tchaka. Jamie, let them get all the way through the door first.”

“They’re inside already and we can talk while they walk. We also had fried plantains, and diri-she —” he stumbled again, this time with a grimace. “Maybe Carrie should describe it.”

At that, Jamie’s stepmother laughed, her expression a mixture of indulgence and amusement, and Lee decided he’d been imagining things a moment earlier.

“We had diri shela poul fri for Thanksgiving itself,” she said as she took their coats. “It’s a Haitian version of fried chicken. Then the tchaka, which is a traditional holiday stew, yesterday and today. Joe and I decided not to do a turkey and sides, so that it wouldn’t bring back bad...” she trailed off. “So that it’d be different.”

“Well, I’m jealous,” said Lee, and he meant it. “There are some good Haitian restaurants up in Hyattsville and Silver Spring, but I’ve never had anything home cooked. You’ll have to make those again sometime, or send me the recipes.”

She gave him an enigmatic look, and a trace of wariness reappeared in her demeanor. “I suppose.”

Before he could react, another set of footsteps came down the stairs. “Hi there,” said Joe. “Welcome back. How was — where did you say you were going again?”

“We didn’t,” answered Amanda. “But we went down to Kitty Hawk. There’s a nice little motel right on the beach, within walking distance of the Wright Brothers Memorial.” She stepped back from the bear hug she’d given Jamie. “We’ll go back there this summer, at least with Jamie and maybe all five of us.” Still smiling, she sat down on the love seat she’d shared with Lee the last time they’d visited, pulling him down next to her. “Was everything, ah...” she trailed off. “You didn’t have any problems, right?”

“It’s all right,” said Carrie. Lee decided there was a definite cool undertone to her words. “Joe told me what’s going on. And no, there weren’t any problems.”

“What do you mean, what’s going on?” asked Jamie.

“Grown-up talk,” said Amanda easily, although her hand had tightened on his. She’d noticed Carrie’s reticence, too, then. “And if there were no problems, then there’s nothing to talk about anyway.” She paused. “You ready to come back?”

“Actually,” said Joe, “we’d like to talk to you about that.”

The muscles at the back of Lee’s neck got tighter. “Yes?” he asked.

“To be specific,” continued Joe, “Jamie would like to talk to you about that.” He glanced over. “This is your idea, son. We’ll be right here, but you need to be the one to explain it to them.”

Jamie took a deep breath as he sat down in a nearby chair. “Mom, I think I’d like to stay here for a while.”

There was a long pause, during which Lee could feel Amanda forcing her fingers to relax. “Why is that, sweetheart?”

“Well, it’s not because you don’t agree on cutting my allowance.” He exchanged a glance with Joe. “Dad says he’ll work that out with you privately and let me know the final decision. It’s mostly —” he cut himself off, taking another deep breath. “I think...I think I need a few changes right now. And I’ve never had the chance to spend a whole lot of time with Dad and Carrie. It’s not like I don’t want to see you or anything, either, ’cause I do. It’s just that...” he trailed off again. “A whole lot of reasons, really. And I don’t mean forever. Just maybe until it’s time to go back to school after New Year’s.”

Under his hand, Amanda’s was shaking, but her voice was steady. “What about

school between now and then? How are you going to get there?”

“Carrie says there’s a bus from her school to mine.”

“Okay,” she answered slowly before looking at Joe. “I take it you’re fine with this?”

“Yes. We have the room. Plus, it would let you focus on...” he trailed off. “Well, it might be a little more, ah, *secure*.” There was a slight but detectable emphasis on the word, and he looked directly at Lee when he said it. “What with him having his own room and all, instead of sleeping on the couch in your living room.”

Lee nodded, indicating he’d understood the unspoken message: Joe felt like Jamie would be safer staying there while they investigated the murders. Glancing at Amanda, he could see that she, too, had heard that message; and like him, she didn’t think he was wrong. Still, her hand had wrapped itself back around his and was gripping it a bit too tightly as she answered. “I have to admit that makes sense, although Lee and I are coming back with a bit of our own news.”

“What is it?”

They’d talked it over while they were in North Carolina, coming to a final decision during the drive back. “We’re...” she trailed off. “Jamie, you’re right about needing some changes, and every time we go back to our house, it hurts. A lot.”

“Yeah, I know,” he answered. “I always try to get in and out as fast as I can ’cause everything there reminds me of —” his voice hitched. “Of them.”

“So,” she continued. “Over the next few weeks we’ll actually need to back there a little more often than we have been, because it needs to be spic-and-span like you’ve never seen clean before. Once it is, I’m going to put it up for sale.”

Jamie’s shoulders dropped, but Lee couldn’t tell if the child was disappointed or relieved. Probably it was a combination of both. “Are you gonna buy another one?”

“Yes,” she said, “but I won’t be able to do that until I sell the one we have. And that could take a while, especially this time of year.” She glanced over at Lee.

He picked up the thread. “I’ve been on a month-to-month lease for a while.” The words were addressed to Jamie although he found himself meeting Joe’s eyes as well, and even, once, Carrie’s. “So all I have to do is give notice. I’m going to look for a two-bedroom place with a short lease, maybe six months or so. That’ll give you your own room while your mom works on selling the house, and while we decide exactly what it is we want to buy together.” He paused. “All three of us.”

A smile appeared on Jamie's face.

The muscles on Carrie's face, however, were still tight. "That's an awful lot of moving around in a short time," she began.

"Yeah, but it's for a good reason. And, well, I'm used to moving around a lot. I know how to make it as easy as possible. Plus," he continued, "six months would let Jamie finish the school year where he is. If you end up changing schools, sport," he continued, "and let's be clear that we're not yet sure you will, it'll be a lot easier to do it over a summer break. I would know."

Jamie considered that, not noticing that Joe and Carrie were having a silent conversation behind him. "You know, I'm not sure I would mind going to a different school. I mean, if I can still see my old friends and all."

"We'll decide how to handle it when the time comes," said Amanda. Under his hand, hers had begun to relax. "As for right now, it might not..." she swallowed. "It...it probably isn't a bad idea for you to stay here until we've moved into that two-bedroom place. So, Joe, thank you for letting him."

That, Lee knew, had been incredibly hard for her to admit. He stroked the back of her hand gently to reassure her. Across the room, Joe and Carrie had apparently come to some sort of agreement, because he was nodding at her.

"You're welcome," he answered Amanda. "And you know what? Carrie and I have an idea. A couple of the townhouses in this complex are for rent right now, and we're only just outside the Arlington Heights school district. Why don't you put in an application for one of them? That way Jamie can just go back and forth whenever he needs or wants to."

Lee hesitated, but his concerns vanished when he saw the look in Amanda's eyes. "Yes," he said. "That's a great idea."

## 18. Billy: Grateful

Billy had his door shut, but the voices on the other side were getting clearer with every word. “But why not?” cried Zeta. “It’s the next logical step!”

“No, it’s not, because they aren’t here!” yelled Francine back.

“Don’t you know where they are?” asked Zeta. Her expression was vexed. “I mean, what with you being friends and all, surely they’d have told you where they were going. So call them in! They’ll understand having to come back early!”

“Now you listen here!” Through the glass, Billy could see Francine rounding on the younger agent, although her voice dropped in volume and became muffled again. He’d heard enough, though, to understand what was going on. He yanked open his door so hard that it crashed back against the bookshelves behind it.

“Desmond. Zusterakos.” His voice was a growl. “In here, right now.”

They complied even as they continued their argument. “It’s going to be at least another day before the ballistics comparisons come back,” Zeta was saying. “And we don’t have any other physical evidence besides that and the Jeep. Leatherneck confirmed the CV axle had been tinkered with, so there’s nothing more to do there. The only thing we can do right now is ask Mr. and Mrs. Stetson for an interview!”

“For the last time,” hissed Francine, “no. I am not going to drag Lee and Amanda back in here a single *minute* early.”

Zeta rolled her eyes. “I get it. I get it, okay! But everyone here’s seen how badly they’re hurting. But don’t you think they’d look forward to getting to the bottom of this case? Now that it’s been transferred over? Though,” she continued, “I still don’t quite understand how that happened. Arlington PD closed the case.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” snapped Francine. “I’ve already given you an assignment. Why are you even still here?”

The younger agent’s expression became mulish. “Because you’re not my supervisor!”

“But I am,” broke in Billy. “Zeta, what is it she wants you to do?”

“Go through the daily logs to check on Bulgarian and Russian assets’ activities,” she reported. “Which I don’t understand, because wasn’t this an East German group?”

“Are you completely *dense*? They’re all allies, and they —”

“Be *quiet*, Desmond! Zeta, it was an East German group. You’re right about that. But Desmond’s also right when she says they’re allies. They do each other’s dirty work all the time, and they keep changing up so they can throw us off their scents.”

Zeta opened her mouth to respond, but then closed it again, her upper teeth coming down to worry at her lower lip.

“At the same time,” continued Billy, puncturing Francine’s triumphant look, “Zeta is right that all we have so far is circumstantial evidence. You don’t even know what you’re looking for yet. Why are you sending her off on a wild goose chase without interrogating Lee and Amanda first?”

She squared her shoulders. “It’s right there on the board. They’re on sick leave. Sick leave,” she repeated crisply. “Which is not something either of them ever takes voluntarily. There is a damn good reason they’re gone, and I am not going to bother them with this unless I am absolutely certain there’s nothing else to be done. And that our other casework is also at a standstill.” She turned toward Zeta again. “Have I made myself clear enough to the junior agent now? Or does she still want to go running to teacher and tattle?”

“It’s a bit late for that, seeing as you’ve already gotten us called in.”

“*Enough!*” roared Billy. “Both of you, sit down and *shut up!*”

They dropped their eyes to the floor as they complied.

“If you want to act like children,” he told them, “then I’ll treat you like children. Or you could grow up and get some work done. Both of you! You’re supposed to be partners, not arguing over who’s in charge. Desmond is, since she’s senior and it’s her case, and *that’s how I expect to see this done!* But Zeta’s right about supervision, Desmond. Damn it, it’s her *job* to object if she sees something that doesn’t look right, and you know it! God knows you did that enough times when you were a junior!”

Francine fidgeted.

His temper spent, Billy nodded. “Zeta, go on out and start pulling those files. It’s going to take you a while. Desmond, stay in here.” He waited until they were alone before sitting down. “All right, Francine, what’s going on? You should have called Lee and Amanda in for questioning by now.”

She sighed. “That sick leave of theirs. Billy, have you been up to the Q-Bureau lately?”

“Several times. Including this morning when Lee and Amanda reported back in

for duty. They'll be at the staff meeting this afternoon."

"Oh." Her voice was quiet. "I hadn't heard."

"Clearly. Now, are you going to go ask them about being interviewed or do I have to make it an order?"

"I'm not prepped."

"How long will you need?"

Her continued silence said volumes.

"Look," he told her. "I know this is going to be hard, but you know the rules. No partiality." He gentled his tone. "Do you want me to do it for you, just this once?"

She shook her head. "No. No, I, ah..." she trailed off. "Billy, they're the ones that figured the whole Colonial Cookery thing out in the first place, and they know where the leak happened. It's going to be hard for me to work up any kind of authority during the session, especially if there's something they don't want to share with the Agency." She met his eyes briefly. "We've already seen that they're pretty good at hiding things when they want to."

"They don't have anything to hide about this."

"I know," Francine said, and she suddenly looked exhausted. "That's what I keep telling myself. But for all I know, the reason they haven't come down yet is because they're up there expecting me to go question them before they get back into their own cases." Her sigh was deep and heartfelt. "All right. I'll go up there now."

She stood, opening the door and heading out into the bullpen and the sea of eyes waiting for her. Billy followed her, wanting to see what she was going to do next.

As he'd hoped, she stopped at Zeta's desk first, and she spoke loudly enough to be overheard. "Nancy, I owe you an apology. You're right that we're supposed to interview all the material witnesses we can, and in this case, that means Lee and Amanda. And you were right to call me on it when I didn't."

For once, the younger agent managed to keep her foot out of her mouth. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. And I want you to keep asking questions any time you feel like you need to." She paused. "I'm going up there now. I'd like it if you stayed here, though. This...this isn't going to be easy, and there's already years of existing rapport between them and me —"

"I understand," said Zeta "Should I set up an interview room for recording?"

“No.” Francine shook her head. “I don’t see the need for a Class A, and there’s recording equipment up there if we need it.”

“You’ll want someone else to take notes, though,” said Billy. “I’ll go up with you.”

He could see it in her eyes: she wanted to object. But she stifled that urge and instead nodded, waiting for him to go back to his desk and get pen and paper. That was, he reflected, why he’d chosen her as his backup and heir apparent. She could be snippy and difficult to get along with and had very definite opinions about the way things should and shouldn’t go. She still needed seasoning. But in the end, when the rubber met the road, Francine would always do what the Agency needed done. Even when she hated something so much she had to be argued into doing it.

• • •

She went into the Q-Bureau first. He followed, but hung back a little, curious to see how she would handle this part.

“Good morning,” Francine started. “Oh. Um. Sorry to interrupt.”

“It’s all right,” stammered Amanda as she came out from behind Lee’s desk. “Ah, good morning, Francine. You weren’t interrupting anything. We were just —”

“Don’t bother. Those wedding rings mean you don’t need any excuses anymore. Nobody thinks you’re up here playing backgammon all the time anyway. Not with your efficiency ratings.”

Amanda flushed slightly. “Thanks. I was just looking at the pictures in the investigative report. Are you here for something from the vault? I’d be happy to help.”

“Actually,” said Francine, “I have something to say about you two, if you don’t mind.”

“About what?” asked Lee. “Surely not backgammon.”

“No. It’s been...” she trailed off. “It’s good to see you back, Amanda, and it looks to me like you’re really back. I hope that’s true, because everyone loves listening to the two of you banter back and forth, both in the hallway and in staff meetings. We usually learn a lot from it. You’re...” she took a breath. “Amanda, you bring a kind of...oh, I don’t know, sunlight even when everything else seems to have gone all cloudy and stormy. I hadn’t realized that until you were out after being shot, but it didn’t truly hit me until you were out for, um, this time.”

“It’s all right,” said Amanda. “You can say it. From half of my family being murdered.”

“Yeah.”

“Francine. Look at me.” There was a brief pause. “There’s something I want to tell you too, and that’s ‘thank you.’”

“Thank you? For what?”

“You opened up that envelope, even though it was marked confidential, even though you knew it might make either Lee or me or both of us mad. You being the one to open it meant that you were able to guess who might have shot that tire out.”

“It’s only circumstantial —”

“I know that.” She waved at the report, which still lay open on his desk. “But that and the ballistics labs are also all we’ve got and *I’m grateful for it*. Any answer, no matter how small, is better than nothing, and you risked our friendship to give us this one.”

“Um, well,” began Francine. “It seemed like the right thing to do. But, ah, thank you for saying that.” She audibly took a deep breath. “Now, I need to actually go on and tell you I’m —”

“Wait,” interrupted Lee. “That’s it.”

“That’s what?” Amanda and Francine asked it together.

“We’ve been needing a code name for you, Amanda. A standard one, I mean, not just something for a specific op. Remember how everyone was tossing around possibilities before all this happened? I think I just heard it.” He paused. “Sunlight.”

“Sunlight?” asked Amanda.

“Yeah. Francine’s right. You bring that to this entire Agency, not just me. Sunlight and a breath of fresh air.”

“Oh, it’s perfect, Amanda. It’s quick, and it’s easy, and it suits you. It even works in combination. You know, ‘Scarecrow and Sunlight’? That’s not hard to remember, and scarecrows always work best when they’re in sunlight.”

“I don’t know,” she replied, but she didn’t appear averse to the idea. “What do you think, Mr. Melrose?”

Billy considered it for a moment. “I like it. It suits you, Amanda. What do you think of it, though? You’re the one who would have to live with it.”

Her smile was small, but it was genuine, and he was inwardly thrilled. Appar-

ently, their time away had been as healing as they'd hoped. "It's...simple and sweet, but not too much."

"Good. Then we'll record it in the files and make it official."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now," he continued. "Francine was telling you why she's up here. Why we're up here, actually. It's about the...well, the West/King case, for lack of anything better to call it."

"What about it?" asked Lee warily. "Last I heard, we're still ruling out Russians and Bulgarians. That's not yet enough to start digging."

"Well," hedged Francine, "that's why I'm using processes of elimination."

"You?" he asked. "Since when have you been on this?"

"That's why we came up here," said Billy. "We got approval to make this a full Agency op last Friday, but I can't assign either one of you to the case since you're both related to the murdered civilians. Getting married will do that to you. So I've assigned it to Francine, since she was also on the Colonial Cookery case. Zeta's assisting."

"Whoa, hold on just a minute," began Lee.

"It's all right," said Amanda, glancing briefly over at him. "And Phillip was a minor, so I was also his legal guardian in addition to being a relative. Will we at least be able to get status updates?"

"I'm supposed to refer you to Francine for that," said Billy, hoping his tone would communicate the words he couldn't say. "But you two are absolutely not to do any investigating on your own. It's a potential conflict of interest, and I don't want anyone slithering out of this on a technicality. We need to start by interviewing both of you."

Amanda answered for them again. "I see. Do you want to do it now, or later today?"

Francine took a breath. "We can do it now, and there's no reason not to do it together."

"Not and keep it by the book, you can't," Lee countered. He stood up, grabbing his suit coat. "Look, I need to go down to Crypto and maybe Munitions anyway. You can do Amanda first." Then he paused and leveled a steely gaze at both Billy and Francine. "When it's my turn, you just tell me when and where. If anyone other than us should have this case, it's you. We'll answer any question you have, give you any

information you need. All you've got to do is say the word. You got that?"

Francine's shoulders dropped, and Billy felt a rush of gratitude. Despite his harsh tone, it looked as though Lee understood; and based on her expression, Amanda did too. That understanding was going to make this a lot easier.

## 19. Joe: Redux

It had only been a week since Thanksgiving, but that had been long enough for Joe to second-guess letting Jamie stay with them for an extended period. Carrie had called ahead, but the sight that greeted him when they got home was still a startling one.

He was glad of the prior warning; otherwise, he'd have been hard put to keep his voice at a normal volume. "What happened to you?"

Jamie stared at his toes. "Nothin'."

"Nothing? You tore your shirt and scratched your face and — why are you cradling your wrist like that if it's nothing?"

"I don't want to talk about it!" He turned toward the stairs, only to see that Carrie had sidled around to block his way. "Aw, come on, Carrie, I need to change clothes before I head over to Mom's and Lee's for dinner."

"I think," she said mildly, "I'm going to call them and ask them to come over here instead. It's been a while since we all had dinner together."

"Aren't we supposed to do that in a couple weeks for Christmas?"

"There's no reason we can't do both."

"You're changing the subject," snapped Joe. "What happened to you?"

"I told you! Nothing!"

"Don't lie to me!"

Jamie didn't answer, but Carrie aimed a sharp, knowing look in Joe's direction. He forced himself to take several deep breaths and unclench his fists before continuing. "Okay. Did you fall? Is that how you got hurt?"

No response. His son simply stared into space with a stubborn expression.

"James," he began, hoping that the use of his given name would be a warning, "it doesn't make any sense for you to keep on claiming that 'nothing' happened to you. Not when you look like that. And we need to see to that wrist."

"It's no big deal."

"That was not," Joe ground out, "a request."

With a scowl, the child came over and presented it. There didn't seem to be much swelling, and nothing looked out of place. There were some bruises, but they seemed minor. When Joe pushed the fingers open from where they'd been fisted, though, Jamie yelped and yanked his hand back, his eyes tearing up.

“Hurts, does it? Can you use the hand?”

Jamie shook his head.

Carrie had quietly gotten out the first-aid kit.

“All right,” continued Joe, relenting in the face of Jamie’s obvious pain. “What about your face and under your shirt?” He brushed the visible scratches lightly, which didn’t seem to elicit much reaction, and they certainly looked as though they were superficial. “Did you fall?”

“Yeah. Kind of.”

“Kind of? How do you ‘kind of’ fall?” The words were harsh, but Joe kept his tone gentle. It was easier, somehow, now that the conversation had actually started.

But Jamie just shrugged and dropped his eyes.

“Did someone push you?” asked Joe. “Is that how you fell?”

At that, the boy’s eyes closed, and something that might have been relief flickered across his face. “Yeah.”

Carrie came up with a wet cloth and an elastic bandage, drawing Jamie down to sit at the kitchen table. “You’re going to have to open your hand back out so I can wrap this, love. But I’ll go as fast as I can.”

Nodding, Jamie did as she instructed, although he paled again, and a few tears spilled out onto his cheeks.

“You think it’s broken?” Joe asked his wife.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “It could just be sprained. By the time he got to my school, the doctor’s office had already closed for the night, and the school nurse had gone home. That’s why we came back here without treating it. You’re doing great, Jamie.” She had already finished cleaning the area and had begun to wind the bandage. “Just a bit longer.”

“I know,” he gasped.

“Who pushed you, son? Did they say why?”

Jamie’s eyes were screwed shut and his mouth was puckered in pain, but he was able to shake his head.

“All right,” Joe conceded. “I’ll call over to Amanda’s. Were their cars in front of their townhouse?”

“Amanda’s minivan was. I didn’t see Lee’s car.” Carrie finished winding the bandage and secured it with two safety pins. “But they are still unpacking, and I think

Lee's planning to make a habit of parking out at the far edge of the lot."

Lee had claimed he was doing it to keep the Corvette from being scratched, but Joe privately suspected that it had to do with visibility from the main road. With a sigh, he reached for the phone.

"Jamie," Carrie instructed, "you should go upstairs and clean up. But come right back down when you're done. We're going to finish talking about this."

"Do we have to?" the child whined.

"Yes," Joe heard her say as he began dialing.

• • •

"Oh, my gosh!" Amanda ran straight to Jamie, pulling him into a hug before she knelt down to examine him. "What happened?"

"That's what we're still trying to figure out," replied Joe as he brought in a tray from the kitchen. He'd extracted a beer from the fridge for himself, but had juice and aspirin for Jamie, along with tea for the ladies. "All I know is he got pushed." He gave his son a look. "Are you ready to add to that yet?"

Jamie flopped down into his usual chair, favoring his bandaged wrist. "No."

"Well," said Amanda, "you're going to have to tell us something. Take the aspirin, Sweetheart. It'll make you feel better. Although I guess if you're wrapping it up here instead of going to the doctor, it means it's not broken. It isn't, is it? You can't always tell when it's the wrist, you know. It's real easy to mistake a sprain for a break and vice versa. I mean Mo —" she cut herself off, taking a breath. "Mother did that once, and it wasn't until two months later when it was still hurting that she finally went to the doctor and it turned out she'd had a broken wrist the whole time. By then it had healed wrong, and they had to go in and do surgery. Have you called the d —"

"I wasn't able to reach them," interrupted Carrie. "I'll try again in the morning."

"Why don't you sit down?" Joe invited Amanda.

"Thank you." She did so and took a long drink of her tea. "I can take tomorrow off to take Jamie to the doctor."

Carrie shook her head. "If you go into the doctor's office and ask for a work-in, it could take all day. Why don't I take him to the school nurse in the morning, instead? If she thinks he needs to see the doctor, they'll take him in quicker once he gets there, since she'll have already made the determination. Plus, neither of us would

need to take as much time away from work. There's no reason I shouldn't —"

"Yes, there is," said Joe. "You can't sign permission to treat."

"It's all right," said Amanda into the awkward pause that followed. "I appreciate the offer, but I'll take care of it. Now, Jamie," she continued, turning to her son, "your dad says you got pushed. Who pushed you?"

He stared at his toes. "Didn't see."

"Was it an accident?"

"I doubt it," interjected Joe. "Look at his face. It happened outside, didn't it? And you landed on the sidewalk."

"Yeah," he mumbled, shoulders drooping. "We were outside at the bus corral."

Amanda picked the questioning back up. "Who were you with?"

"No one. I was by myself, running to the bus."

"Did any teachers see it?" she asked.

He shook his head.

Amanda sighed. "Jamie, are we going to have a repeat of what we went through when you got into those fights a couple weeks ago?"

His face came up at that, eyes wide. "I wasn't fighting! I was walking away, the way you and Dad told me to! Well, okay, I was running, but that wasn't because I was afraid of them. It was because I thought I was gonna miss the bus."

"Them, who?" asked Joe. He could hear his voice getting tight again.

Jamie shook his head. "Not important."

Joe took a deep breath to steady himself. "It's very important if someone was giving you a hard time. What were they hassling you about?"

He shrugged. "Same old, same old."

"About your mom?"

No answer.

Amanda bit her lip. "Jamie, did Bobby Boyd or Tad or Katie Carlisle call me a..." she hesitated for the briefest of moments. "A whore, again?"

"No!" The word burst out. "They all walk home. It was some of the eighth graders saying that..." he trailed off. "Just that it was a shame Grandma hadn't left you enough life insurance, so you're probably going to lose the house to foreclosure which is why I have to ride the bus now. And that your new husband wasn't much of a man if he isn't willing to help you out. Nor are you, Dad, since you're too busy with your —"

he stopped. “No. I’m not gonna say it, ’cause it’s another ugly word.”

Amanda’s face had become a little flushed. Joe couldn’t blame her, and he couldn’t miss the look on his own wife’s face, either. He took another deep breath. “Were they talking about Carrie’s skin color? Was that the ugly word?”

“Yeah.” He looked over at his stepmother. “I’m sorry.”

Carrie shook her head. “You weren’t the one who said it.”

“I guess not, but it’s still ugly. Really, though, they were mostly talking about Mom and Dad, not you or Lee.” His eyes darted around the room. “I did what you said! I walked away ’cause it wasn’t *worth* it! They’re just trying to prove they’re all grown up since they’re starting high school next year. I told them that picking on a seventh grader didn’t make ’em any more than bullies, and that’s when they all got around me in a circle and I knew I was gonna end up in big trouble if I stayed there. But I don’t think they expected me to shove through and take off running.”

Joe got to his feet. “That does it. I’m calling the school. I don’t care what time it is.”

“You’ll have to leave a message,” said Carrie. “They aren’t there.”

“Then I’ll leave a message, because he’s not going back after his doctor’s appointment. I want him transferred.”

“So do I,” said Amanda. “Joe, sweetheart, please. Listen to me.” She had climbed back to her feet to face him. “We’re close enough to the winter break that we can do it then. I’ll call the superintendent’s office tomorrow, once I’m in the office. We’ll transfer him to — what zone are we in, anyway?”

“Swanson,” murmured Carrie.

“Swanson!” cried Jamie. “What if I don’t want to go to Swanson?”

“It’s just for the rest of the school year,” said Amanda. “Remember, I told you that Lee and I are going to look for a new house as soon as the old one sells. We’ve actually...” her blush this time seemed different, somehow, from her earlier one. “He likes the area around Rockville, and it does have good schools and houses that work for us, in our price range.”

“Rockville! All the way in *Maryland*? No, Mom, we can’t move there!”

“Jamie,” said Carrie, her voice still soft. “There’s nothing wrong with Rockville.”

“But all my friends are in Arlington!”

“Are they really your friends?” questioned Joe. “Because friends would have

stood beside you to lift you up, instead of across from you to tear you down. It sounds to me like you've been getting bullied. That's not what friends do."

His son gave him a pleading look. "And I want to spend time with you and Carrie even after I move back in with them! I can't do that if I'm so far away."

At that, Carrie gave him a sharp, significant look, but Joe couldn't quite bring himself to meet either Jamie's eyes or hers, or Amanda's for that matter. The official decision about their potential assignment was supposed to come through by the end of the year, but he'd been quietly assured that they had been awarded the posting they'd requested. Still, he hadn't yet seen anything in writing, and neither had she, so they didn't necessarily need to bring it up just yet.

Fortunately, a knock on the door saved him from having to gloss over anything, or even worse, tell an outright lie.

## 20. Carrie: Undercurrents

Lee stopped short as the door closed, his coat still hanging from one arm. “What happened to you, Jamie?”

He sighed and shrugged. “I fell down.”

“Really? That’s your story?” Finishing with his coat, he looked pointedly at the wrapped wrist. “You forget to keep your thumb outside your fist when you threw those punches? I know I’ve told you about that.”

“Lee,” said Amanda. “He didn’t throw any punches. He fell on it after being pushed down. We’ve already talked it through.”

“You were pushed down?” he echoed. “Why?”

“I said,” repeated Amanda, “we’ve already talked it through. I’ll tell you about it later.”

As Carrie hung his coat in the closet, he shot Amanda a disbelieving look, but then relented. Then Lee looked back toward Carrie, and he must have seen something in her face, because he stopped again. “Whoa,” he said quietly. “What’s going on?”

She shook her head, flustered that he’d noticed. “It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing. Is it about Jamie’s — whatever it was?”

Now Carrie understood why Amanda sometimes reacted to his facial expressions the way she did. When they were pointed at you, they had a good bit of intensity.

Carrie took a breath. “Some,” she admitted. “Although not all. We can talk about it later if you want.”

His eyes narrowed. “All right. We will.” Then he turned and shook Joe’s hand before crossing over and greeting Amanda with a kiss. “Hi, beautiful.”

“Hey, big fella.” Their eyes locked and the love was so strong Carrie could feel it from halfway across the room. Even Joe smiled a bit.

Lee turned back around. “What is that fantastic smell?”

“Oh, my goodness!” Carrie cried as she remembered what she’d started when Jamie had gone upstairs. “It’s going to burn!”

Turning, she raced into the kitchen toward the oven. Fortunately, the casserole had only been in there for about five minutes too long; its color had darkened, but she was able to slide a fork in easily and nothing was actually burnt. She’d already chopped the bacon and shredded the cheese, so she should have been able to start

work on the topping immediately, but her hands were shaking so badly that she knocked the bowl of cheese over onto the counter. “Oh, damn it!”

Hands slid around her waist. “Calm down and take your time. It’s all right.”

“It’s not!” She pulled free from Joe and began sweeping her hand across the counter, pushing the spilled cheese shreds into a single pile. “I’m lucky I got to it in time, but we’re still at least fifteen or twenty minutes from eating and the emotions out there are already strong and having a bad dinner would only make that worse. I don’t even know if any of them are going to like this, anyway, and —”

“Carrie.” Taking her hands, Joe turned her around. “Marie-Caroline. They’ve already moved on to talking about Christmas decorations, chérie. And even if they don’t like it, no one’s going to shout or curse at you. Not here. I won’t allow it.” His lips brushed her forehead. “Neither will Amanda.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, holding it a moment before she exhaled. “All right. But I do want to finish this as quickly as I can.”

“What can I help you with? Or is there something else you need?”

“No. Well, yes. See to everyone in the living room and let them know how much longer it’s going to be?”

“I can do that.” He gave her another kiss. “Dinner’s going to be fine. You’ll see.”

• • •

Forty-five minutes later, Carrie had bitten the inside of her lips so much that they’d begun to bleed. Dinner wasn’t fine. Or, at least, everything felt more than slightly odd. The conversation, while genial, was superficial and full of awkward silences, as if it were being forced. Everyone cleaned their plates, but she’d noticed Amanda hesitating a few times, and she’d been the only one who’d also gone back and finished her salad. Was there some sort of an aftertaste or something?

Lee met her eyes from across the table, and she flicked hers to Amanda briefly, hoping it would throw him off her own thoughts. He answered with half a smile before breaking eye contact, dropping his eyes to the empty plate. “That was great, Carrie. Thank you for making enough for all of us.”

“Of course,” she answered, frustrated at still feeling like she was in the dark. They’d all kept their silence about the exact nature of Lee’s and Amanda’s jobs, after all, until Joe had been forced to explain after Lee had called, speaking in French,

across the Thanksgiving break. At least now she knew that Joe knew Lee could speak it, but annoyance still crept across her shoulders. Why didn't anyone in this family trust her? She knew about secrets. They had a way of coming out at the worst possible time.

Which was why she hated knowing that she and Joe were still keeping one.

• • •

After dinner, Lee and Jamie helped her clean up before they settled into the living room. Joe had gotten a fire going, and when she sat on the couch next to him, he wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close and dropping a kiss at her hairline. "I told you," he whispered. "Everything was fine."

Carrie felt herself begin to relax, especially after she glanced over and saw Lee and Amanda sitting close together on the love seat. Whatever the tense undercurrents were, they weren't occurring between them, or between her and Joe.

They were still definitely there, though, and Jamie seemed to feel them, too. He appeared to be enjoying the fireplace and the ambiance at first, but it wasn't long before he began to fidget. Finally, he got out the deck of cards, dropping back onto the floor before laying out a game of solitaire. The first two games went fine, but the cards started refusing to line up during the third hand. By the time he finished the fourth, he was actively grimacing, his face pale and his mouth a thin line.

"Hey," said Joe from beside Carrie. "Your hand hurting again?"

"No."

"The cards, huh? Why don't you pick them up and we can do Crazy Eights instead."

"Whatever." But he made no move to pick up the cards.

The uncharacteristic response got Carrie's attention, and her focus sharpened. "Do you want to talk about what's going on, love?"

"No," he grumbled. "Since you guys already made up your mind without asking me."

Amanda leaned forward. "About transferring you to Swanson?"

"Yeah. And selling the house, and Rockville, and changing everything around. I'll bet you're going to tell me we're doing Christmas different, too."

"Of course we are," said Amanda slowly. "We've already agreed it'll be over here

with Joe and Carrie. I know they've told you that. But, ah..." she glanced over at her son's stepmother. "I had meant to talk to you about the menu anyway. We should plan it."

"Menu?" asked Jamie. "What menu? We always have the same thing. Roast goose and cranberry sauce and green bean casserole with corn pudding and then homemade pies. None of that's all that hard. Why can't we have that?"

"We can," said Carrie. "I would just need the recipes."

Amanda shook her head. "It —" her voice caught, but it didn't quite break. "Mother always made the roast goose, and this year, that's just...that's just a little too much. We might make it next year, but for this Christmas I think it'd be better to try something different."

"A little different?" Jamie sprang to his feet. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. *Everything's* different now! I know, Phillip and Grandma are dead, and we're living in these townhouses, but you — you're not keeping up with anything we used to do! It's almost like you're trying to *forget* them or something!"

Amanda fell back against the cushion, a stricken look on her face.

"Why can't we do something the way we always have before!" continued Jamie, his voice rising. "Can't we just be normal for one night and do one thing like decorating the tree all together? Or are you going to tell me you're doing that differently, too? And when do I get a vote in any of this?"

"Jamie," said Joe sharply. "Don't raise your voice at your mother."

"Why not? Nobody hears me any other way!"

Lee spoke up. "Hey, sport. That's not true and you know it. Simmer down."

"Simmer down!" Now Jamie spun toward Lee. "You're the one who signed the lease and moved into that other townhouse."

"Now, see here," Joe broke in. "You know full well we have to make some changes, if nothing else because we're not at the house in Arlington this year —"

"We could be! Mom hasn't sold it yet."

"But they've already moved out," reasoned Joe, "and they moved your things, too. Besides, everything changes over time."

"Over *time!*" he yelled. "Not all at once. And not because of this!" He flung his hands out, the gesture encompassing all four of them. "I know, I know, I've been staying here, but I have a room over there and I'm supposed to be moving back after the

holidays are over except that now I'm going to have to go to a different school where I don't even know *anyone* and then I find out you're changing the menu and maybe other things without even asking me as if we aren't a family anymore and...and..." he was spluttering now, tears running down his face. "It's not that I don't like you, Carrie and Lee, but I just wanted *something* to be the way it always has been!"

Silence greeted the outburst.

Carrie allowed herself a steadying breath before she spoke. "There's still a lot that's the way it always has been, Jamie. Your parents still love you. We're still having Christmas together as a family, even if it's in a different place. And I..." she trailed off, turning toward Amanda. "I'm willing to try doing the goose. I've done them before, so I know the general idea. I'd just need a list of the spices and trimmings you like. And I could do one of the side dishes, too. Maybe the cranberry sauce. That could help."

The other woman's face was pale, but she nodded. "It's not written out. I'll see what I can remember and write that down for you."

"It's not *her* recipe!" Jamie interrupted. "It was Grandma's! She and Aunt Lillian always made the goose, and they argued about it the whole time, but it was always perfect." He wiped his face angrily with his good hand. "That's what I want. Grandma's recipe, and if you were really a part of this family, you'd have already known that's who always did it!"

The words hit her like a gut punch, and Carrie understood why Amanda had fallen backward earlier. She found herself fighting the same thing, even as Jamie dashed up the stairs.

Joe turned toward his wife. "I'm sorry. I —" but he was clearly distracted by Amanda running up the stairs after Jamie.

"It's all right," Carrie choked out as she sought emotional equilibrium. She couldn't get her voice above a whisper. "This isn't about the goose. It's not even about me."

"That doesn't excuse his behavior. I'll talk to him when they come back down." He glanced over at Lee. "We all will."

Carrie shook her head. "No. No, this needs to come from you and Amanda." She took a shaky breath. "Go upstairs. Talk to him there. We'll wait down here."

"But —"

"She's right," said Lee, his gentle tone contrasting with the fierce emotions in

his expression. "This needs to come from you and Amanda, not the four of us. We'll mind the fire and...oh, I don't know. But I'm sure there's something." He paused, his shaking hands briefly clenching into a fist and then unclenching. "Go on, Joe."

He stood up slowly and made his way across to the stairs, turning to give them one last unhappy look before following in his ex-wife's footsteps.

## 21. Lee: Secrets

Lee turned away from the stairs, scrubbing his hands through his hair. “Damn it.”

“I know.” Despite her sympathetic words, Carrie’s expression was unreadable as she settled onto the couch she’d shared with Joe. Lee considered the love seat, but couldn’t stay still, instead pacing back and forth across the living room floor.

“Please stop,” said Carrie after several minutes. “You’re making me dizzy.”

“I just — how long do you think it’s going to take, up there?”

“As long as it takes,” she answered.

He made a frustrated gesture. “I thought we were through dealing with this sort of thing. But now he’s been in another fi — okay, not a fight, if I understand correctly. What did happen, though?”

“It wasn’t a fight,” she replied. “At least, not on his part.” She calmly explained what had happened. “Jamie’s also upset because they’re transferring him now, instead of waiting until the end of the school year.”

*“What?”*

“We’re in Swanson’s district, so that’s where he’s going after the holiday break.”

“When did this happen and why wasn’t I a part of the conversation?”

“Because you’re not his parent.” There was a slight emphasis on the last three words. “I wasn’t part of the conversation, either. Joe and Amanda made the decision tonight, before you got over here. The students who taunted him today weren’t the same students as last time.”

The skin under Lee’s collar heated up. “And they’re just transferring him out instead of demanding the school actually do something?”

“Joe sounded like he wants them held accountable. I haven’t yet had a chance to ask.” She sighed, and the expressionless mask that had been on her face briefly segued into something that echoed his own discontent. “It’s the right decision, Lee. Jamie’s relationships with his peers have been too damaged to keep him at Arlington Heights. He would just face one confrontation after the other for the rest of the school year. Better to transfer him out between the semesters instead of doing it in the middle of the next one, after it gets worse. It’s less disruptive that way.”

Lee scrubbed his hands through his hair again. “I guess that’s what right for him, then. I just wish I hadn’t been kept out.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I didn’t like being left out, either. Especially since I was in the room when it happened.”

He sighed, giving in and sinking down onto the love seat. “I know I’m still a bit new at this, but this...this has got to be the worst part of step-parenting. To step back when I’m supposed to, I mean. It’s not always as easy as it sounds.”

“No.” She twisted her hands together in a way that reminded him of Amanda. “It’s not. Even when you know it’s coming. All of the experts on step-parenting say that the best thing to do is to love them as if they’re your own. Then they say that you have to always remember they aren’t, and you have to be especially careful not to...”

“...forget they aren’t,” he finished with her. “No matter how much you might disagree with what their parents do. Er, um, what they were doing. Weren’t doing. Did in the past before they came back —” This wasn’t coming out right. “I’ll stop digging this hole before it’s any deeper, especially since I’m in your house.”

She chuckled, although the laughter didn’t reach her eyes. “You haven’t said anything I didn’t say to Joe myself when we were dating.”

Somehow, that acknowledgment made things a little more bearable. However, it didn’t actually ease their shared predicament or give him any ideas how to address the awkward silence that fell between them. Just what were they supposed to do while Joe and Amanda dealt with whatever was going on with their son?

Carrie laughed a little, though it didn’t sound entirely comfortable. “You’re wondering if there’s anything we can do to help them.”

He hadn’t been, but he admitted it was a worthy thought.

“That’s another one of the hard parts. There really isn’t, except to give them the time and space with Jamie that they need.”

Lee sighed, a long release of breath, and forced his shoulders to drop. “Yeah, and waiting’s not fun, no matter what the reason is.”

“I suppose you do encounter that a lot, don’t you?” An edge crept into her voice. “Waiting. Don’t you have to do a lot of that during a — what do you call them? I believe you say stakeouts?”

His back muscles, which had begun to relax, tensed up again. “Yeah, I do a lot of waiting between takes, but it’s not —”

“Lee,” she interrupted. “Don’t. Joe told me what you and Amanda really do. Please don’t be upset. He couldn’t come up with a good explanation when you called to

warn him that Dotty and Phillip had been..." she trailed off with a grimace, "...murdered. And he hadn't liked keeping it from me in the first place."

He couldn't quite meet her eyes. "Did he tell you that it has to be kept secure?"

"He didn't have to," she replied. "I'm not stupid. I understand why the two of you need a cover identity."

"IFF really does have a film department," he pointed out. "We put out a few every year. Educational stuff, documentaries, things like that."

"I know," she confirmed. "I'd looked up their library, and I remember being surprised that it was so slender given the amount of work you and Amanda seemed to be doing." She paused. "But the two of you aren't involved in the films part, are you?"

He sighed. "No. Other than the fact that I recruited one of the camera operators, and even that happened by accident."

Her expression was cool. "You told Joe not to tell me. Why?"

He still couldn't quite manage to meet her eyes. "At the time, the two of you weren't yet married. And it didn't seem like there was any need for you to know. I'm going to have to report this conversation, by the way. Alert my section leader that you're aware."

"Will there be any repercussions?"

"I don't think so. But they may run a background check on you, just to be sure. It won't be as extensive as the ones Amanda and I had to pass, but is there anything I should warn them about?"

"No. I'm just..." Her voice rose a little. "Why didn't you *trust* me?"

"It's not that simple. I've trusted you for a while, and especially after the way we've talked since...well, since that night at the hospital. Before then, neither Amanda nor I knew that much about you. Joe only found out because he was involved in a case —"

"He told me about that," she confirmed. "But we are married now, and we have Jamie in common. Don't you think we both should be aware of potential dangers around your jobs? At least as far as they affect Jamie?"

"You and Joe and Jamie are perfectly safe!" He barely remembered to keep his voice down. "Amanda and I go to a lot of effort to keep things that way. Look, there are other agents with families, and there's a whole set of protocols and regulations around the topic. Plus there are classes that they can take, and..." a new thought hit him. "Is

that what you're asking me about? Do you and Joe think you need to take them?"

"It probably would be a good idea, but no, that's not what I'm asking. I didn't even know those were an option before."

"Then what's bothering you?"

"Try to see this from my perspective. First, I find out that you and Amanda got married even before Joe and I did. Then I find out the two of you are spies —"

"Intelligence operatives."

"Call it whatever you want. What other secrets are you keeping?"

He was honestly confused. "What? Most of the secure information is about our operations, our assets, that sort of thing."

"That's not what I meant," she snapped. "I mean, what else haven't you and Amanda told Joe or me, that we really ought to know?"

"That's all. Those are — those *were* — the only secrets."

"How do I know you're telling the truth about that?" she pressed. "The reason I can't *stand* secrets is because they have a way of blowing up in your face at the worst possible time! How do I know there isn't something else lurking out there?"

Lee took a long, steadying breath, and made himself meet her eyes. She was angry, yes, but there was no little amount of hurt beneath that. *And fear*, he realized. She was speaking from experience, from the point of view of someone who'd been deeply betrayed by keeping secrets. A part of him wondered what had happened, but right now, that wasn't the point.

"Carrie," he began. "I promise you. *There are no more secrets*. I don't know what I can offer to prove that, except to ask you for time and to trust your instincts. From what I've seen, yours are almost as good as Amanda's, and hers make her an amazing agent. We kept this from the Dotty and the boys so we they wouldn't be scared, but we likely were going to tell them about the marriage soon anyway." He paused for a breath. "We should have brought you into the loop sooner, and I'm sorry we didn't. You know now, and I'll talk to Amanda, make sure we don't leave you standing in the dark again."

"Except that just a few minutes ago, you were sticking to your story about being a director. How am I supposed to believe you now?"

"We need to keep up the film cover," he replied. "At least, in front of Jamie. And to his school, and his friends, and their parents. Everyone except you and Joe. People

who need to know what it is we really do.”

She considered that for a long time before nodding. “All right. You were honest about that, at least. And you didn’t try some outlandish method of convincing me. You just played it straight by explaining it would take time and patience.”

Lee nodded.

“I’ll try to give you that space. I want to believe you, you know.”

“You can,” he assured her.

She gave him an inscrutable look, but the silence they lapsed into was somewhat more comfortable than it had been before. After several minutes, Carrie stood up.

“Is something wrong?” Lee asked.

“No. I just forgot a few things still needing doing in the kitchen. It’ll give me something to do while we wait.”

“Can I help?” He was trying to tread as carefully as he could.

They worked with a minimum of speech as she cleaned out the refrigerator into the trash can and then gave the kitchen a thorough once-over, including sweeping and dry mopping the floor. But when she closed the trash bag and started to carry it outside, he took it out of her hands. “It’s getting cold out, and the compactor’s pretty far away. Why don’t you pour yourself a glass of wine?”

It seemed as though she might demur, but at the last moment she bobbed her head and let go. Lee took care of the chore quickly, since it really was cold out and he wasn’t anxious to hold onto the trash bag any longer than he had to. By the time he came back in, he was wondering if he could ask her for a glass of whatever she’d gotten for herself. Maybe he’d even make something for all of them, since Joe and Amanda might very well need a drink when they got back down.

“Hey, Carrie,” he called into the living room. “You still have that wine out? If you’d like, I can use it to make mulled wine for all of us.”

She appeared in the doorway. “I do, but it’s...” she trailed off. “We’re in my kitchen. I’d like it if you taught me how.”

“Sure.” He began listing ingredients, which she pulled out and lined up on the counter. As she stepped in front of him to remove a pot from a lower cabinet, he looked over what she’d laid out, making sure everything was there. That was when he saw the pamphlet lying on the back of the counter.

“What’s this?” he asked, pulling it out.

She froze. “What’s what?”

“This pamphlet. It’s — from the International Rescue Committee?” He met her eyes. “Tips for Your Deployment?”

Carrie nearly snatched it from his hand. “It doesn’t concern you.”

“It might!” he countered. “You mind explaining what this is all about?”

She drew herself up. “Yes,” she said. “I mind. Joe and I wanted to talk to the two of you together —”

“Talk to us? Does this mean what I think it means?”

“Parlez moins fort!” she snapped. “Le garçon pourrait nous entendre.”

He made the language switch. “What if he does overhear? He’ll find out sooner or later, won’t he?”

She closed her eyes, inhaling and exhaling before re-opening them. “All right. Yes. We’ve been offered posts in Côte d’Ivoire. We’d been hoping for Algeria, but the EAO couldn’t place us together. The IRC could, and they’ve agreed to let us come back and visit at least two or three times a year.”

He slammed the pamphlet down on the counter, making her jump. “Are you *insane?*”

“It’s something we both want.”

“You’re going to just *abandon* your family after everything that’s happened? I don’t believe this!” He began pacing again, stalking from one side of the small kitchen to the other. “All this talk about secrets and then I find out *you’re* keeping them!”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That’s why we wanted to talk to you together.”

“Turn the offers down. There’s got to be something you can do here in the States.”

She shook her head. “We’ve already accepted them. It was our decision to make.”

“You’ve already — how could you be so *selfish?*” he asked. “What are you going to do if Jamie needs his father?”

“Joe *needs* to do this!” she cried. “So do I. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be...us. I — I told you, when he and I first started dating, that I told Joe he shouldn’t have gone to Estoccia when the boys were toddlers. But Jamie’s in seventh grade now. He’ll understand, and if it’s a true emergency we’ll be able to get back.”

“And what about any children you and Joe have?”

“We aren’t planning to have any. Not that that’s any of your business.”

“Maybe not,” he allowed, “but it *is* my business that you’re going to hurt Jamie again. You really think it’s going to be different just because, this time, he’ll understand you’re leaving him again?”

“That’s not fair!” she exclaimed. “You and Amanda have left him plenty of times when you’re off on one of your cases. And until tonight, you didn’t even tell me the truth about where you go or what you were doing! What’s going to happen when one of you gets kidnapped or, God help us, hurt or even killed, and *he won’t even be allowed to know why?*”

The words hit him like a gut punch, and Lee turned away toward the door. Carrie busied herself putting away the cooking ingredients. Her movements were jerky and uncoordinated, and she ended up knocking other things askew as she did so.

“Carrie,” he finally said. “Just stop, will you?” It was only after the words came out that he realized he’d spoken them in English.

She complied, although she wouldn’t turn back to face him.

“When,” he finally managed, switching back to French, “are you planning on breaking the news?”

“Soon. He’s not ready to hear it yet.”

“He might not ever be. Did you ever think of that?”

“Yes. We’ll have to tell him eventually anyway.”

“Don’t wait that long,” he told her, his voice calmer now. “Tell him as soon as this blows over, once he’s found his footing in the new school. Amanda and I...well, you know we kept the marriage secret for eight months. When it finally did come out, the way it came out, the way Jamie in particular had to learn about it...” a lump rose in his throat. “I can’t think of a worse way for it to have come up. Not to mention that we never got to tell Phillip or Dotty.”

She slowly turned around. “Lee,” she said quietly, “we’re going to get through this. All of this, and all of us. It’s going to take time, and strength, and probably a few more heartaches, but —”

Her words were interrupted by Joe’s and Amanda’s arrival in the kitchen, both of them pale-faced and almost dragging their feet.

“Is he all right?” he asked, switching back to English for Amanda’s benefit.

“For now,” his wife replied. She didn’t look entirely steady.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. We should go, though. Jamie’s going to stay over.”

“Okay.” He followed her back into the living room so they could get their coats. Carrie and Joe followed them.

“Lee,” said Joe. “Thank you for coming over. And for giving us space with Jamie.”

He finished helping Amanda into her coat before turning and squarely meeting the other man’s eyes. “Il faut qu'on parle. Le plus vite possible.” *We need to talk. As soon as possible.*

Carrie closed her eyes, turning away again.

“Ce n’est pas encore fini,” he told her as they opened the door. *This isn’t over yet.* And it wasn’t. Not by a long shot.

## 22. Amanda: Developments

Amanda slipped her gloved hand into Lee's as they made their way along the sidewalk toward their townhouse. "What were you talking about just now, in French?"

As he explained, her surprise became disbelief and then horror. She finally held up a hand. "Stop. I've heard everything I need to. We're going back over there and finishing the conversation right now."

"Ah, Amanda," he began. "It's getting late, and tensions are still kind of high, and you've already had to deal with Jamie tonight —"

"Which is exactly why I want to go back over there now!" she countered, indignant. "After all those accusations about us keeping secrets and then we find out they've been keeping a huge one themselves! Didn't they *learn* after watching how our secrets affected Jamie? And you're right. Taking those positions is selfish! Then there's Carrie, talking out of both sides of her mouth, saying that Joe shouldn't have left back in '77 because the boys were too young but it's now all right to leave because Jamie's in middle school. She's a teacher. She studied child development. She should know he's still not grown up! He's going to think they're abandoning him again, and *he'll be absolutely right!*" She was breathing heavily, and tears pricked at her eyes. "How dare they even *contemplate* hurting Jamie like that!"

They were stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, and now he reached out for both her hands. "You're right. Jamie's not yet grown up. They're probably still trying to calm him down. So how do you think he'd take it if we went back over there and started the argument again?"

She didn't know whether to be proud of Lee for considering Jamie's emotions, or angry at him for being the voice of reason. "We need to resolve this sooner instead of later."

"Tomorrow night's soon enough. Let's let everyone have time to get some distance."

Amanda blinked. "Who are you and what have you done with Lee Stetson?"

His brow furrowed. "What?"

"You're not usually so..." she trailed off, fumbling for a description. "*Aware* of the emotional side of things."

He shrugged. "Been reading those step-parenting books again. A lot still seems

like hokum to me, but so far, their advice has been consistently good. I'm willing to try more of it."

She relented, reaching over to touch his face. "I love you."

Using her hands to pull her closer, he leaned in for a quick kiss. "I love you, too. Can we go inside where it's warm now?"

With a start, she realized they were standing right in front of their own front door. Suddenly feeling a bit impish, Amanda pulled Lee back toward her. "Speaking of all these emotions flying around..."

"Yeah?"

"What say we go in there and see about working some of them out of our systems. And getting warm at the same time."

His eyebrows went up over sparkling eyes. "Killing two birds with one stone?" Then horror flashed across his features. "Oh, Amanda, I'm sorry. I didn't think about what I was saying —"

"It's all right," she managed around the ringing in her ears. "I knew what you meant."

"Yeah." He brushed fingers along one cheek. "Maybe I should try again. Call it a...a double play? Throwing two strikes with one pitch, or freeing two runners with the same hit? I imagine I can come up with others."

At that, she couldn't help giggling a little, and he looked relieved, though his eyes were still anxious.

"Or we could just rephrase it into something else entirely," he suggested.

"Maybe," she answered. He was trying so hard that her sorrow had already begun segueing into amusement. "I might have a few ideas."

"You do? Care to enlighten me?" His voice lowered. "You know your...skill and technique...have always left me amazed and wanting more."

"Skill and technique? That's the best line you've got, Scarecrow?"

An almost-innocent look appeared. "I'm talking about your problem-solving abilities."

"I see." She was smiling by now.

"What did *you* think I was talking about?"

"You'll have to come in if you want to find out."

• • •

Francine and Jonathan came over for supper two days later. Amanda had wanted to make a nice meal, but Lee had shaken his head. “Don’t put yourself out. We’ve both been at work all day. If one or both of us ends up too upset, having to face a big clean-up job in the kitchen will only make it worse.”

Amanda couldn’t imagine how dinner with Francine and Jonathan could upset either one of them, but she’d acquiesced and asked Carrie for the recipe for that casserole she’d made the other night. She’d worried that it might not suit the two of them, with their cosmopolitan palates. To her surprise, they’d both cleaned their plates, asked for more, and even volunteered to help with cleanup duty.

Lee shooed them into the living room, going to the cabinet to pull out glasses for white wine. “Why don’t you get out that Frank Célèbre, the one that they gave us for a housewarming present. It’d be just right after that casserole.”

“And I know they’d appreciate the gesture,” she agreed as she found a corkscrew. The bottle uncorked with minimal fuss. “Does it need to breathe?”

“It’ll have enough time being carried in there.” He retrieved a tray from its place and began putting filled glasses on it, finishing by placing the bottle in the middle and then balancing the whole thing as they made their way to the living room. For a few minutes, there was polite conversation as they distributed glasses and enjoyed the wine, but soon enough, the talk turned to the real reason they were there.

“Well,” began Francine, “we’ve confirmed the Colonial Cookery case wasn’t a Stasi op.”

Beside Amanda, Lee frowned. “I thought we’d confirmed that at the time.”

“We’d figured it *likely* wasn’t, since it wasn’t their style, but we hadn’t ever had a need to be completely certain. I actually hadn’t known that until I started digging back into it for this case. I hadn’t known it wasn’t confirmed, I mean.” She was speaking rapidly, one leg beginning to bounce. “Since the, ah, the compromised agent was from our division, I asked Thompson from Research to do the confirmation. He has a source inside the East German consulate and was able to contact them today. They hadn’t ever heard about Colonial Cookery. But those Kurz-33s were definitely the kind East Germany uses. Thompson suggested maybe it was some sort of a rogue faction.”

“Which would make sense,” remarked Lee, “given that they all chose to kill themselves rather than face interrogation.”

Jonathan spoke up. “Why is that significant?”

“Most Iron Curtain operatives assigned to the United States develop some ambivalence,” explained Amanda. “When they get here and see that life in this country isn’t what they’d been led to believe it’s like, they start asking questions. If they are captured, they’ll often change sides to avoid being sent back. These operatives didn’t, which suggests that they either hadn’t been here very long or were very emotionally dedicated to their cause.”

Lee’s eyes had become distant, but his voice was crisp. “Even when the chips are down, it’s hard to actually push yourself into going through with suicide. If it weren’t, there’d be no need to teach us how to resist interrogation.”

The other man paled. “I hadn’t ever thought about it that way. Don’t you have suicide pills anyway?”

“Yes,” said Francine. “Except I can probably count on one hand the number of times anyone from the Agency has actually used one since I’ve been there.” Then she blinked. “Wait a minute. Lee, I think you’re on to something. What if they committed suicide because they hadn’t been trained in interrogation resistance?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if they knew they probably would break while being questioned, and were afraid of what would happen if they later got sent back?”

Now Amanda was the one who frowned. “But we rarely send enemy operatives back if they break or switch sides. We just —” then it hit her. “Oh. *Oh.*”

“What?” asked Jonathan as he looked between the three of them.

Francine was the one who explained this time. “They didn’t know the United States’ usual practices. That would add one more check mark to the ‘rogue faction’ column.”

“Okay,” he said, “but how is this useful information?”

“Because of what they were doing,” said Lee. “They were trying to make it look like we couldn’t protect our agents even when they were inside our own country.”

Francine cocked her head. “It was a psy-op? Creation of propaganda? I didn’t ever get that impression.”

Amanda, who’d been watching Lee, had caught on immediately. “Of course. I’m surprised I didn’t see it at the time. They wanted to use the media in order to show how easily it could be manipulated. That’s why they chose, of all things, a cooking show that focused on ‘decadent’ desserts with a patriotic theme. If even our harmless

cooking shows can be twisted around, what else would people find suspect?”

He reached over to take her hand. “It was your first case, Amanda. You didn’t yet have enough background to analyze all aspects of it.”

She squeezed his fingers gently as a thank-you, and he winked back at her.

Francine was still frowning slightly, but she had begun to nod. “That makes sense. That makes a lot of sense, actually. I’m surprised *I* didn’t see it at the time.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” said Amanda. “You had good reason to be distracted.”

“You know,” replied Francine after a mollified nod, “if we start from this media angle, we could narrow it down. What kind of television show takeover could make our country look bad, and why that? Why not do something more direct? And why would they want to attack again now, after four years?”

“Are you sure it was me they targeted?” asked Amanda. She kept her voice even, but her stomach began to churn. “What if it was Lee?” She glanced over. “We do switch cars sometimes, sweetheart.”

His lips twitched as he thought. “You’re right. I’m sure I’ve been seen driving the Jeep.” But then he shook his head. “No. No, if they were after me but they’d been watching you, they’d have known I picked you up in the Corvette that morning. Which means,” he said, voice rising, “they weren’t targeting either one of us. It had to have been your family they were after!”

“But why?” she asked. “What would that have accomplished that wouldn’t be better served by coming after us?”

“Psychological impact,” said Francine. “We’re back to that. They know who broke that case open, and what happened as a result.”

“What did happen?” asked Jonathan.

“That’s when I started working part-time for the Agency,” said Amanda. “They brought me on because they liked how I’d handled myself during the case. You know, the one where...” then she trailed off. This might be a story Francine had never told him.

“It’s all right,” said Francine softly. “Just keep in mind he’s not completely cleared.”

Amanda took a preparatory breath. “All right. Lee had been captured, and I’d figured out where, but I didn’t know who to call since his was the only phone number I

had at the Agency. So I went out to where they filmed Mrs. Welch's show and sneaked in, and then when I hid in a dumbwaiter because I didn't realize what it was and it moved up, I saw them, um, trying to get some important information from Francine. After that I got back down to where Lee was when I saw them bring him out of the house toward a helicopter. I didn't know what else to do and I just *knew* he'd end up dead if that thing took off, so I sort of made a few things up to keep that from happening."

"Did you ever," remarked Lee. "I had nightmares about it for a month."

"We didn't crash, though! Francine, you were there when I told Mr. Melrose how everything happened."

The other woman chuckled. "Yeah, I was, and the look on Lee's face when you talked about flying the whirlybird was *priceless*. He hadn't mentioned it in his official report."

Lee shot her a look. "That detail wasn't relevant, any more than the fact that y—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Francine before he could finish.

"Except that the details might have been relevant," Jonathan pointed out. "To them, I mean. The East Germans."

"That's true," said Francine. "I suppose this means we'll need to do in-depth interviews with the two of you, then. Again, damn it."

"What?" asked Lee. "We do multiple witness interviews all the time."

"No!" she cried. "You've already had to relive this once, when I did the first round of interviews, and that was once too many. I won't make you do it again!"

"Francine," said Amanda gently, "If it will help the case, interview us again. Let us worry about our own emotional reactions." She met the other woman's eyes levelly. "I want you to interview us as however many times it takes."

Lee nodded his agreement, but Francine was still shaking her head. "There's other evidence to be gathered, other avenues we can explore. I can check with my contacts over at Tass and Pravda to see if anything interesting has come down in the last couple of months, and Lee, don't you have a contact at that government broadcaster? The one that's ours, I mean, when we've been in Europe on a case. Not Radio Free Europe or Radio Liberty, but the other one."

"The Voice of America," he confirmed as he took out his pad, wrote a name and

number on it, and passed the paper over. “Try him. He’s one of their news directors. I did him a couple favors a while back, so use my name if you need to.”

Francine tucked the slip of paper away. “Thanks. It’s still a pretty wide net, though. We need to narrow the topics down.”

“Which is exactly why you’re going to interview Amanda and me again, first, before you do anything else. You heard her. We’re available for re-interview as much as you need. Just say when.”

“Damn it, Lee —”

“Don’t!” he snapped, and Amanda nodded along with his words. “Don’t go easy on us just because we’re agents, or victims, or whatever it is that you’re thinking. *We don’t want you to*. What we want is for you and Zeta to solve this case!” As he finished, the phone rang, and he stood but waved Amanda back down onto the couch. “I’ll take care of that. Amanda, you —”

“Of course,” she replied. She turned to face Francine. “I know I was pretty traumatized when we left for Thanksgiving, but don’t you remember how *angry* I was when we got back? I was mad at whoever did this, not at you and not at the Agency. I want the perpetrators held responsible. I want them brought in and tried and imprisoned for life! If it means I have to re-live this case a dozen times, then that’s the price I’ll pay. My family is worth it!” Despite her resolve to stay strong, her voice broke on that last word, and she had to force her hands to stop shaking. But she did, because she’d meant every word.

Francine took a deep breath. “All right. All right, we’ll —” she was interrupted when Lee came back into the living room, his face pale.

“What is it?” asked Amanda, standing up to go to him.

He took her hand, but his look encompassed all of them, even Jonathan. “We need to get to the Agency. Right now.”

Jonathan frowned. “At nine o’clock in the evening?”

“At nine o’clock in the evening,” repeated Lee. “There’s been a development.”

## 23. Francine: Fouled

Francine pulled the photo off the printer and grimaced even as Lee, who was peeking over her shoulder, made his own face.

“Wow,” he observed. “That’s ugly even for Manny.”

She whisked the photo around and pinned it onto the case board. There were still some operations and overnight staff in the bull pen, so they’d adjourned up here, to the Q-Bureau. “So you do recognize him, then.”

He sighed, the momentary gallows humor dropping from his face as he dropped into his desk chair. “Yeah. That’s Detective Manny Trudeau with Metro Police. Didn’t they send the ID over with him?”

“They did, about an hour ago when they first found him,” said Billy as he finished pouring himself a fresh cup of coffee. “Plus a list of his current cases. None of them matched up with being down by the Potomac. They called us because the last call from his car phone was to you, Scarecrow.” He gestured to see if anyone else wanted coffee, but no one took him up on the offer. “Twelve minutes and eighteen seconds.”

Although Lee’s shrug seemed nonchalant, Francine could see tension in his shoulders. “Yeah, but it was three days ago.”

“Which is about how long they think he was in the drink,” she countered. “Am I going to have to drag it out of you?”

“No.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Manny’s the one who went over Amanda’s car the second time around. But that was weeks ago!”

“What were you talking about Monday afternoon, then?” she asked him.

Lee hesitated, glancing over at Amanda, who was seated at her own desk. “He, ah, he’d noticed something.”

Francine felt her features pull into a frown, even as Billy broke into the conversation. “What kind of a ‘something’ would get him bashed over the head and dumped into the river, Scarecrow? And why didn’t you bring Francine into the loop? You know full well you should’ve just turned this over to her, damn it! Why didn’t you?”

“We weren’t positive it was related to the case,” he protested. “That’s why he called me. That, and he wanted to see if I’d heard the news.”

“*What* news?” A vein was throbbing in Billy’s forehead.

Lee sighed. “Mrs. Welch was found dead in her prison cell over Labor Day. The autopsy report said natural causes, but he...well, this wasn’t his jurisdiction, but he’d called in a favor to find that out, and he wanted to follow up. There was something about the exact cause of death that seemed suspicious to him.”

“Why didn’t Trudeau just hand it over to us, then?”

“I don’t know!” snapped Lee, pushing back onto his feet. “For all I know he was just being territorial. You know how he got sometimes. But he knew about...he knew about Amanda and me, so...” now the look on his face was miserable. “Francine, we should probably go find an empty interview room and record this.”

“We will in a second. First, you tell me why this man was investigating *my* case in the first place.”

“I just did! We didn’t know if it was related or not, but then Manny pulled a list of Mrs. Welch’s personal property.” His eyes met hers, and it occurred to Francine that it meant he wasn’t looking at Amanda. “There was...well, there was something in there.”

“What was in there?” she asked, testy. If he’d just told her what was going on, they all might have been able to finish up their evenings. She’d seen Jonathan slip something into his coat pocket as they’d left for Lee’s and Amanda’s. But he’d dropped it back in before she got a good look.

The fact that it was small enough to be concealed in one of his hands gave her a couple of ideas, though.

“Well?” asked Billy after Lee hesitated again. “Spit it out, man!”

He took a breath. “A list of names. Amanda’s was at the top of it.”

Amanda made a soft, inarticulate noise, but didn’t actually say anything.

“Who else was on it?” asked Francine.

“I don’t know.” Lee shook his head. “Manny said he’d get me a copy, and that was where we left off. Was there anything in his pockets when they found him? He might’ve had it on his notepad.”

“After three days in water?” asked Billy. “Even if he had, it wouldn’t have been legible. But why didn’t you just turn this over to Francine? Especially since the ballistics evidence also came from Trudeau, didn’t it? You know what this means!”

Lee closed his eyes. “Yeah. I do.”

“I don’t,” said Amanda, her voice quiet.

Francine half-turned to answer her. “Any evidence that comes from either Lee or you is questionable. A competent defense attorney would tear it apart, which is why we won’t use that kind of evidence unless we don’t have anything else.” She turned back to give Lee a glare. “You *know* that, Stetson! So why pull such a foolish stunt!”

“I wanted to make sure it was solid first!” he protested, but Francine could hear a defensive tone underneath his bluster.

“That wasn’t your call!” roared Billy. “And now you’re the one who might have fouled up our entire case! Is that what you wanted, Scarecrow? For the whole thing to get tossed out on a technicality?”

“There’ve been no arrests yet,” said Amanda. Her voice was still quiet, which Francine found eerie. “We don’t even have suspects yet.”

Now it was Francine’s own turn to sigh. “That’s not entirely true.”

“Who?” demanded Lee.

“I’m not answering that!” she shot back at him. “Not until I can interview you first, and not unless you convince me you can be trusted! Which means telling me everything you and Amanda have been doing on this case behind my back!”

“Amanda hasn’t been doing anything!” he yelled. “She didn’t even know it was Trudeau who processed her car a second time, never mind that there was follow-up. Hell, until Monday afternoon, *I* didn’t know how much he was still chewing on it.”

Billy slammed his coffee cup down so hard on Amanda’s desk that it chipped, the white showing brightly against the original maroon color. “Well, we’re all about to learn. This time of night, Interview One should be open. Five minutes, Stetson, and you stay in sight the entire time between now and then! You hear me?”

“Billy,” said Francine. “It’s been a while since I did a hostile interview. I want to go back over my notes first, and it may take me a little longer than that.”

“A hostile interview?” Amanda’s too-quiet voice finally rose. “We’re not under investigation, and Lee and I have both been cooperating. Well, except for him not telling me about all this.”

*Uh-oh*, thought Francine. That didn’t sound good. She turned back toward Amanda, the explanation on her lips, but Billy waved her to silence.

“Go on,” he told her, his voice harsh but calmer. “I’ll explain.” Then his voice hardened again. “After I get the real explanation from you, Scarecrow, because right now I haven’t heard anything worth listening to.”

• • •

“Okay,” said Francine after she turned the recorder on. “You know how a hostile witness interview works. I have to do everything I can to pick your story apart.”

“Do your worst,” answered Lee.

Francine nodded. They were the only two people in the interview room, but she had no doubt that Amanda and Billy were watching through the one-way window. “Let’s start with Detective Manny Trudeau. How did you know him?”

“We rubbed together on a few cases,” answered Lee. “Not always well, but there was respect. He was the detective on the Rawlings assassination back in ’85, and that’s when he met Amanda. He did me a couple favors on that one, and I’ve done a few for him since then.”

“What kind of favors?” asked Francine.

“Strictly professional,” he insisted. “He’s the one who arranged for Elizabeth Sullivan to be released on her own recognizance. In return, I let him know which way the Kowalczyk brothers were headed after we released them. They weren’t spying like the Agency had suspected, but they definitely had a car theft ring going on and, if it hadn’t already turned deadly by then, it was going to.”

“We’re not talking about the Kowalczyk case,” said Francine, “or anything else unrelated to the West/King case. You said that Trudeau was the one who went over Amanda’s car a second time, after you asked him to?”

“Yeah.”

“And when he told you what he’d found, what did you do?”

Lee scowled. “You saw that report before I did, Francine. Which is a good thing because I don’t think I’d have recognized those Kurz-33s as quickly. It also meant I didn’t have to formally turn the report over to you, because you already had it.”

“How did Detective Trudeau send the report to the Q-Bureau?”

“I don’t know,” muttered Lee. “Inter-office, I guess.”

Francine made a note to have Zeta follow up on that in the morning. There were no known inter-office exchanges between local police and Federal agencies; that alone could be enough to get that entire report tossed out. “What reason did Detective Trudeau use for re-processing the vehicle?”

“Hell if I know. He didn’t tell me and I didn’t ask.”

“All right,” said Francine. “But tell me this, Agent Stetson. Why did you ask De-

ective Trudeau to take another look?”

“It was hinky,” he answered. “Dotty — Mrs. West — always drove below the speed limit and was super careful. I have a hard time believing she would flip Amanda’s Jeep in regular traffic. The cops wrote it off as a front left blowout, but we’d replaced those tires not too long before.”

“She easily could have run over a nail,” said Francine. “That’s not probable cause for suspicion.”

“I know. That’s why I asked for the favor.”

“Why did you need a favor?” She needed it on the record.

“Because I suspected something, damn it!” he said roughly, but then he took a breath, visibly settling down. “Arlington PD wanted to close that case quick and easy and move on to the next one, and that didn’t sit well with me.”

“That’s not good enough, Agent Stetson.”

“If I’d had probable cause I would have done it through official channels!” he retorted. “I just wanted some answers.”

“Yes, well, you ‘just wanting some answers’ could very well have torpedoed this case,” she argued. “You’re sworn law enforcement. You know the rules of evidence, which means you knew better than to ask Trudeau to do an off-the-record reprocess!” She shook her head. “That’s not the only thing you did off the record, even when you were ordered to let me lead the investigation. Why didn’t you let us do that?”

“Because it wasn’t getting anywhere.”

Francine slammed her legal pad down onto the table. “Thanks so much for the vote of confidence in our abilities, Scarecrow.”

Chagrin appeared on his face. “Oh, damn it. You’re right. I didn’t think how that sounded. I’m sorry, Francine. That wasn’t a comment about yours or Zeta’s work. It was...” he trailed off. “Well, it’s a comment about investigative procedures in general. I just wanted some answers,” he repeated, “and I wanted them sooner instead of later.”

“Major lapse in judgment, Stetson. *Major.*”

“Yeah.” He sighed, scrubbing his hands through his hair. “I know. But this is my family, Francine, and I knew that Amanda —” he cut himself off.

“Amanda what?” she asked after a long, silent moment.

He glanced meaningfully at the window.

“Let the record show the witness is apparently concerned about one of the in-

interview's observers," she said, irritation creeping into her tone. "Damn it, she's going to hear all of this again at trial anyway. Amanda's a professional," she continued, aware of, but ignoring, the irony behind that statement coming from her. "She should be able to handle it. Hell, she's probably going to handle it better than you."

His eyes flashed, but he kept his voice steady. "Fine. I knew that Amanda wasn't going to have anything to add, and she's a first-degree relative of both murder victims."

"So are you."

"Only by marriage. A marriage which hadn't been acknowledged before the accident."

"You know as well as I do that that doesn't make any difference! You and Amanda were already partners on the record." Francine took a long breath, reaching for calm. "We're getting off-track here. Did you speak with Detective Trudeau between the time he forwarded the re-process and this past Monday night?"

He hesitated.

"We're on the record here, Lee. And you're effectively under oath."

He sighed and closed his eyes. "Yes. Twice. The first was when I called to thank him for doing the investigation. That was right after we got back from our time off. The second was maybe a week later, when he called me about releasing the Jeep to Amanda's insurance carrier. I asked him not to. The last..." he swallowed. "The last time I spoke to him was Monday afternoon, about three o'clock. He called me to tell me he'd been brought into the case on Mrs. Welch's death, once they'd realized it was a homicide, and wanted to know if I wanted him to peek on this while he was investigating that."

She rolled her eyes. "Do I need to repeat myself how bad that judgment call was?"

"You just did. But this time, Francine, I swear it was at least semi-official. You can probably check with Metro for Trudeau's notes, and they might give you a new lead."

"I know how to do my job, Stetson," she said frostily. "I'll decide what leads are and aren't worth a follow-up. From here, I'm going to have to put in a request that you be sequestered from this case, and Amanda too."

"No!" he protested. "Don't leave us out in the cold, wondering what the hell is

going on. Especially since you've already told us you've found something else."

"I wasn't going to lock you out, until you pulled this." She inhaled, held it for a two-count, and then let it out. "Lee, you haven't given me any other choice."

The miserable look came back onto his face. "I guess I haven't, have I?"

She sighed, reaching over to turn off the recorder and then facing the window. "Billy, if you can find a reason for denying my request, I won't file it a second time." She looked back at Lee. "That's the best I can offer." Even going that far would be a stretch.

He backed down with a nod. "All right. And thank you."

## 24. Amanda: Out of Control

Amanda was pleasantly surprised when she read the contents of the envelope she'd retrieved. "Wow."

Lee, who was across the breakfast table perusing the morning newspaper, looked over the top. "What?"

She indicated the papers in front of her. "Phillip's last few assignments, including that civics project he'd turned in but hadn't yet gotten back. He got an A."

"In civics?"

"In civics," she confirmed. "And he did good work, Lee. This would've been acceptable coming in from one of the Agency's junior operatives. He'd been tracking the use of media as propaganda, focusing on some examples, and this paper was about one of those cases. You remember that report that supposedly proved that AIDS was created at Fort Detrick as a bioweapon?"

"Yeah," he said, laying the paper down. "Duffy and Jenkins chased that one around for nearly a week to find its original source. That wasn't too long ago, either. I'm impressed he was able to find out enough for a school paper."

She slid the schoolwork across the table. "I picked this up yesterday, when I went over to do Jamie's transfer paperwork while you were still in Interrogation." She'd intentionally left the premises between his first and second interviews, both to cool down after finding out she'd been kept out of the loop, and to demonstrate lack of collusion between the two of them. Everything needed to be by-the-book from here on out. "They'd had the high school send it over when I called for the appointment."

He flipped pages, his eyebrows steadily going up. "This is good work. Where'd he get his information?" He turned the report over to flip back the last few pages, shaking his head at the bibliography. "Oh, come on, Phillip, no one's going to believe this even if your father is a lawyer." Then his face froze. "Oh, Amanda. I'm so sorry."

It actually took some thought on her part before she understood the apology: he'd referred to Phillip as though he were still alive. That hurt, but not the way it had at first. *Is this me learning to adjust?* she wondered. *Because I don't know if that would honor his memory or not.*

*He wouldn't want you to actively grieve forever,* argued a different part of her mind.

She shook her head to clear it. “So where do you think he got the information?”

Lee was paging through the paper more intently now. “Okay, well, there’ve been no intelligence breaches. But damn, he’s good. He’s citing the *Post*, the *Examiner*, and *Metro Weekly*, and those are just the newspapers. Looks like he also got some stuff from NPR and PBS recordings, too, and apparently, he interviewed a couple of folks from Briarwood to get some background information and confirm his ideas.” He looked up. “How’d he know about Briarwood?”

Amanda felt her lips thin. “He was with me when we took some baskets over one time. But he stayed with me the entire time he was there, and I don’t know how he managed to get back over there without me finding out.”

“It’s on the 33 Bus Route,” said Lee. “He could’ve taken the 16E in and changed over at Gallery Place. Or he could’ve asked Joe to take him during one of his weekends.”

She made a mental note to ask. Phillip had technically been old enough to ride the WMATA buses by himself, but that didn’t mean she would have felt comfortable letting him. They hadn’t used transit that much; there was a school bus, and once her mother had been licensed, she’d begun leaving the car at home at least once a week. After Lee began openly picking her up in the mornings, that frequency had become two or three times a week.

“Amanda?”

She had to shake her head to clear it again. “He was still working on that project when he...when the crash happened. It was all year long, in fact, and sometime this spring they’re going to do presentations for the school and for any parents who want to come in and watch.”

Lee’s voice gentled. “Do you want to go?”

“No, that’s not what I was thinking about. Lee, when Mother and Phillip were in the car that day, they were on their way back from ordering a birthday present for Jamie. It was supposed to be a surprise, a scaled down version of one of those photographer’s vests, though I don’t know why it had to be ordered since those aren’t *that* unusual. I guess it’s because he was still in small men’s sizes. And do you know what? I’ve not heard from the store, either, so I should probably call them. The thing is, though, to throw Jamie off their trail, they’d told him they were going to the library so that Phillip could do extra research on this project. They’d been at the park

playing basketball just before Mother picked him up, so someone could have overheard that conversation. And if they did, and if Phillip mentioned he'd found what he thought might be evidence of disinformation, and if he was right about that just by chance —" she broke off as horror dawned. "Oh, my gosh."

"Yeah," he confirmed. "If someone had been observing and perceived that as a threat, they could've decided they needed to take care of it."

"Which is a motive that we hadn't even considered," she agreed. "We never thought they might have actually been going after either Mother or Phillip."

He stood up. "I'm calling Francine."

• • •

Amanda had made meatloaf for dinner, which was always a favorite, but Jamie was clearly in a bad mood. She wasn't in all that much better of one; Francine had been audibly irritated at Lee's call and had told him to buzz off. In so many words, and her tone had clearly indicated that her next words might not even be that polite.

He'd sighed. "I guess we're going to have to wait until Monday."

At the time, Amanda had reminded him that Francine and Jonathan were going out on what the former had termed a *very special* date. "I think," she'd concluded, "you and I both know what that means. Or at least, we both know what Francine hopes that means."

Lee had scrubbed his hands over his eyes. "I'm happy for her. I really am. But the timing stinks."

"When has *our* timing ever been good?"

He'd laughed, and they'd somehow managed to get through the rest of the day, but then Jamie had stomped through the door with a murderous scowl on his face, followed by a frazzled-looking Joe and Carrie. She'd seated them quickly, but not before Lee had looked a question over at her.

"Don't ask me," she'd whispered as they put the finishing touches on the meal. "Although I don't think that's related to the Ivory Coast posting. Joe told me they weren't going to tell Jamie about it until they knew the exact date they're leaving."

Lee's lips had thinned. "That's going to make it worse, not better. And God help us if Jamie finds out we've known the whole time."

"Don't tempt fate," she'd warned him just before going to the living room to let

everyone know dinner was ready. Very little had been said during the meal itself, which was telling. Carrie in particular had been uncharacteristically quiet, spending nearly the entire meal with her eyes on her plate. She'd picked at her meal until Joe laid his hand on her shoulder. That had gotten her to relax and eat, but she still wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. Had they told Jamie their news after all?

After dinner, as they were all settling into Lee's and her living room, Jamie decided to sprawl out on the floor with his back against one of the side tables.

"Jamie," said Joe. "There's a bench right there."

"I know. I like this fine."

"I'm glad you like it. Now get up on the bench anyway."

At least Joe was getting better at being direct when dealing with children. He really was making an effort. It was a shame that he couldn't take the next logical step by realizing how much leaving would affect Jamie even at his current age.

Lee caught her eye, and they exchanged a long look before he broke the silence. "All right, sport. You want to tell us what's going on?"

"Nothin'."

"Something," Amanda insisted. "But would you prefer we hear it from your dad and Carrie instead?"

"No!" he exclaimed. "I just...look, can't we just watch TV or something? I don't want to talk about it anymore!"

"Talk about what?"

The look he gave her in response was particularly nasty, even when compared with his earlier scowl. "How it was Dad's idea that you transfer me in the middle of the school year. Don't you have — what do they call it? Primary custody?"

"Yes," she answered, "And I do. But I agree with your father. Things have gotten too bad for you at Arlington Heights." She glanced over at Joe. "If he hadn't brought it up first, I would have."

"*Why?* All my friends are there!"

"Including the 'friends' you were fighting with?" asked Joe. "Or the friends who called you and Carrie both bad names just because of her skin color."

"That's just her being super sensitive."

"James Richard!" snapped Amanda, shocked. How could he even think such a thing, never mind say it in front of his stepmother! "You apologize this instant."

His chin came up. "I meant it. Kids say stupid stuff all the time."

"Yeah, like how not liking being called an ugly name is 'super sensitive' on Carrie's part!" snapped Joe.

"Joe," said Amanda gently. An argument wasn't going to do anything except hurt feelings even worse. "Why don't we ask Carrie what she thinks?"

Carrie was looking at the floor. "I don't want to be the cause of any problems."

"You aren't," said Amanda. "But you and I, young man, are definitely having a one-on-one talk about this attitude of yours."

Jamie's response was a shrug.

"Don't just shrug it off like it's no big deal!" retorted Joe.

"Joe." This time, it was Carrie who reproved him, but he shook his head.

"No," he continued. "You're my *wife!*"

"But she's not my mother," sniped Jamie. "She's just my stepmother."

"That's not winning you points with anyone in this room," Amanda warned him, although she made the effort to keep her voice even. "If anything, you're showing us that transferring you is exactly what needs to happen." She flicked her gaze over. "Carrie, since Jamie won't apologize, I will. I don't know why this is happening, but it's not how either Joe or I ever raised the boys, even before you were in the picture."

"It's all right," she whispered.

"No," said Lee. "It's not. Jamie, I'm 'just' your stepfather. Do you feel the same way about me?"

Amanda cringed even before Jamie started nodding. That hadn't been the best tactic.

Lee took a long breath and let it out slowly. "I see."

Jamie fixed him with an accusative glare. "You think transferring me's a good idea too, so why does that even matter? Why do I even matter? It's not like any of this would've happened if the school hadn't complained. You're all so busy with other things that you never even think about me that much!"

At that, Lee's temper flared. "That is *way* out of line, damn it —" he broke off. "Okay, I'm not your father, but this *is* my house and —"

"— and I'm only in it 'cause you married Mom! Which you lied about doing, and then the two of you moved over *here* just so you could shove me onto Dad and Carrie whenever your job keeps you out late! And you're selling the house so we won't even

have to remember Phillip or Grandma anymore!”

All of Amanda’s breath left her body. Yes, teenagers could be difficult and mean, but this was her son! How could he even *think* that, especially after all the years she’d spent focusing nearly exclusively on her children?

“James,” said Joe, his voice a growl. “Go up to your room. Now.”

He jumped to his feet. “Fine! You don’t like what I’m saying so you just push me back off on Mom? *Why doesn’t anyone care what I think?*” There were tears running down his face. “Do you even want me anymore? Any of you?”

Around Amanda, the room was spinning faster and faster.

“Why isn’t anyone *answering* me!” cried Jamie.

Lee had managed to get his temper back under control. “Because we — we all love you so much that it hurts to hear you this angry and upset and...and we want to make it better.” His delivery was awkward and hesitant, but Amanda felt a little bit of pride trickle through her anguish. It was still so hard for him to verbalize his feelings with anyone other than her, and even harder for him to swallow his anger when it was justified. “And we — *God*, Jamie, how could you ever think anyone wouldn’t want you? You’re too...” his hands were visibly shaking. “You’re — I —”

“Lee’s right,” said Carrie, her expression suddenly intense. “We do want you. All of us, including him and me.”

“Then why aren’t any of you *listening* to me!” At that, he dashed up the stairs, slamming his bedroom door so hard it shook the walls.

“Well,” said Carrie after a moment. “That could have gone better.”

“You don’t say,” muttered Lee. “Now what?”

“We definitely won’t tell him about our assignment yet.” She paused. “You know, I can take him back and forth to Swanson instead of making him ride the bus, and he might feel more seen that way.”

Joe shook his head. “We don’t want him to get too used to anything like that.”

“I’m only talking about a couple of weeks. No more than a month. Just to give him a tangible reminder while you and Amanda work things out more permanently.”

Joe continued to shake his head, his expression dubious. Lee was doing the same thing, and when they realized it, they exchanged a long look. But then, they both took deep breaths and nodded.

“All right,” said Joe. “But only for a couple of weeks. I’ll go up and let him

know.”

Amanda was still rooted in her seat, barely able to think — never mind speak — and as they waited, she looked anywhere but at Lee or Carrie. *Her own child* feeling this way about her...

Then Joe appeared back at the top of the stairs, his face pale. “Amanda, you’d better get up here.”

The request was a catalyst; she raced up the stairs before stopping cold at the bedroom door, gasping. Jamie’s room was a shambles, with things thrown everywhere, a few of which had broken. Jamie himself was curled into a ball on the bed, shoulders shaking.

With a deep breath, she walked in and put her hand on his back. “Jamie, we’re here. Can you look at us?”

Slowly, all too slowly, he uncurled. His face was streaky and red. “I’m sorry, Mom and Dad, I’m sorry and I’m sorry what I said about Carrie too. I just —”

“I know,” said Joe. “Pack a bag. You’ll come stay with us tonight, so your mother has a chance to clean up in here.”

“I can do that —”

“No,” Amanda croaked. “I will. It’s all right. You just rest and —” her throat closed.

Jamie got up then, and Joe wrapped his arms around her while they waited for him in the hallway. He didn’t offer her any empty platitudes, just a long moment of strength and understanding before speaking in a low voice. “This is way out of control.”

“I know,” she answered him dully, her earlier burst of energy drained. “I’ll — I’ll talk to Dr. Joyce on Monday. She’s the Agency counselor Jamie and I have been seeing since the accident. I don’t think she does intensive therapy, but she should be able to recommend someone who can do that and who has more experience with children.” She sniffled. “We’ll all need to go, you know. You, me, Lee, and Carrie.”

He leaned back and wiped her tears. “We’ll be there.”

## 25. Lee: Friendship

Francine was using her hands more than normal, clearly wanting to show off their new adornment. Lee had noticed right away, but just for his own amusement, he decided not to say anything. How far would she take things before coming right out and talking about the news she so obviously wanted to share?

Smothering a smile, he nodded in response to her latest question. “No, I don’t know how he figured out Briarwood. Amanda admitted that she’d taken the boys with her on a visit at least once, but as far as they knew it was just a retirement facility. You really think former agents wouldn’t have been smart enough to keep up the ruse?” He shook his head. “They’re out of the game, but they’re not senile.”

“Most of them,” mumbled Zeta, who had accompanied Francine up to the Q-Bureau this morning.

“Watch it,” Lee cautioned, though he kept his tone light. “That’s a place we’d all like to end up in, sooner or later.”

He could see the retort in the younger agent’s eyes, but to her credit, she managed to squelch it before it came out of her mouth. Good; she was learning. He remembered reading Beaman’s assessment: once she got control of her impulsive comments, she’d be one of their best agents. In light of that, it made sense that Billy had paired her with Francine, whose caustic remarks were enhanced by her sense of timing.

“Lee?”

He came out of his thoughts to see Francine peering at him. “I’m sorry. What?”

“Are you even here?” she asked. *Speaking of caustic...*

“Yes,” he answered. “Just lost in thought. What was your next question again?”

“Did you say anything to anyone about this?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t even know about it until this past weekend. Amanda’s the one who made the connection.”

Francine looked around. “Where is she, anyway?”

“She’ll be in later,” he temporized, not wanting to confirm that she was already in the building with Jamie. This interview was also going onto the official record, he knew, which meant that some things did not need to be discussed.

“All right.” Francine sounded unconvinced, but she let it go for now. “You say

you don't believe some of your stepson's source work? Why is that?"

He sighed. "Phillip wasn't the greatest student. He tended to do the absolute minimum to slide by on subjects he didn't like, and he was smart enough to get away with it. As far as both Amanda and I knew, civics was one of the things he didn't care about, which is why I suspect he made some of his sources up."

"We'll still need to check on them," she replied, with a glance at Zeta, who nodded. "Where do you think he got his information instead?"

Lee rubbed the bridge of his nose. "That's the thing. We don't know. The Segal Report, the one that made those claims about AIDS and Fort Detrick, was just presented last September. At a conference in Africa."

"Yes," said Zeta, "but it made the news here. I remember reading about it. Wasn't it attacked as unscientific right away, though? That alone might have led someone to believe there was a propaganda campaign."

"An adult, maybe," said Lee. "But a high school freshman who's just learning about disinformation? My best guess is he saw something on the news and decided it would sound good for his project. He knew enough to make his sources sound legitimate."

Francine laid the report down. "Why are you so determined he made everything up?"

He met her eyes. "Why are you so determined he didn't? We could chase our tails forever trying to find all these sources!"

Her lips thinned. "We aren't chasing anything. Zeta and I are." She turned to her assistant. "I'd like you to go over to the Library of Congress and the National Archives and...oh, wherever else you think might be relevant. I'd like to find out everything we can about this Segal Report, including who wrote it and who published it. Leave me a list of the places you're planning to go and — *what*, Lee?"

"If you're checking the Library of Congress, then what about T.P. Aquinas?"

"What about him? He's your contact, not mine."

Aggravated, Lee took out his pad and wrote down T.P.'s contact details. "Doesn't mean he's a compromised source. And are you also going to at least give her my guy at the Voice of America?"

"All of my media contacts are in the address book in my desk drawer," she answered archly, looking at Zeta instead of him. "Including a higher-ranked news direc-

tor at the Voice, along with several others. I've been stationed in D.C. longer than you have, Scarecrow. I was already sourcing press outlets when you were over in Italy taking classes in mumbo-jumbo by day and gallivanting along canals at night!"

"That," he interrupted her tightly, ignoring the pain twisting through his gut, "was a cheap shot, *Desmond*."

"Yes," she admitted after a long, uncomfortable moment. "It was. And I'm sorry. I think we should all take five to calm down."

Zeta's eyebrows had climbed nearly up to her hairline, and there was no mistaking the curiosity in her expression.

"It was before your time," muttered Lee as he tried and failed to take a steady-breath. "And not related to this case."

Francine nodded. "Yeah. Go downstairs and get started with the research. Lee, I'll go with her and bring you back a cup of coffee —"

"No." He shook his head vehemently. "Stay. Coffee's better up here." Getting up, he pulled out two of the maroon-colored mugs and started pouring, beginning to add cream to both before he remembered Francine took hers black. The Q-Bureau door rattled slightly as Zeta left.

"Lee," Francine said into the awkward silence that followed. "I can, ah, go downstairs anyway and — well, I'm sure there's something needing doing in the bull pen."

"Francine," he chided as he put her mug down in front of her. "We both know part of the reason you came up here was so you could show off that rock on your hand. So why don't you go ahead and tell me about it." A change of subject, he thought, would benefit both of them right now.

She shrugged. "Jonathan proposed last night at dinner."

"*Francine*." Didn't she understand he was trying to de-escalate? "Come on, details. Did you make him grovel?"

"What?"

"Well, with your history and everything, he kind of owed you a bit, don't you think?"

"Oh, please," she answered with a hint of her usual bite, although the ghost of a smile had appeared in her eyes. "We talked through that before I even agreed to go up to the Adirondacks with him. It's old news."

“Yeah, but it happened,” he pointed out as he reached down to pick up her hand and bring it up for a closer look at the engagement ring. It was a simple marquise-shaped solitaire, and if he had to guess, he’d figure it was two carats. “You know better than to pretend it didn’t.”

She was starting to relax. “Of course. But we’ve decided to look forward, not back.”

“Always a good idea.” He leaned against the desk, not wanting the formality of having it between them. “But how do you know history won’t repeat itself?”

“I don’t,” she admitted. “But I won’t give up this chance just because I’m afraid.”

“You guys set a date yet?”

“He just proposed last night.”

“Oh,” he replied. “So you decided to celebrate instead of talking about the next steps, then? Whoa, whoa, don’t get all huffy. I wouldn’t have blamed you.” In fact, he and Amanda had done exactly that, the night he’d presented her with her engagement ring. “Just don’t let it sidetrack you from actually making concrete plans.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Voice of experience talking?”

Despite the fact that his gut hadn’t completely calmed down, Lee found himself chuckling. “Yes. I won’t go into the details.”

“You asked for all my details,” she argued back, though a smile had broken through. “Turnabout is fair play.”

“Hey,” he replied, holding up his free hand. “Aren’t you supposed to be respectful toward your elders or something like that?”

She snorted. “Elder by what, all of two years and change?”

“Even a day counts.”

“Not for this it doesn’t.” But then Francine relented. “It was perfect, Lee. He took me to L’Etoile and ordered all my favorites from memory. And this ring? He deliberately chose something that *wasn’t* the same as the first one. In fact, I like this one better. It’s classier.”

“Will you feel safe wearing that in the field?”

She shrugged. “Amanda doesn’t wear her engagement ring in the field.”

He was surprised she’d noticed. The first time Amanda had taken off her engagement ring and locked it inside her desk for safekeeping, he’d been startled enough

to protest before he thought it through. That protest had sparked a minor argument, although they'd had it resolved before they got to the car.

"Lee? That is why you and Amanda have plain gold bands, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "No, actually, it wasn't a consideration. I had just wanted us to have matching wedding rings, and the jeweler said I couldn't go wrong with those. I'd known that Amanda had left the original ring box here, but it wasn't until our first field assignment after..." he trailed off, swallowing quickly. "After the funeral, that she explained she'd left the box here so she would have somewhere safe to keep her engagement ring." He gave her a speculative look. "I take it you're planning on doing something similar?"

"We haven't even decided on single-ring or double-ring yet," she replied.

"That's not what I asked. I'm talking about whether you'll wear the ring in the field."

"I answered that already. I don't feel safe wearing it out there, so I'll do what Amanda does. It's not like I'm out in the field as often as other agents, anyway, especially since Billy is thinking about —" she broke off. "Never mind."

He gave her a level stare.

"Don't, Lee. I really can't talk about it. Not even with someone I trust."

Suddenly touched, he looked down into his coffee cup. "You know, I didn't realize it until I heard it, but I've been needing to hear you say that. That you still trust me."

She reached over to lay a hand on his arm. "You guys did a number with this whole secret marriage thing, and then with you going off the rails on this case. But in both cases I understood the reasons why, and I still want to trust you." A rueful look crept across her face. "Even though right now it's pretty hard. I'll go off the record here. Is there anything else — anything at all — that you think I should know about?"

He remembered having this same conversation with Carrie. "No, Francine. There are no more secrets. You can trust me there." One of the most painful lessons he was learning was that true friendships were valuable enough to be worth keeping.

Her hand squeezed his arm. "Thank you. I think *I* needed to hear that."

Lee could feel his smile spreading all the way across his face, and it was echoed in Francine's expression. "By the way," he continued, "you definitely want double-ring."

The smile on her face segued into a frown. “What, because you think I shouldn’t trust him? Jonathan’s not going to betray me!”

“He already has,” replied Lee, although he kept it mild. “The fact that you two worked through it doesn’t change the fact that it happened in the first place. Or is that another part of looking forward and not back?”

Her lips thinned as she nodded.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt again, Francine.”

“I’m a big girl, Lee,” she replied, her tone short. “When I say we talked it through, I mean we had a couple of knock-down, drag-outs. He didn’t try to just sweep things under the rug and neither did I. Look, I understand what you’re trying to do, but on this one I need you to back off. Please.”

*Friendships are worth keeping.* “All right,” he began. “I’ll —”

The door to the Q-Bureau slammed open, admitting an Amanda he’d only occasionally seen before: a whirling dervish of activity driven by heightened emotions. She dropped her bag on her desk with a loud thud before turning around to deal with the door, which she shut with more than the necessary force. After that, she started rooting through her desk.

Francine found her voice first. “Good morning to you, too, Amanda.”

His wife nearly spat her reply. “No, it’s not.”

Lee exchanged a glance with Francine before asking, “Do you need to talk about it?”

“No.” Amanda slammed a desk drawer shut and stood up, revealing what she’d retrieved: her service weapon. “I just want to — I need to —” she broke off with a slight gasp, and that was when Lee realized she was panting. “I’m going to the firing range.”

“What?” Francine’s voice had gone up. “You’re actually voluntarily going down there?”

“I need to do *something*,” snapped Amanda. “And I’m supposed to be getting more range time in anyway.”

Lee crossed over to her desk and took the pistol from her. “Put that back where it belongs. I’ll go with you,” he continued, “but only if you use the training weapons. No live fire. Not if you’re this upset.”

“I am not —” but then she broke off, and now he could see she was shaking. “All right. We’ll use the training weapons.”

Francine stood up. "I'll meet you down there, too. Just as soon as I put my ring away."

## 26. Francine: Keeping Score

It was hotter than normal in the firing range, as though someone had set the thermostat a little too high. Francine welcomed it, though; the range was cooler than normal most of the time, which meant that she often had to wear a heavy jacket during her visits here.

She was positioned in one of the booths at the end of a lane; Amanda and Lee were next to her. Due to the noise, they weren't speaking in soft tones, although Francine's ear protection kept her from hearing much. Only a few words were audible here and there: *Jamie, therapy, angry, long-term, adjustment*. She also heard them mentioning Claudia Joyce's and George Pfaff's names.

The puzzle pieces weren't too hard to put together, especially when combined with Amanda's fierce focus on hitting the targets as they popped up. There was no hesitation, no indication of discomfort, nothing to reflect the woman who'd almost seemed afraid to even handle guns at first. This Amanda was clear-eyed and determined, and her score reflected that. While a seventy-eight was far from perfect, it was a respectable figure and within the Agency's qualification requirements.

They finished the cycle and pulled off their ear protection to hear cheers from Leatherneck. "Personal best, Mrs. Scarecrow!"

"Sunlight," corrected Amanda.

He held up his hands. "Yes, ma'am. Sunlight. Still your personal best. You should be proud of yourself."

Amanda smiled, but there was no mirth or happiness underneath. "I am. Good." Then her arm drooped, although she remembered to flick the training weapon's safety before letting it fall to her side. Strictly speaking, that wasn't required, but most agents preferred to train the same way they would operate in the field.

Francine couldn't help a quiet internal chuckle. Who would have thought that Amanda King's — Amanda *Stetson's*, she corrected herself — best firearms score would be sparked by anger and determination? Francine would have thought that her best scores would come while protecting children, either hers or others'. Apparently not.

She checked her own score and groaned.

"Problems?" asked Lee, who had moved down the line to pick up his own train-

ing weapon. “Eighty-nine is a sharpshooter’s score.”

“I’ve done better,” said Francine sourly, resetting her lane for another cycle.

“Hey,” he said. “Not everyone needs to be an expert at everything, you know.”

She pushed a harsh breath out. “I can usually edge into expert range.”

“So try it again,” he suggested, reaching for his own ear protectors. “Ears on, Amanda,” he called.

Francine followed suit. This time she scored an eighty-seven. Amanda improved to eighty, only one point below sharpshooter. Lee, being the expert shot that he was, scored a ninety-three and called for the next level of difficulty in his targets.

Amanda reset her lane. “Again,” she called. “Let’s see if I can keep improving.”

“Take it easy,” said Francine. “You don’t want to get tired and start losing points.”

The other woman jammed her ear protection back on. “I said, again.”

Lee and Francine exchanged a glance before resetting their lanes. For this cycle, Francine scored a ninety-one, the minimum score for an expert rating. Lee’s score was a ninety, but that was using the higher-difficulty targets.

Amanda scored sixty-nine. She ripped her ear protectors off with a soft exclamation that might have been a curse. Since the word was muffled, though, Francine couldn’t be absolutely sure.

Lee answered her at an equally low volume. Again, Francine couldn’t hear the exact words, but she could clearly hear a soothing tone in his voice. Amanda responded by screwing her eyes shut, vigorously shaking her head, and reaching for the reset lever. Lee blocked her, which resulted in some surprisingly vociferous and loud protests.

Focusing, but not willing to fire as long as there were unprotected ears around — this didn’t qualify as a field exception — Francine lined up several shots and tried to ignore the rising voices off to her side. That wasn’t particularly easy, especially after Leatherneck’s Southern-accented voice joined the fray. She felt her ire rising and pulled off her ear protection to go wade in herself.

That was when she heard the actual words. The first were from Amanda. “...just *fine*, Lee, except that my partner’s gotten overprotective again!”

“No you aren’t fine,” snapped Lee. “Seventy-eight, eighty and sixty-nine? That’s not consistent shooting. And look at you. You’re sweating like a pig!”

“When was anyone ever going to tell me consistency was a requirement?” Amanda’s voice was shrill now. “When I failed to qualify *again*?”

“Now, hold on, Mrs. Scare — ah, Sunlight,” began Leatherneck. “You’ve known about that part of it all along.”

Amanda all but threw the practice gun down in front of her. It bounced and clattered on the countertop. “Fine!”

“Amanda,” began Lee, “damn it —”

“*Don’t you try me.*” Francine had never heard such an unpleasant tone in the other woman’s voice.

“Then act rationally!” he shot back. “You’re in no shape to be on the range right now. Leatherneck, can’t you keep this session off the record books? Just for once?”

Leatherneck sighed. “You know better than that, Ace. Besides, all three scores were qualifying. Not to mention that one personal best.”

Lee laid his own training weapon down, more gently than Amanda had, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I suppose. But we are done here, no matter what she—”

With a wordless screech, Amanda charged out of the firing range, slamming the door behind her. For a moment, it looked like Lee was planning to follow her, but then he sighed and sat down, turning his attention toward Francine. “I’m sorry. To you, too, Leatherneck.”

“For what?” she asked.

“You shouldn’t have had to see that.”

“Something’s got her fired up good, Ace,” observed Leatherneck. “And it’s not you, either. We all know what *that* looks like.”

“I know it’s not me.” Now his shoulders drooped a little. “It’s been...a bit rough at home lately. Amanda’s son especially isn’t taking things well.”

Francine squatted next to his chair. “Much as I hate to say something like this, Lee, he has just been through a lot of trauma. He needs some leeway.”

“He’s had it!” Lee argued, but there was no heat behind the declaration. “But the acting out’s just getting worse. Amanda...” he trailed off. “This can’t leave this room.”

“I got to go record the scores,” said Leatherneck, executing a quick and strategic exit.

Now that they were alone, Francine shifted to her knees and laid a hand on his arm. “Do you want to talk it out?”

Lee sighed. “I know I should. Amanda brought Jamie in to meet with Claudia this morning. She wanted him evaluated and referred to a specialist.”

“Sounds like it didn’t go well.”

“No,” he agreed quietly. “I was hoping to calm her down enough to get some details, but if anything this got her more riled up instead of less.” He rubbed his nose again. “The latest...I don’t know what to call it. The latest flap, I guess, saw Jamie accusing her of not caring like a mother should. Along with a good many other things.”

Francine winced. “Ouch.”

“Yeah, it was pretty awful, and it’s getting to her.”

“I can only imagine. Being a mother is really important to her.”

“Jamie knows it, too, which is why he knew exactly which button to push.” Lee climbed to his feet. “I should go find her before something else blows up.”

She patted his arm. “You know that thing about not wanting to see me get hurt?”

“Yeah?”

“That goes both ways. And don’t you forget it.”

• • •

By the time Francine cleaned up and went up to the Q-Bureau, Amanda was acting as though the whole incident in the firing range hadn’t happened. Instead, she had her head down over some file folders, pencil busy as she made notes on whatever was in front of her. Francine tried not to be very obvious about sidling around behind her, but when Amanda laid the pencil down and sighed loudly, she knew she’d failed.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll stop snooping. If you’ll tell me what you’re working on.”

“I think I might know who put out the Segal Report,” said Amanda. “It came to me while I was coming up the elevator.”

“Amanda,” said Francine testily. “That’s not your case.”

At that, the other agent turned to face her. “But it *is* my son. Francine, nobody knew him better than I did, and I know that if he’d run across something like this, he’d have tried everything he could to figure out where it came from.” She paused. “We already know he lied about some of his source work.”

“We,” said Francine irritably, “don’t know anything. But *I* can take that into consideration. I’m still waiting for Zeta to get back with whatever information she was able to dig up. You, however, are not doing any further research.” Leaning forward, she reached for the folders.

Amanda slid them out of the way. “Where is she? I thought she’d be back by now.”

“This isn’t school, and I don’t take attendance. It’s going on five o’clock anyway. If she finds something, she’ll bring it in tomorrow. And she will bring it to me first.”

“I’ll want to see it.”

“No.”

Now Amanda’s voice was hardening. “They were my family, Francine.”

“You’re in the middle of dealing with some sort of crisis about the rest of your family! If you’re not focused on work, you should be focused on that. Not on this case! I’m not going to let you use it as a distraction away from whatever happened with Claudia this morning!”

“Use what as a distraction?” Lee appeared at the door, smelling faintly like the industrial-issue soap from the locker rooms. His hair was still damp.

“I had an idea about the Segal Report,” answered Amanda, her tone still rough. “But Francine thinks she can lecture me about my priorities.”

“When it comes to this case, I do determine the priorities!”

“Even if I’ve found something?”

“What did you find?” asked Lee before Francine could snap back a reply. “And how’s it going to help the case?”

Amanda pivoted to face him, and the tone of her voice softened a bit. “I think I know who’s behind the Segal Report. The KGB.”

“*What?*” exploded Francine. “We’ve already eliminated them as a possibility.”

“Francine, hear me out, damn it!” yelled Amanda as she turned to face her again. “We know that the KGB uses East German resources to cover up their activities sometimes. We also know the Russians directly funded some of their more covert activities, including what otherwise looks like rogue elements within the Stasi. What if that’s what they did this time? What if they were able to get to the remnants of whoever ran the Colonial Cookery case and re-mobilize them?”

“Re-mobilize them how? They all committed suicide!”

“All of that cell’s members *that we know about* committed suicide!” Amanda gestured to the files on her desk. “But nobody ever confirmed that they were all of the members, period. Because of their failure they’d have been stuck here and looking for a way to get themselves back into good graces with Stasi! What better way to do it than to successfully launch a smear campaign against the United States government? Something this big would have caused a huge scandal with lots of finger-pointing! And while everyone’s focused on that, they could slip in and do something else!”

“Oh, come on, that’s —”

“A plausible theory,” interrupted Lee again. “But a bit far-fetched. Amanda, give the files to Francine. It’s her case.”

She turned on him, her face a study in fury. He met her eyes evenly, his own expression impassive. Francine could almost *hear* their argument, even though neither said a word out loud. It took a few minutes, but Amanda eventually turned away from her desk, pointing at the files.

“There you go,” she said to Francine. “Take them.”

Lee’s eyes shot Francine a warning before she could offer a really sarcastic reply. Physically biting her lip in order to stay quiet, she picked up the folders. “I’ll take these downstairs and then we’re done for the day.”

“Yes,” said Lee. “All three of us. Amanda, we need to talk about Jamie and Claudia in private anyway.”

Amanda’s response was a furious look, and Francine decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Just as she stepped into the hallway outside the Q-Bureau, a mail room courier ran up with a package. “Miss Desmond?”

“Yes?”

The courier shoved the package into her hands. When Francine opened the envelope, a VHS tape fell out.

“I assume you’ve already checked this for booby traps,” she said. “What is it?”

“It’s...” he trailed off, swallowing hard. “Agent Beaman called it a proof-of-life video.”

That got her attention. “A what? From who?”

“Agent Zeta, ma’am.”

“*What?*” She felt the color drain out of her face. “Who brought in the video tape?”

“We don’t know,” he admitted. “We’re reviewing security footage now. But ma’am, Agent Beaman said you’d want to see this right away.” He swallowed again. “She says that she’s going to be executed in twenty-four hours.”

## 27. Billy: Tough Love

“Okay,” said Billy. “You have your assignments. Let’s get out there and beat the bushes, folks.”

The agents scattered quickly; after all, Zeta was one of their own. Amanda caught Lee’s sleeve and said something; he responded with a nod. Then she split off from him, nearly running down the hall on the way to the closet elevator.

Billy had no idea why he followed her, but he did. The longest delay was waiting for the elevator after she’d taken it. He clasped and unclasped his hands, wondering why he was even doing this in the first place. He’d given orders that no agents were to proceed alone; today, they’d work in pairs and not worry about covers. Since Zeta was the source of the search, Francine didn’t have a partner, so he himself was planning to pair with her.

By the time he got to the Q-Bureau, Amanda had already vanished into the vault. Billy looked down and caught his breath.

Her desk was in disarray, with open files on top of open files and a chewed-up pencil tossed carelessly into the mix. The flowers she usually brought each day were wilted, and they looked suspiciously like the ones he’d seen the day before. Even worse, when he pulled open the desk drawer that was partly ajar, he found her weapon with the holster only partially secured.

“Sir?” Amanda had come out of the vault.

Billy indicated the desk. “Amanda, what’s this?”

A confused look appeared. “My desk.”

“It looks more like Lee’s,” he replied.

At that, her gaze fell to it, and as she apparently saw it with fresh eyes, her cheeks began to flush. “I’ll clean it up first thing once we get back.”

“No,” said Billy, quickly reshuffling people in his mind. “You’ll clean it up now.”

“Sir, Zeta’s one of our own agents!”

“I know that,” he replied. “But so are you. Amanda, what happened this morning in Claudia’s office? Not the confidential parts. Just tell me why you’ve been so wound up ever since then. Yes,” he continued, “I know you posted a personal best down in the shooting range after your son left. But this...” he trailed off, indicating the desk. “This isn’t like you. So what’s going on?”

“Sir, I — I’d really rather not talk about this morning.”

“Too bad. I told you, leave the confidential parts out.”

She sank down into her chair. “Jamie was...combative. With his words, I mean, not his actions. Claudia had to call him down several times during her assessment, and when she sent him out of the room so she could talk with Joe and me, he slammed the door so hard one of the pictures fell off the wall. We were both afraid that he was about to go destroy something, so Claudia simply gave us a couple names and numbers and said she’d follow up with a written report that we could take to whichever therapist we chose.”

Billy blinked. “I hadn’t been aware Joe was in the building.”

“I escorted him the whole time, sir. Joe and Jamie left together, and Joe gave Jamie a ride to school. Jamie was mad about that, too. He didn’t understand why he had to go in, since he was reporting late.” She closed her eyes. “He gave us both an earful before we left, and, well, he’s my son. He knows exactly where to aim his arrows.”

“I see.” He glanced down at the desk again. “What were you doing up here afterward?”

She flushed again. “I got a copy of the Segal Report. I was looking through it for clues about its origin.”

Billy didn’t know if he should be impressed or exasperated. He settled for worried. “Amanda, you’re perilously close to obsession territory.”

“I’m not!” she protested. “I just...sir, Francine’s lead investigator on this case, but she’s just not very detail oriented sometimes, and I don’t think she understood how important this was. I thought I would...I just wanted to help.”

“No,” he said. “Let her handle that, or give it to Zeta.” Then he realized what he’d just said. “Oh, damn it. Well, take it downstairs to Francine’s desk, at least.”

“I gave her the files directly.” Amanda’s voice dropped almost to a whisper.

“Then what are all these papers?”

“They’re not related to that case,” she answered quickly. “It’s...well, there’s been chatter lately about military action in either Chad or Libya. I’ve been trying to match things up so I can give you a clear report, but...” she dropped her gaze. “I haven’t found anything yet.”

He picked up one of the sheets that were scattered everywhere, perusing its

contents. The more he read, the more his heart sank. “Amanda, this transcript is full of errors. You weren’t looking for patterns. You were trying to correct all the errors before anyone else found out you’re doing that.”

“Too late,” said Lee from behind them. “Because I just heard it.”

Billy hadn’t even heard him come into the office. Based on her surprised expression, neither had Amanda.

Lee circled around Billy so that he could face Amanda. “I have to ask. Are you going to be safe out there with me?”

“Of course I am!” she flared. “I’ve always watched your back before.”

Lee’s eyes flicked up to meet Billy’s gaze, and Billy shook his head slightly.

“Amanda,” said Lee. “Look at your desk and this drawer. You didn’t even double-check your weapon before going down to the shooting range. And this mess...” he indicated it with his hands. “This isn’t like you at all.”

“I am not becoming a burnout!” she yelled.

“Nobody said you were,” answered Billy. “But I’m not letting you into the field until the case is over. Scarecrow, go downstairs and find Francine. Tell her I said you’ll be the one paired with her instead of me. Amanda, stay here, clean up, and then come down to the bull pen. You’ll be responsible for coordinating all the reports that come in.” He paused, knowing he needed to say the next part, but hating it anyway. “And I’ll have to monitor to make sure you do it right.”

• • •

Amanda showed up in the bull pen about ten minutes later. She was following direct orders, at least, which was good, and she’d brought a set of transcripts with her so that she could work on them between calls from those out in the field. Billy knew he needed to talk to her about her latest set of errors, but he could see the hurt and worry in the set of her shoulders.

*She was checking herself for errors already*, he reminded himself. *Maybe I don’t need to talk to her after all.* He certainly hoped so. He knew he was probably rationalizing, but right now it seemed like the right path to take.

Leaving his office, he made his way over to where she was flipping switches on the communication equipment, cueing up for when the reports would start coming in. “Are you ready for this?”

“Yes, sir.” Her voice was hard and brittle, but her hands were accurate as she finished with the equipment and then pulled a fresh legal pad out of her file folder, writing the words *Zeta Kidnapping Comms* across the top. “They can start calling reports in anytime now.”

“Good,” he told her.

“Sir, about my desk and what I was doing —”

“Don’t,” he interrupted. “We can call it a temporary lapse.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed.

“If,” he continued, “it doesn’t happen again. And I will be checking to see if it does.”

She took a breath. “Yes, sir. Understood.”

“Go ahead and do the mic check,” he ordered. “Let them know they can call in reports anytime now.”

She complied, noting the time each pair of agents responded back to confirm. “May I get a copy of those location assignments, sir? So that I can track on the map?”

Her voice was still stiffly formal, but it no longer sounded like she might potentially shatter into pieces. Billy decided not to say anything about that, either. She’d had a rough day already, and working communications meant it was far from over. “Give me just a minute.”

When he came back with the assignments, her head was bent over her transcripts and she had a red pencil out. There was a regular pencil lying on top of the legal pad, where she’d be able to grab it with a moment’s notice.

Amanda looked up as he approached, reaching for the assignment list. “Thank you, sir. I’ll get these plotted on the map right away so I can track their movements. I wish I’d thought to check locations with that mic check, and I know it’s another error, but I can make it up by asking the next time everyone calls in. They won’t have gotten very far down their routes anyway.”

“It’s fine, Amanda,” he said, keeping his voice gentle. He hadn’t caught the lapse until she’d pointed it out; and she was right: she could make it up fairly easily.

She closed her eyes and took a sharp breath. “Thank you, sir.”

“What I do want you to do,” he told her, “is reach out to a different pair every half-hour. Don’t always wait for them to call you. When you check in, give them anything you think is relevant and also take down an interim report.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, probably because she already knew the protocols. But he figured it wouldn't hurt to be sure, and even better, she didn't roll her eyes or respond with a cutting remark. Francine might have done either. Lee, of course, would have interrupted him halfway through and tried to finish the sentence. Amanda, though, was acting more like Amanda every second.

It was a long evening, but she kept up her duties without fail. Every half-hour she checked in with another team and got an interim report. In between check-ins, she listened for calls while correcting her transcripts. Toward the end of the night, though, she rubbed her eyes and put the transcripts aside. Billy found himself relaxing even more. Today really had been just a lapse.

At 10:30, he went to relieve her. "Take a break and get something to eat."

"I'm fine, sir. And I'm not hungry."

"That's an order. You're back up at midnight. I want you rested and fed."

She sighed but nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll just run up to the Q and fix myself a sandwich."

Not even five minutes later, the radio came to life. "Scarecrow and Princess. We've found something."

Billy leaned forward, keying the mic. "I hear you and confirm secure line. Go ahead."

"Thank you," answered Francine around a crackle of feedback. "Billy, it took us a while to talk the librarians into opening back up, but it's a good thing they did. We found where Zeta had to have been working, based on her research materials."

"I figured as much," he answered. "Get to the point, please, Princess."

"Right," came the reply. "We went through the books she'd pulled. She left a note in one. It's signed with a zeta. The lowercase Greek letter, I mean, not a zee. I think she was trying to make it clear it was her."

"Keep going," said Billy.

"Sir, we think she knew she was about to be taken. The handwriting's sloppier than normal, which could've happened if she was writing fast. The note just says, 'HVA Directorate A-16.' Do you know what that is?"

"No, but I'll find out. Any forensic evidence?"

Lee's voice chimed in. "Yeah, I've got some fingerprint cards and a couple of impressions. Not a lot to go on, but we'll bring it in."

“See that you do,” Billy said as he signed off. That was when he heard the phone in his office ringing. He stayed where he was; the answering service would pick it up.

A few minutes later, one of the overnight aides brought him a note. *Sunlight logged out and departed. Says family emergency. No return estimate.*

Billy swore softly. What was Amanda up to now? Picking up the phone, he dialed her car phone’s number and listened to it ring. It was a good thing, he thought, that he’d made sure all of his agents had one as soon as they became commercially viable. It would be better, though, if she actually picked up.

She didn’t, but she called back as soon as he hung up. “I’m sorry, sir,” she told him. “I was on the phone.”

“With who? Lee?”

“No, sir, not yet. In fact, sir, it would be nice if you could call him and let him know.”

“Let him know what?”

“I was talking to Joe.” A brief pause was his only warning. “Jamie didn’t come home from school today.”

## 28. Carrie: Flight

At the sound of knocking, Carrie hurried to the door. Amanda stood on the other side of it, shivering in the cold. Carrie quickly ushered her in. She was halfway in when they both turned at the sound of running steps. Lee almost skidded as he turned the corner toward their doorstep, and he came in with her.

“And just where have you been?” snarled Joe from the entrance to the kitchen.

“At work,” said Amanda, her chin coming up.

“At *eleven o’clock at night*? What could you possibly have been working on, that kept you too late to have dinner with your family?”

“There was an emergency.” Amanda’s voice was firm. “I called around 3:30 and left a message on the machine, telling Jamie to come over here and have dinner with you. I also said I’d pick him up as soon as I could.”

“An emergency,” said Joe, his anger still in full force. “An emergency. Something more important than *your own son*? I would think you’ve learned better by now.”

“Hey,” broke in Lee. “Watch it.”

“You watch it! We didn’t even know he was missing until we got the automated call from the school!”

Carrie laid a hand on Joe’s arm. “Joe, please.” Then, turning to Lee and Amanda, she continued, “We tried going over to your unit, but it was locked and dark. That’s when we called you, Amanda.”

Amanda nodded. “What are you talking about, automated call from the school?”

Joe harrumphed, but his voice was calmer. “The one reporting he was absent today.”

Now Amanda rounded on him. “Excuse me? He left with you, and you said you’d drop him off! Did *you* forget, or was something in *your* work more important?”

“Don’t start!” But Joe had dropped his gaze. “I did drop him off. On the sidewalk outside the main entrance. The ride had been...Amanda, you know what kind of a mood he was in after the session. It didn’t get any better, but when I dropped him off, he just closed the door, waved, and headed toward the entrance.” He sighed. “Before you ask, no, I didn’t actually see him go in. He’s in seventh grade! I shouldn’t need to!”

“No,” said Lee. “And you wouldn’t have needed to worry about it under normal

circumstances. But you knew these weren't, because you were in that session! Why didn't you at least suspect something?"

Echoing Carrie's earlier motion, Amanda laid a hand on Lee's arm. "Lee. There was no reason. Jamie's never acted up this badly before."

That, at least, got everyone to shut up for a minute, and Carrie breathed a sigh of relief. "While we were waiting for you, Amanda, I made some hot chocolate. You look like you might need it."

Amanda exhaled, her shoulders dropping. "Thank you. It's cold outside, and I left my coat at the office."

Lee wrapped an arm around her waist. "And there is an emergency at work. A big one, and it's related to Phillip's and Dotty's case. I was out in the field, but I got over here as quickly as I could after Billy told me what happened."

Carrie stopped and turned back to look at him. "What happened?"

Lee frowned at her. "I just told you what happened. After Billy called me, I got here as quickly as I could."

"No," she clarified, taking a step back toward the other three. "What happened with the case? And I thought you weren't allowed to work on it. Isn't that right?"

Amanda and Lee exchanged a long look, and then he took his coat off, laying it on their usual love seat, before pulling his wife down and settling next to her. "It's all hands on deck. If you'll bring in the hot chocolate, we'll tell you everything." His gaze slid over. "While we're waiting, maybe Joe can catch us up a little more."

Joe collapsed onto a chair. "I've told you all I know. Jamie apparently skipped school today. Carrie didn't find out until he wasn't on the bus back to her school. That was hours afterward. Goodness knows how far away he already was by then."

By then, Carrie was in the kitchen, so any reply that either Lee or Amanda might have made was muffled. She was breathing heavily, but forced herself to calm down as she poured the chocolate. She put a splash of peppermint-flavored liqueur into one of them, marking the mug by folding the napkins into the handle. Carrie had never learned how to manage the taste of it herself, but Joe loved it; and he certainly had sounded like he needed a little extra.

As she started carrying the tray out, Amanda's voice rose again. "...no, leaving is what *you* do! Have you even told him you're going to Ivory Coast yet?"

Carrie bit her lip as she handed out chocolate. "No," she jumped in, "we ha-

ven't. He's been in no shape to hear it, and —"

"— and there are some things we need to confirm before we say anything anyway," said Joe. He tasted the hot chocolate and smiled at her over the rim of the cup.

"What kind of things?" demanded Lee.

"Some questions needing answers," said Carrie shortly, not wanting the conversation to get off-track. "Right now we're more worried about Jamie."

"As well you should be!" snapped Amanda. "How did you miss the fact that nobody was home at our place?"

"Believe it or not, we're not always checking on what you're doing over there!" yelled Joe. "It's not like you leave a lot of clues for everyone to look at anyway!"

"Wait just a —" Carrie started. They ignored her and continued arguing right over her objection, but were finally interrupted by a sharp whistle from Lee. Amanda dropped her eyes to her mug. Joe scowled at his toes.

Lee glanced over at her. "What were you saying, Carrie?"

She reminded herself that she and Lee had to be the cool heads here, since Joe and Amanda were both justifiably petrified. "I said, wait just a minute. This isn't about blame. If anyone's to blame, it's Jamie for skipping school. Has he done it before?"

Amanda shook her head, her eyes still on her drink.

"Not even once?"

"That wouldn't be like Jamie," said Joe. He'd softened his tone, but Carrie could still hear the tension underneath. "He's a rule follower, not a rule breaker."

"Then we need to figure out where he might have gone!" Carrie told them. "You can't tell me he's *never* feigned illness or something to get out of going to school. Every student does that sooner or later."

Amanda sighed. "No. But it was usually because he hadn't studied for a test. He never cut out from the house when he was 'questionably' sick."

"He probably knew better than to push his luck," said Joe. "Especially while Dotty was still around."

"So we don't have anything to start from?" asked Lee. "Is that what you're saying? That we'll have better luck pulling a rabbit out of a hat than we will figuring out where he would have gone?" He shook his head. "Zeta's still out there with the clock ticking."

"Perhaps," said Carrie, "you should tell us about that."

Lee lifted the mug to his lips and took a long swallow. “This is good, Carrie. Doesn’t taste like a store mix.” Then, before she could remind him of her question, he continued. “We’ve had a pair of agents working this case, Francine Desmond and Nancy Zusterakos. Nancy’s usually called Zeta since that’s easier to say.” In a few short sentences, he explained the current situation, including the note they’d found in her research and the deadline in the video message. “Crypto is still working on the note she left, but she wouldn’t have made it too difficult to figure out. I expect they’ll decipher it soon.”

Joe had a look of horror on his face. “You mean to tell me that this wasn’t about Amanda or you at all? That these East Germans may have been targeting *Phillip?* Over a *school project?*”

“That,” said Amanda, “is why we’re trying to find out how he really got the Segal Report. In his paper he claims three media sources, but we checked those already and none of them ever printed a copy of the report. I suppose he could have gone over to a university to see if they had a copy in their stacks, and I guess it would have had to have been one of the larger ones since they do more scientific research. But they probably wouldn’t have had a copy, either, since everything was all so new. I have no idea how Phillip got hold of that report, but something tells me that if we can figure that out, we can figure out who’s behind this and where we can find them. Francine and Zeta had eliminated a number of possibilities, but they hadn’t yet found one that actually makes sense. That report’s been kept under a lot of wraps and —” she broke off, turning to Lee. “Has anyone been over to our townhouse?”

“Not since we checked earlier,” said Carrie. “Do you want me to go over there?”

“No,” said Lee, standing up. “You and I are going up to his room here to see if we find anything out of the ordinary.” He held up a hand as Joe began to protest. “We have outside eyes, Joe. We won’t inadvertently miss something that you might, simply because you’re used to it.”

Joe clamped his lips down, but his eyes were shooting daggers.

“I’ll go over to our townhouse,” said Amanda. “If I can borrow a coat.”

Lee picked his up off the love seat and wrapped it around her. “We’ll be over in a little bit to go through his room there.”

“What about me?” asked Joe.

“You dropped him off,” said Lee. “So we know he took off from Swanson. What

route might he have taken when he did that?”

“How am I supposed to figure that out?”

“Look at a map, find anyplace that might have caught his interest. Call around, see if anyone saw him earlier today. Anything could help.” He paused. “The quicker we solve this, the quicker we can get back to looking for Zeta.”

Joe was staring at him. “You’d put Jamie ahead of her?”

“He’s family.” The tone of his voice brooked no arguments. “Carrie, let’s go upstairs.” He gave Amanda a quick kiss before she left.

They searched in silence, starting at opposite corners of the room and working toward each other. Then Carrie heard a soft curse.

“What is it?” she asked.

Lee mutely held up the pamphlet he’d found in the kitchen a few days earlier. “It was hidden between the mattress and box spring.”

She felt her heart plummet. “Oh, no. How did he get that? I put it away after you left the other night. In Joe’s and my bedroom.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Lee. “What matters is that he knows about your deployment.”

Carrie had to fight the urge to curl up in a defensive ball. *Stop that*, she chastised herself. *Lee’s not angry at you.*

“Hey.” The word drew her out of her ruminations. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing. Let’s see what else we can find.”

But Lee didn’t start searching again. Instead he came over and hunkered down next to her. “Fight-or-flight’s not something you can ignore. Take a break.”

“I can’t afford the time.”

“Carrie.” His voice was firm. “Take a break.” Then he leaned forward, reaching for her but not quite touching. “You think I haven’t figured out you’ve been through some rough stuff, or that you’ve been getting triggered by some of what’s happened the last few weeks? Are you seeing anyone about it? Getting help?”

She hung her head. “Not right now. But I did do several years of therapy. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“All right.” There was sympathy in his voice now. “But don’t forget that you need to take care of yourself. You’re like Amanda that way. Pushing your own needs aside in favor of everyone else. There are days I’ve had to physically pull her away from

something or someone, just to get her to rest normally. Does Joe know?”

She nodded, noticing that her breathing had become more even. “Thank you,” she said. “I think I’ve settled down.”

“If you get worked up again,” he said, “all you have to do is just say something. I’m...” his eyes briefly went distant. “Agents face trauma on a regular basis. We know what it can do. Neither Amanda nor I would ever judge you if you stepped back.”

At that, she actually managed to smile. “I’m all right, right now.”

“Good.” He stood up and went back to searching around the bed. Carrie did the same with the bookshelf, shaking her head. Those had been the actions of a friend. Could she and Lee be friends, given the tension that sometimes existed between Joe and Amanda? Oddly enough, she realized she hoped so.

Her hands pushed another book aside, causing a spiral-bound notebook to fall from the back of the bookshelf. Why had Jamie hidden that back here? Picking it up, she started leafing through it. “Lee, come look at this. The dates, I mean.”

He did, and his eyes widened. “This wasn’t an impulsive reaction to this morning’s assessment,” he breathed. “Jamie was *planning* to run away, and has been for a while.” He began flipping through the pages, and then his eyes met hers. “And he knew where he was going to go.”

“I think we’ve found what we’re looking for,” she agreed. “Let’s go back downstairs.”

Just as they got there, the front door opened, admitting a wild-eyed Amanda. “He’s been in his bedroom, sometime after we left for the Agency this morning. His duffel and some clothes are gone, and his bike’s missing. So is that transit pass that had been in Phillip’s book bag.” She was panting, having trouble getting the words out. “He took advantage of us moving to a townhouse just over the line from our old school district, and on the city bus routes. He didn’t just skip school. He ran away.”

Lee held up the notebook. “We know.”

## 29. Joe: Timekeeping

The minivan's headlights cut through the darkness as Lee turned off Wesley Chapel Road. Joe, who was seated directly behind him, took a deep breath to steady himself.

While he knew that Lee had gone through driver's training for law enforcement, it had still been a hair-raising ride over from their townhouse complex. His ex-wife's husband had coaxed out a level of speed and performance that he'd never imagined a family vehicle would have. Ordinarily it took five or ten minutes to drive to the house on Maplewood Drive. Lee made it in just over three.

With a squeal of tires, Lee parked the minivan in the driveway, ignoring the fact that the driver's side wheels were on grass. They spilled out into the yard, Amanda racing toward the front door. "Jamie! Where are you?"

There was no response.

Lee appeared with flashlights, handing one to each of them. "Spread out. Joe, take the garage. Carrie, circle around to the back yard. I'll go through the front."

Joe felt his lips thin. "I don't have a key to the garage anymore."

With a sharp look, Lee dug his keys out of his pocket. "I assume you know which one."

He took the keys and raced toward the garage, nearly crashing through the door before he managed to get it open. "Jamie!"

The garage was silent and empty. Amanda had moved everything out of it into a rented storage area, and Joe's voice echoed in the cavernous space as he dashed toward the attic stairs. It took two pulls of the cord to get it down, bringing a cascade of dust and dirt with it.

Based on that, he wasn't surprised to find nothing up there either. Dust was layered half an inch thick around the various surfaces.

Joe slid back down the stair rail, not bothering with the steps themselves, landing hard enough to twist a knee. He ignored it and ran across the floor back toward the door, which he'd left hanging open. "Not in here!"

Amanda came out onto the patio. "Or in here."

Joe flung himself past her, switching on lights as he raced around the empty rooms. "Damn it!"

Lee came through the front door, breathing hard. "Nothing in the front yard ei-

ther. Did anyone see his bike?”

“No,” panted Amanda, who had come back inside. “Everything’s just like we left it when we locked up the last time.”

“Check the yard again,” Lee directed her, handing over his flashlight. “See if there’s any evidence he’s been here and gone.”

“Right.” She raced away, her face showing the same determination that was on Lee’s.

She’d made a phone call on the way over, communicating in short bursts of jargon-filled sentences. Lee had periodically jumped into the conversation, using the same idiom, as they coordinated what sounded like an all-out search.

Was this, a part of Joe’s mind wondered, how they functioned on a case? If so, it was no wonder their success rate was so high. Joe had never seen Amanda like this before, cool and confident, projecting calm even though her hands had been shaking when she took the flashlight from Lee.

“Nothing,” said Carrie as she darted into the house.

“Including the bushes?” asked Lee.

“No. I’ll go check those.”

Joe and Lee weren’t far behind, which meant they were outside when they heard Amanda’s cry. “His bike!”

“Where?” shouted Joe as he ran toward her. “In the bushes? He never left it there before.”

She was clambering into the foliage some distance from where Carrie was checking, shoving branches and aside as she made her way to the bike. “No. Not like this. Lee!”

“What?” her husband called from outside the bushes.

“This looks like it was thrown in here. By an adult, or maybe even two. Which means —”

“Yeah. I know.” His expression was tense as he helped her back out into the yard. “Lock up, will you?”

“Lock up?” asked Joe.

“Yeah. We’re going to the Agency.” Lee indicated both him and Carrie, who had come up behind him. “Look, um, you both know what we do. There’ll be some things there that you can’t discuss or explain and we’re not always going to be able to answer

questions.”

“I know,” snapped Joe.

Carrie laid her hand on his arm. “Let him finish. He has to do this.”

Lee nodded. “I need you both to promise me you won’t discuss anything you see or hear, unless you check with us first. We’ll take you in on our own authority, but we need to be sure you’ve agreed to that.”

“Of course,” said Carrie.

Joe nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Good. Thanks.” Taking his keys from Joe, he raced back around to the driver’s side, unlocking the sliding door so they could crawl onto the second-row bench. By the time they finished, Amanda was in the car, and once again there was the squeal of tires as Lee backed out.

• • •

“A lot of times, the waiting is the hard part.”

Joe looked up and saw one of Lee’s and Amanda’s co-workers standing there, two maroon-colored mugs in his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he began. “We’ve spoken before, but I’ve forgotten your name.”

Offering one of the mugs, the man sat down beside him on the couch. “Melrose. Billy Melrose. Director of Field Section, which means I’m the one who’s in charge of this circus.” He paused. “God only knows how many nights I’ve spent here, worrying what little detail I might miss because I’m running on caffeine and adrenaline.”

Joe nodded. Across the room, Amanda had her head bent over a grid, plotting something on it. Lee was sitting on the edge of her desk with several ragged-edged sheets of printer paper, alternating between reading out whatever was on them and pointing to places on Amanda’s — was it a map? A search pattern? Something else entirely?

Carrie joined them. She, too, was carrying a maroon mug, although hers had a cat-shaped ceramic charm clipped to the rim. A faint smell of chocolate came from it. She’d switched off the coffee, then, probably in an effort to stay calm.

The older man acknowledged her with a nod. “Mrs. King. I’m Billy Melrose.”

“It’s good to meet you, Mr. Melrose.”

“Call me Billy,” he replied. “Since I’m not your supervisor.” He indicated Lee,

Amanda, and a blonde woman who was seated in front of a radio set. “Most of my own people do that anyway. Amanda’s about the only one who doesn’t.”

“Then I’m Carrie,” she replied. The exchange was so quiet, so ordinary, when *his son* was out there somewhere...

Billy met both of their eyes in turn. “Listen, these three characters are one of my best teams. If Jamie is anywhere in the Capital Region, they’ll find him.”

“What about your agent?” asked Carrie. “Zeta, I think Lee said she’s called?”

“They’re coordinating with agents on that search too.”

Joe spoke up. “Do you think the two disappearances are related?”

“I really hope not.” Billy exhaled loudly. “Francine, you heard from Duffy or Monroe recently?”

“No,” said the blonde at the radio.

“Give them a call. They’re overdue for check-in.” His gaze came back to Joe and Carrie. “You’ll have to excuse me. But we’re not going to stop until we find both Jamie and Zeta. That’s a promise.”

Beside Joe, Carrie nodded. Her hand slid into his, small and warm, and he squeezed gently. She responded by laying her head on his shoulder.

A clock radio perched on one of the bookshelves read 3:18 a.m.

“Maybe you should get some sleep,” he suggested. “There should be enough chairs around for me to let you have the couch.”

She lifted her head and shook it, but then sighed and nodded. “I’d rather share.”

“On this couch?”

She directed him to one corner of it and then lay down with her knees over his lap. They’d done this a few times before, on couches with a lot more stuffing. He was surprised how comfortable it was on this one.

“I’m glad we came,” murmured Carrie as she began to drift off. “It’s good to see how much everyone here cares. Makes me feel a lot more comfortable about knowing what they do for a living.”

He nodded, feeling his own attention starting to drift. “I’m glad too.”

• • •

The shrill of the telephone pulled him out of sleep. Lee picked it up at his desk. “Stetson.” There was a pause. “*Jamie?* Where are you?” He gestured frantically at Amanda, who picked up the extension at her desk and motioned Joe and Carrie over to listen.

On the other end of the line, Jamie’s voice was thin and scared. “Lee, I’m so sorry I ran away —”

Despite his obvious agitation, Lee kept his voice calm. “We’ll worry about that later. Is there anyone there with you?”

“Yeah. Couple of men with guns and there’s a lady, too. I don’t think she’s with them though. They’ve got us in a room together and only took me out ‘cause they wanted me to make this phone call.”

Amanda looked up sharply, a question in her eyes, but Lee shook his head as he continued. “What’s the lady’s name?”

“I dunno. They come in and threaten us anytime we talk to each other.”

“Okay.” Lee’s hands clenched briefly. “Is she about five-seven, with short brown hair?”

“Uh-huh. Well, I can’t tell about her height, but she’s got short brown hair, a little curly but not much. She looks a little like you actually.”

Amanda put her hand over the bottom of her handset. “Zeta,” she whispered to Joe and Carrie.

Just then, there was a commotion on the other end of the line, and when Jamie’s voice came back it was shaking. “Look, the men with guns, they —” he sobbed, just once. “They said I haveta give you a message. That that’s why they let me call. And that your deadline’s up in twelve hours.”

The blonde woman at the communications console waved her arms at Amanda, who nodded before jumping into the conversation. “Jamie, it’s Mom.”

On the other end of the line, he began to cry.

“Shh, sweetheart. I know you’re scared. We’re all scared. But you just need to hang on for a little bit. Has anyone hurt you?”

“N-no,” said Jamie. Then he gulped. “Well, they took my backpack.”

“All right.” Amanda was still exchanging gestures with the woman at the communications console. “Are you able to describe the men for us?”

There was a long pause before Jamie audibly took a breath. “I don’t think so.”

Over at his desk, Lee clenched his fist again, but didn’t say anything.

“That’s okay, sweetheart. You don’t have to. Did they...” she trailed off, looking at Joe. He shook his head, not at all certain what she was trying to say but knowing that they weren’t in a position to discuss it right now. “Did they tell you anything at all about this deadline we’re supposed to meet?”

“No,” came the answer.

Over at the communications console, the blonde snapped her fingers. Lee immediately laid down his handset and went over to her, looking at something before nodding to Amanda. It occurred to Joe that they had to have worked together before, very closely, if they were able to communicate like this.

“Okay,” said Amanda into the headset. “Okay. You’re doing just fine. Can you —” but then there was another commotion on the phone, and shouting in the background. Her voice went up an octave. “Jamie?”

There was the sound of scuffling, and then he came back on the line. “I gotta go, Mom. I love you. Bye.” Then the call cut off.

Amanda collapsed into her desk chair, shuddering and shaking. It took her three tries to get her phone’s handset back into the cradle, and tears were running down her face. Lee was at her side immediately, kneeling and wrapping his arms around her before pulling her against his chest. For a long moment, he simply whispered and stroked her hair as she cried, rocking them both gently. His own expression had become drawn and haggard.

Joe had to admit he felt the same way. If he had a mirror, he suspected, he’d have likely seen the same expression in it.

Then Lee looked over Amanda’s head at Joe and Carrie. “Thank you.”

“For what?” asked Carrie. There was a faint smear of blood on her lower lip from where she’d been chewing on it.

“Staying quiet. We needed to keep the conversation going as long as we could so that we could try for a trace.” He nodded at the blonde woman. “It looks like Francine got one. She also got a good recording of the call.”

Carrie was hanging on to Joe’s hand as though it were a lifeline. “Where’s Mr. Melrose?”

“Downstairs in the — in one of our other departments.”

“All of you just stay put,” said Francine. “I’ll go and get him.” There was a click as she locked the door behind her. For what seemed like the first time, Joe noticed the

words *Film Library* stenciled on the outside. That certainly explained the film canisters stacked along one shelf, and possibly the large, safe-like door near the couch.

The clock radio on the bookshelf read 6:22 a.m. He and Carrie had only slept for about three hours. It had been pure exhaustion, and he wasn't feeling particularly rested. He imagined Lee and Amanda, who had had things to do, likely hadn't slept at all.

At the desk, Amanda straightened up and patted Lee's shoulder before turning toward him. "I was worried I might scare him worse than he already was, and that he'd end up trying to do something and getting hurt."

"Oh," said Joe. "Was that what you were trying to tell me?"

"Yes. Thank you for staying quiet. We didn't want them to know you and Carrie were on the line."

"Why not?" asked Carrie.

Lee was on his feet now. "You never give terrorists more information than you absolutely have to. And you can bet they've got a watcher over at the townhouse complex. That's why I had the two of you leave through the back door of your place and keep your heads down before we drove off. If we're lucky, whoever was watching won't catch on to the fact that the two of you are with us."

"And if we're not?"

The other man closed his eyes and shook his head. "It might be significant. It might not. Regardless, I don't want to give anything away."

Joe nodded and took a deep breath. "All right. What now?"

The door unlocked and opened, admitting Billy, who nodded to Joe and Carrie. Francine was a step behind him, looking tense. "Lee," she began. "They bounced that thing all over the place. The trace is saying Montréal, but nobody down there believes it."

"Neither do we," replied Amanda. "So we're stuck with the tape, is that it?"

Billy sighed. "Yes."

She squared her shoulders. "Then let's get to it."

"Get to what?" asked Carrie.

"We have to listen," said Billy. "Anything that could be a clue. Mr. and Mrs. King, I'd like you in on that too. We're setting up in the first-floor conference room now."

Joe felt Carrie's hand slip into his. They might only be running on a few hours' sleep, but for Jamie's sake they could do just about anything.

### 30. Amanda: Listening

“Again.”

Even Lee’s expression had become difficult. “Why?”

“There’s something there.” Amanda twisted her hands together, aggravated.

“What’s there?” asked Joe in an overly controlled voice.

“I don’t know!” she exploded, surprising even herself. “But if I did, it’s all we’ve got, and —” her voice broke, and she suddenly realized there were tears streaming down her face again. “It’s all I can think of.”

Joe and Lee exchanged a glance. In the hours since they’d adjourned to this featureless room, the two men had reached some sort of tacit agreement. Amanda wasn’t sure which was worse: having them barely tolerate each other, or having them about to unite against her.

She shook her head before either of them could verbalize a response. “Don’t even start.”

Lee, who’d been bending toward her chair, awkwardly landed on his knees. “Don’t start what?”

“Trying to calm me down, or whatever it was the two of you are thinking about doing right now. Just replay the recording.”

“Amanda,” he began, and while his speech was soft there was an underlying burr of annoyance. “Crypto’s been at this thing forward and back, and you yourself just admitted you don’t know what it is you’re hearing. How many times have we replayed this by now?”

“Not nearly enough.” She couldn’t keep it from coming out as a snap.

“We’re also all running without sleep,” he continued, as if she hadn’t spoken, and now that she was looking, she could see that his eyes were on the verge of blood-shot. “At the very least we should take a break.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, feeling her throat threatening to close. “He’s my son.”

“He’s mine, too,” said Joe. His tone wasn’t as gentle as Lee’s, but it wasn’t harsh, either. “We aren’t going to get anywhere by playing that call over and over.”

“Maybe you can’t, but I intend to.”

“Amanda.” Now he sounded as unhappy as Lee.

“If you’re too tired, you can go to the barracks with Carrie,” she replied tersely.

Joe's wife had finally collapsed from exhaustion, and Francine had taken her to sleep in an actual bed. The other agent hadn't yet returned herself, leading Amanda to suspect that Carrie wasn't the only one who was getting some down time. "You can at least get some rest for yourself."

He and Lee made eye contact again before he replied. "Only if you come with me."

"No. I couldn't sleep now if I wanted to."

Lee pushed to his feet. "Amanda, don't make me make this an order."

"You *wouldn't*." He, of all people, should understand that she needed to be here!

He didn't quite meet her eyes. "I will if I have to. I'm the senior agent."

Amanda was on her feet before she realized it. "How *dare* you!"

He circled around in front of her so that their part of this conversation could be more private. "Next to Joe and you, there is nobody who wants to find Jamie more than me. But we're all exhausted, probably to the point of making mistakes that we don't even realize yet." His hands scrubbed through his hair. "Two hours. Then we can come back."

"Lee!" she cried, feeling her pulse pounding at her temples. "Please. It's already—" she glanced at the clock. "Oh, my gosh. It's already ten-thirty. We only have six hours left!"

"Two hours, Amanda."

Her lips compressed into a line, and she realized her mouth was dry. When was the last time she'd had anything to drink? "One."

"Ninety minutes, *and* you have something to eat. That's my final offer."

"If I can listen to the recording one more time."

Lee shook his head. "There's nothing there that won't still be there in an hour and a half."

She suddenly understood: he didn't expect to find Jamie before the deadline. Based on her ex-husband's expression, neither did Joe. The surge of anger from earlier returned, beginning to segue into true rage. How could *Jamie's own father* just give up like that? And how could her husband agree *in the same breath* that he'd argued he wanted Jamie back just as desperately as she and Joe did?

Amanda stalked over to the tape machine and rewound the recording herself before putting her headphones back on. "Start it again."

The technician glanced nervously at Lee, who rolled his eyes. "One time only," he instructed. "Then Sunlight's going to the barracks even if I have to pick her up and carry her there myself."

Oddly, the threat and his use of her code name steadied Amanda, and she felt her emotions settle. She took a deep breath, focusing her concentration, as the tape clicked back on.

*"Stetson."*

*"It's me."*

*The fear and relief were both unmistakable in Lee's tone as he answered on the recording. "Jamie? Where are you?"*

*"I dunno," came the reply. "Lee, I'm so sorry I ran away —"*

*Although she hadn't recognized it at the time, Amanda had long since identified Lee's harsh intake of breath, but his tone of voice, when it came back, was almost gentle. "We'll worry about that later. Is there anyone there with you?"*

*"Yeah." Jamie's voice shook. "Couple of men with guns and there's a lady, too. I don't think she's with them though. They've got us in a room together."*

*"What's her name?"*

Amanda focused her awareness, trying to ignore her husband's and son's voices on the recording tape. Whatever it was she'd heard, it wasn't in anything either of them had said. Had Zeta made some faint noise? Is that what she was hearing?

The recording continued, and she heard her own voice enter the conversation. *"I know you're scared. We're all scared. But you just need to hang on for a little bit. Has anyone hurt you?"*

*"N-no," came the response. "Well, they took my backpack."*

There was that faint sound again, and Amanda forced herself to listen, not to her son, but to the background noise. She'd heard something like that before, not too long ago, hadn't she? But when? And where?

Her eyes opened wide. "Sea gulls!"

Joe's eyes widened. "What?"

The machine's wheels stopped with an audible click when Amanda switched it off. "In the background. I can hear sea gulls. They're near a coast."

Lee reached for the telephone. "Beaman? You're the one on today? Well, good. Listen, we've got the second tape up here and we need an enhancement on the back-

ground noise.” He paused. “Bird calls.” Another pause. “Yes, ‘seriously,’ and we need this top priority for the case! I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Amanda and Joe accompanied him to the elevator. Ordinarily, Amanda would have gone into Beaman’s office with Lee, but since Joe needed an escort, she stayed out in the hallway instead. Absurdly, the situation reminded her of all the times Lee had told her to stay in the car, or some other supposedly safe place.

She hadn’t even realized she was swaying until Joe took her arms to steady her. “You’re falling asleep on your feet. You need some rest, even if it’s only an hour or two.”

Lee came back through the door. “We all do. Beaman says they need a minimum of two hours to do the work anyway. They’re also going to pull up Zeta’s proof-of-life video and analyze it for anything similar.”

“We should call T.P.,” she murmured, vaguely irritated that the words were coming out slurred. “He can identify the birds.”

“Francine or Billy can do that. Come on,” he said, and this time his tone turned firm. “It’s time to sleep.”

Was he really going to pull rank on her? She opened her mouth to protest, but then she saw the determined look on his face alongside the sadness in his eyes. Amanda wasn’t sure which one of them she was responding to when she simply nodded and followed.

• • •

“Yes,” came T.P.’s voice over the phone speaker. “Those are, in fact, sea gulls. American herring gulls, to be exact.”

“So he’s near the water,” Amanda surmised.

“Now, wait a minute,” said Lee. “Don’t sea gulls migrate inland this time of year? And these don’t sound like what I remember. When I’ve been to the beach, they’ve always sounded like someone’s mean laughter. But these sound like cats, or crows.”

“Very good, Lee.” T.P. sounded as though he were praising a precocious child. “Laughing gulls do migrate inland. But American herring gulls don’t. If you go out on the Delmarva, they’re everywhere this time of year.”

Amanda and Lee exchanged a glance before she asked the next question. “What

makes you bring up Delmarva?”

“Well,” their friend began, “you did say you think they’re close by, right?”

“Right.”

“It’s a large flock. You can tell from their cries. Except that you don’t usually find American herring gulls north of Cape May during the winter. Since they don’t migrate inland, and since they’re presumably not well south of here, that pretty much means they’re somewhere along the Bay.”

“The Bay?” asked Lee. “Why not the ocean?”

“Listen to the water.”

“The *water*?” he repeated with an incredulous look.

“It’s coming in waves,” explained T.P., “but they’re not crashing. More like lapping. That’s too soft to be the ocean. I don’t hear a lot of cars, though, which means they’re probably not in a city or along the western shore. My guess is they’re on the other side of the Bay.”

Now that Amanda was listening herself, she also heard it. “T.P., I don’t know what I’m ever going to do to thank you for this. It means so much to us. We’ll owe you one.”

“No you won’t,” he answered before hanging up. “You just get out there and get your people.”

During the conversation, Francine had come in with the videotape from Zeta and set it up to replay. She was clearly seated somewhere indoors, but there were no other details to indicate where she might be. Analysis had been all over the tape trying to find something.

With this replay, though, all three of them closed their eyes to concentrate on listening. Amanda heard the waves, and the gulls, and an occasional car, but there was another type of engine too.

Lee sat up straight. “Helicopter traffic. And what sounds like an ultralight. You can tell from how fast the propellers are turning, and there’s a counter-rhythm to one of them. That’d be a tail rotor.”

Francine frowned, leaving the video playing in the background. “Great. So now we need to check out every little airport on the Eastern Shore.”

“Wait a minute,” said Amanda. “Play that last part again.”

Francine gave her a look. “You hear something else?”

“No,” she replied. “Look at her. Not at the surroundings. At *her*. You’ll want to go back a minute or two.”

Francine rewound and restarted. Zeta looked tired, and there was a bruise forming on one cheek, but she seemed calm and unafraid. “...*they’ll include a written list of demands with this video. I’m also supposed to tell you I’m being treated well. They even brought me a porchetta sandwich and a Coke from the local depot. My...friends...say they’ve been breathing ‘Yankee air’ long enough, and want to go home. That’s why their deadline’s so short.*”

Thinking furiously, Amanda signaled Francine to stop the recording. While she hated admitting it, doing so was far easier than it had been before the hour-and-a-half of sleep Lee had insisted she take. A part of her envied Joe and Carrie, who were still downstairs, twined around each other in one of the barracks’ single bunks.

She blinked back to the moment. “...clearly some sort of coded language,” Francine was saying. “Crypto’s made this a top priority, but we haven’t been able to break it. There’s a company called Yankee Air Services out of Easton Airport, but that lead didn’t pan out since there are no Italian restaurants there or anywhere close by.”

Lee shook his head. “I’ve flown Easton. It’s not close enough to the water to be where we want anyway, and there’s also a decent amount of traffic in the area.”

It hit Amanda suddenly. “Does Yankee Air Services have another location? Maybe at some other airport out there?”

“Yeah,” said Francine. “In Stevensville. That’s not near water either.”

“But Bay Bridge Airport is,” said Lee suddenly. “Don’t they have a Stevensville address?”

Amanda had already pulled the phone book down and retrieved it, turning to the map pinned up behind her, and suddenly her heart began thumping. “Look at this. Bay Bridge Airport’s address is on Airport Road, but that opens up off Roman-coke Road.”

Francine shook her head. “I don’t get it.”

“Don’t you see?” She couldn’t keep her voice from rising or her speech from accelerating. “The porchetto sandwich. Lee, didn’t you tell me once that they serve those as street food in Rome?”

“Yes,” he said, and by his intent expression, he was following right along with her. “A Roman sandwich and a Coke. Romancoke. She must have figured out where

she is. How close to the water are they?”

Amanda pointed. It was right next to a marina. “Those other engines I heard. Could they have been from boats?”

“How much do you want to bet they were?” asked Lee as he grabbed his jacket. “Come on, let’s go.”

### 31. Lee: Decision

Billy took one look and turned on them as soon as they came into the bull pen. “Just what do you two think you’re doing?”

Lee gave him a hard stare. “Prepping to go with the rescue mission.”

“Absolutely not!”

The noise in the bull pen came to a near-complete stop. Lee couldn’t have cared less. Billy was wrong and he was right and that was all there was to it. “That’s our son you’re talking about!”

“Which is exactly why you can’t go!” retorted their boss. “Damn it, Lee, we never let family members participate in a mission!”

“Because they’re not usually agents. We are!”

Billy took a sharp breath before gesturing them into his office. He started in as soon as they shut the door. “Okay, Stetson — Stetsons. You’re both parents, and you’re both agents. Which one are you right now? Because if you can’t *absolutely guarantee* that you’re *only* going to act as agents, there’s no way in hell I’m letting you go out to that airport.”

“You just try and stop us,” snarled Lee. “Amanda, go get the rest of the equipment.”

“Belay that!” Billy was breathing heavily. “And that’s an order! You two are going to stay here and man communications and coordination. I also need you to be around if Mr. and Mrs. King wake up.”

There was a tap on the door, and they glanced out to see Francine standing there. Joe and Carrie were with her. With a harsh sigh, Billy let the three of them in.

“Why aren’t we on the way out to — which airport did you say it was?” asked Joe.

“I didn’t,” said Billy. “Because you’re not going.”

Joe was as furious as Lee had been, if not more so. “The hell we aren’t!”

“Scarecrow and Sunlight are staying under order,” snapped Billy. “And we don’t let untrained civilians go on operations.”

“Oh, baloney!” shouted Joe. “Amanda told me how she got started here.”

“That was an exception,” said Francine, whose composure stood in contrast to the rest of them. “Amanda actually put herself in the middle of it the first time any-

way.”

“I don’t care. We’re going.”

“I’ll put you all in lockup if I have to,” countered Billy. “Do I?”

Lee turned away, feeling anger stiffening every movement. Billy would do that, he knew; it wasn’t an idle threat. A part of him even understood why this was happening: they wouldn’t be objective. They couldn’t be. And if someone had to make a split second, life-or-death decision?

Amanda’s hand slid around his. “We can keep Joe and Carrie with us while we work comms.”

He shook his head vigorously, barely noticing that the argument with Billy was still going on. Carrie’s voice had entered the fray.

“Look, damn it.” Francine’s temper finally broke. “I’m not going to let any of you compromise *my partner’s* safety by letting you go with us! Did you even think of that while you were standing here wasting time arguing, when we could be on our way?”

“Your partner,” said Joe. “Our son.”

“The answer is still no,” said Billy, opening the office door and signaling to a security guard. “And if you try, you’re going into holding. All four of you! You hear that, Moya? If you see Scarecrow and Sunlight so much as make a move toward following us, you’re to take them downstairs. Am I clear?”

The security guard swallowed but nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Sir, please!” pleaded Amanda, and Lee could feel her shaking. “We’ll stay out of the way.”

At that, Francine actually laughed, although it was harsh from the anger mixed into the humor. “Don’t even try that line, Amanda. You never stay out of the way, even when it isn’t a relative.”

Amanda’s face crumpled, and she began blinking rapidly, the way she always did when she was holding back tears. “You just...” she trailed off. “You just all be careful out there.” Then she took a long, shaky breath. “Joe, Carrie, before we get started, do you want anything to eat or drink? We have coffee and a couple of vending machines.”

“I don’t believe this!” yelled Joe as they came back out into the bull pen. “You’re actually *letting* him order you to stay?”

Billy and Francine paused from where they were gathering their things. “I can

have both their jobs, King, and they know it. I should also mention I have friends over at the EAO. Good friends. In high places.”

Despite his red face, Joe visibly quailed. Carrie took the opportunity to tug him toward the break room Amanda had pointed out. He threw them a final furious glare before he followed.

“Sir,” began Amanda.

“No!” Francine exclaimed. “The decision’s made.”

Lee looked down at Amanda for a long moment, and realization came abruptly. Francine was right: a decision had been made. It just wasn’t the decision everyone thought it was.

“All right,” he said, fighting for his own control. His voice went gravelly from his efforts. “We’ll man comms. But you bring them both back,” he said, meeting Billy’s and Francine’s eyes in turn. “You hear me? Both of them.”

“Like we’d do anything else,” countered Francine. But then she sighed, shoulders dropping. “Both of them. I promise.”

• • •

As a rule, Lee didn’t like going into the break room; he could never quite ignore its stink of sweat and cigarette smoke. Amanda had told him once that she felt the same way. She only went in there when she had to.

Both of them went through the door without so much as a hitch in their steps.

Joe was at a table. Surprisingly, he was staring into a cup of coffee.

Lee sat down next to him. “I wouldn’t. The stuff out of that vending machine isn’t fit for human consumption. We have something better upstairs in the Q.”

“Is it coffee or something stronger?”

“Coffee,” said Amanda. “Well, okay, we do have stronger stuff up there, but it’s only for when someone’s getting too hysterical and it wouldn’t compromise anything if they ended up a little bit impaired.”

Joe’s stare became morose. “That wouldn’t be a problem right now.”

“Yes, it would,” she answered crisply, and despite everything, Lee found himself beginning to chuckle.

Carrie moved to stand next to where Joe was sitting. “Why? And what’s so funny, Lee?”

“The two of you,” he replied, even as he felt his momentary humor fade. “Thinking we’d actually take an order like that lying down. Especially when there’s communication equipment in our vans. This mission doesn’t need central coordination here.”

Amanda nodded. “There’s just one thing. If Lee and I tell you to stay back, you have to listen to us.” She held up her hands before anyone had time to protest. “I know. I know. That’s pot, kettle, and black. But the four of us are all Jamie has. If we all end up hurt, there won’t be anyone else for him.”

“Do you really think that’s how this would end up?” asked Carrie. Her hand twitched where it lay on Joe’s shoulder.

Lee took a breath and let it out. “It’s well within possible. I’ll be honest. I’d feel better if the two of you weren’t with us.”

That brought Joe to his feet. “Not a chance.”

“I know.” He paused. “Can either of you handle a weapon?”

“A gun?” asked Joe. “Don’t you remember I managed it with the Prime Minister? I needed one for protection a couple of times in Estoccia. And yes, I’ve pulled the trigger. On a practice range, at least.”

“I can’t,” said Carrie softly. “But if it’s something I can learn quickly —”

“No,” said Amanda, and her voice wasn’t without sympathy. “But there’ll be a lot of other things needing doing. Come on. Let’s go upstairs. We’ll need to go the back way, so the security officers don’t see us.”

“Upstairs? We’re not going to the car?”

“Upstairs,” said Lee. “We need to gear up. And get some of that actual coffee.”

• • •

Lee was startled when Amanda pushed Joe into the front passenger seat, instead choosing to sit in the minivan’s second row with Carrie. He could hear their voices murmuring behind him, but they were too quiet to make out any words. When he’d asked, Amanda’s answer had been far too smooth: *I haven’t ridden in the back of this new car yet. Don’t you think I should?*

He’d let it drop. Beside him, Joe appeared to be trying to stare a hole into the windshield.

“Easy,” said Lee. “We’ll be there soon enough.”

Joe gave him a terse nod. When he lifted his coffee mug for a drink, there was

an audible sloshing sound.

“You, ah, you might want to take it easy on that, too. We probably won’t be able to get any more.”

“No coffee makers in your panel vans?”

“Don’t I wish.”

“Mm,” was the other man’s reply.

Lee sighed. “Look, if you’ve got something to say, now’s the time to say it.”

There was a pause before Joe answered. “Why aren’t you driving like you did before, on the way over to the house? I didn’t even know you could lay down tire rubber with a minivan.”

“Evasion,” replied Lee. “We don’t want to get too close to the Agency team until it’s past the point where Billy can send us back.” He used his head to indicate the glove compartment. “Why don’t you open that up.”

Joe’s eyes narrowed, but he complied.

“Reach in and find the latch on the bottom. Feel it? Good. Press down and then pull up.”

The hidden compartment opened silently, and Joe gingerly reached in. When his hand came back out, he was holding an ankle holster and one of their backup pieces. “Is this legal?”

“We’re sworn law enforcement. There should also be an ammunition clip in there. Get that and then close the compartment and put those papers back so you can’t easily see it.”

He complied. “I take it this is one of those tweaks you were having done the day Jamie got into the fight.”

“Not then, but Amanda brought this into the Agency’s garage a couple days later.”

Joe hefted the pistol experimentally. “Why the secrecy?”

“Whole point of a clutch piece is the other guy doesn’t know you have it. You know how to load a Bobcat?”

Joe didn’t, but was able to follow Lee’s instructions for triggering the swing-up barrel. He handled the load well, keeping the muzzle pointed down at the baseboard or out the window the whole time. Lee relaxed at these indications that Joe did, in fact, know proper usage of a handgun.

“That thing won’t give you a lot of kick,” he explained, “and it’s bad for long distances. But up close, it might mean the difference between living and dying. You don’t need to tell Jamie about that compartment, by the way. Amanda knows, and there’s no more reason not to tell Carrie, but that’s enough. Which reminds me. Now that both of you know what we do for a living, it might not be a bad idea if I hooked you up with a couple of our combat instructors. Unless the IRC is already planning on teaching you self-defense, that is.”

Joe’s coffee mug rattled in one of the cup holders. “About that.”

“Now’s not the time.” The last thing either of them needed was to get into an argument right now. “Just think about it.”

“I have been, ever since I figured out you and Amanda were working together. You did an awful job of hiding that, by the way. I’m glad to see you’re more serious about your weapons.”

“Every gun is a loaded gun’,” quoted Lee. “All right. Looks like the Agency team’s going straight in. Maybe another forty minutes or so.”

“Where is ‘there’?”

“Bay Bridge Airport. Amanda heard sea gulls in Jamie’s and Zeta’s recordings.” He couldn’t help the faint smile that touched his lips. “That’s one of the reasons she’s so good. She notices everything.”

“But is that enough to keep her safe?” The timbre of Joe’s voice lowered. “I have a hard time believing she’s even willing to carry a gun. She hates them.”

“She’ll use them if she has to,” answered Lee. “And she’s actually not a bad shot. We’re always training, you know. If not on the range, on something else.”

“No,” said Joe shortly. “Nobody ever gave me that sort of information.”

“I wouldn’t let Amanda out here if I didn’t think she could hold her own. I’m the senior agent. All I have to do is say something to Billy and he’d put her back behind a desk until there’s a chance for a formal review.”

“She’d never forgive you.”

Lee chuckled. “Do you really think I’d tell her if I was the one who did it?” Then he sobered. “There’s no reason. She’s one of the best agents either he or I have ever seen, and we’ve both seen plenty come and go.”

“You’re not better?”

“I’m larger and stronger, better in a fight. And I’m more experienced. But that’s

different from good or bad. What, did you think she was out here as window dressing or something?”

“She just...” Joe blew his breath out. “Her definition of rough-and-tumble is camping with a carload of tents and equipment.”

“That’s an asset.” He signaled his way around a tractor-trailer before glancing at the other man’s face. “Is that what’s had you worried? That she can’t handle herself in the field?”

“It’s not so much can’t handle, as it is shouldn’t have to handle.”

“It was her decision, Joe. She chose this. With her eyes wide open.”

“I know.” The other man sighed. “And I’m beginning to understand why. It’s that weird way her mind works, all those little side trips it takes, like hearing the sea gulls. That’s useful, isn’t it? And you didn’t question it, which means this wasn’t the first time something like that has happened. Is it?”

“Not even close. Which is why you ought to quit needling her about it. She’s not always as confident as she looks. Keep in mind, there’s no one at the Agency who would ever hesitate if it came to protecting her or her family. Nobody so much as *touches* them without us bringing down the hammer. They’re our own.”

“Does ‘family’ include Carrie and me?”

“What does that matter, if you’re not going to be around?” That came out more bitter than he’d really meant, but it was enough to push Joe back into that brooding silence. In the back, Carrie and Amanda’s voices had fallen into a cadence and rhythm, and he heard the faint rattle of beads. Praying, he realized, the same way he and Carrie had at the hospital, and which also explained why she’d climbed in the back. They finished about ten minutes before the end of the trip, and the remainder of it passed in silence.

When they got to the airport, he swung the minivan around behind one of the hangars. There were no people around, but that wasn’t unheard-of for a general aviation operation. Lee scanned the area as they got out; everything else seemed perfectly normal.

“What took you so long, Scarecrow?” Billy Melrose seemed to materialize out of thin air. “We’ve all been waiting.”

## 32. Billy: Lasso

Despite the dire situation, Billy couldn't help laughing at the confused looks on Joe and Carrie King's faces. "What?" he asked them. "Did you really think I thought they would stay put?"

Carrie found her voice first. "You threatened to put them in —"

"He had to do that," said Amanda, who was already retrieving gear from the back of the minivan. "If he'd meant it, he'd have had a guard on that back stairwell too."

"Half the folks in our section have children," Billy explained. "Including me. I knew no parent could ever have been expected to stay behind. But," and now the amusement dropped out of his tone, "you two are to stay back and away from the action, no matter what happens. If Lee or Amanda or anyone else on the team gives you an order, do it first and ask questions later. Are we clear?"

Joe nodded, indicating the holstered pistol in his hand.

"Just hold on to that right now," said Billy. "Pray you won't need it. Scarecrow, Sunlight, you set?"

Amanda nodded as she slung a bag over her shoulder. "Sir, where's Francine? We need our assignments."

"I have them. Code word is 'lasso,' and you're six and seven."

That got Lee's attention. "We have that many out here?"

"It's Zeta and Jamie," answered Billy. "They're two of ours, and a kid to boot. I was beating 'em off with a stick. Van's over that way."

Lee slammed the minivan hatch shut. "I'm going in with you."

Billy shook his head. "Negative. Lasso One wants you held in reserve, and she sent me to make sure that happens." He pointed. "Both of you go. Now. And take Dally One and Dally Two with you," he continued as he pointed to Joe and Carrie in turn.

He made sure they were trotting toward the communication van before slipping back around to crouch beside Francine and Jenkins. Beaman and Duffy, he knew, had had time by now to get into position on the other side of the hangar doors. He counted fifteen seconds before he saw the mirror flash confirming it.

"Your show, Lasso One," he told Francine.

She nodded and keyed her handheld. "Ready. Three, two, one — go!"

They moved quickly and quietly, forming a perimeter around the hangar door and the main entrance, which were located next to each other. Once she was satisfied, Francine nodded and beckoned to Jenkins. He reached over to twist the handle on the main entrance; the door opened silently. Francine was there immediately, covering him, and they vanished out of sight as they leap-frogged in toward whatever location they'd identified.

Billy's handheld came to life. "This is Lasso Seven," said Amanda's voice. "Pickup One advises a vehicle arriving on the airstrip side. Plates coming back stolen."

*Great*, thought Billy. It was going to be just as well that they had such a large team out here.

"Also a sentry going toward that area," continued Amanda. "I still have visual. He's carrying what looks like an M-16."

It could also, Billy realized, be a StG 44. The two could be mistaken for each other from a distance. He swore under his breath. "Lasso One, Lasso Three. You copy that? Could be blown already."

"Acknowledged," answered Francine, but there were no sounds after that. He held still, weapon trained on the hangar doors, counting breaths to stay focused. Thirty-two of them elapsed before there was a metallic groan and the hangar door shook. Billy stiffened his stance, ready for whatever was about to come out, but then there was the sound of a gunshot and the door stayed put.

"Status!" he barked into his handheld.

"Locked office door, north side, central," answered Jenkins. "We're advancing."

Another gunshot sounded, followed immediately by a third. He, Beaman, and Duffy exchanged glances across the ramp.

Amanda's voice broke in again. "Something's coming out that north window!"

Beaman, who was closest, took off at a run, not bothering with stealth as he rounded the building corner. "It's a shirt!" he yelled on the radio. "Dirt or oil smeared on it. Shape of a two. Ah, damn it —" there was a burst of machine-gun fire. "Lasso Five to all units. I'm fine, but pinned down. Shirt's still out there. Looks like a woman's."

Good information, but not enough. Was it, in fact, from Zeta or Jamie? Did the numeral mean both of them were there, or that there were two more attackers? Another curse slipped from Billy's lips.

Another spate of gunfire from inside the hangar, and then Jenkins' voice came through on the handheld. "One bronco's roped, but there's some smoke and visibility's bad. He blew the lights before we got him. Moving forward."

"Do you need backup?" asked Amanda.

No response. Billy wavered. This was Francine's operation, so it should be her call, but —

There was another burst of machine-gun fire from the direction Beaman had gone, followed by two quick single shots.

Duffy caught Billy's eye, pointing at the hangar door. It was shaking again. They burst forward together, running toward it even as, with another metallic groan, it began creeping upward.

"Federal agents!" yelled Duffy. "Freeze!"

The door kept moving. Billy could see movement inside the hangar itself.

"Lasso Three, Lasso Two," called Jenkins. "You see this?"

"I see it," answered Billy, his eyes also tracking Duffy's movements. "Where are you?"

"Other side of the hangar from you. It's an ultra-light. Lasso One's still trying to get into that office and — oh *hell!*" There was another exchange of gunfire from inside, and then five long seconds of silence. When Jenkins came back on the line, he was breathing heavily. "There's a third bronco in here! Must've been under cover." A pause. "I'm down. Thigh shot. Lasso One needs backup."

"This is Lasso Six," answered Lee. "ETA twenty seconds."

The hangar door was now fully open. "Come on out of there!" called Duffy. "Slowly. Hands up!"

There was a buzzing noise. It took Billy a second to recognize the sound as a propeller. He dropped into a crouch, sighting toward the movement he'd seen earlier. Duffy mirrored him as the ultra-light plane came out of the hangar and passed through the late-afternoon shadows into daylight.

"Stop now!" hollered Billy. "I'll shoot if I have to."

Whoever was piloting the thing didn't even slow down. After exchanging a quick glance with Duffy, they squeezed off two shots each. There was a loud crack and a splintering noise, and Billy found himself ducking shrapnel from the disintegrating propeller. Duffy was already belly-crawling forward, keeping his weapon at the ready.

The cockpit door was on Duffy's side, so Billy skewed his own approach as he went in, careful to stay out of the pilot's line of sight.

Duffy suddenly stood up and yanked the cockpit door open. There was a brief scuffle as he pulled the pilot out roughly. It was actually too rough and unsteady; he overcompensated, and the pilot took advantage of the opening to knock him down, twist free, and take off running. Duffy bounced back onto his feet and gave chase.

The plane was still moving. Billy rolled under it, careful of the wheels, and jumped into the cockpit. Stopping the plane's forward motion was easy enough; there were pedals on the floor, just like a car. He was less certain how to actually shut the thing down. Taking a deep breath, he started flipping switches on the control panel. Surely it wouldn't be too difficult to hit the right one!

At the third toggle, the engine powered down, but there was a sudden smell of gasoline. Had a bullet hit a tank? Was this thing in danger of exploding? He slid back out of the plane and did a quick visual check. There didn't seem to be any bullet holes in the body, although there was one in the windshield and another in a tire that had gone flat. What was he smelling, then? Did he even have time to search anyway?

"This is Lasso Four. Pilot from the plane is neutralized."

"Good," answered Billy. "I can't tell if this plane is safe or not. It's stopped and the engine's off, but I smell fuel."

"Did you shut down the fuel feed?" asked Lee over the radio.

"I don't know." He climbed back into the cockpit and started flipping switches again. There was a kind of sigh, and then the smell of fuel began to dissipate. "All right, got it now." He leaned back to catch his breath; he really was getting too old for this. "Lasso Five?"

"Still pinned," reported Beaman. "Two broncos now. I think one of 'em was in the car."

"Lasso One? Two? Six?"

The only answer was another muffled exchange of gunfire from somewhere inside the hangar building. Abandoning the plane, Billy took off at a dead run, but he hadn't made it three steps before he saw a sudden movement near the building's exterior entrance.

*Oh, no.* There wasn't enough time to get there.

"King!" he shouted. "Step back and stand down!"

Joe didn't even acknowledge hearing the order before yanking the door open and barreling through. Billy pushed himself as hard as he could manage, running on instinct as the light transitioned from outdoor sunlight to indoor gloom. He caught Joe as he was starting to open an internal door, snagging his wrist and yanking downward as hard as he could. They crashed to the floor in a heap.

"Stand *down*, damn it!" panted Billy. This was one of the most dangerous situations a law enforcement officer could face: an armed parent whose child had been threatened. "I need cover but you're no good to me like this!"

Joe climbed back to his feet, wild-eyed. "Cover? *Cover?* From my *son?*"

"From whoever else is inside there! I don't —" his breathing caught, and he coughed hard for a second. Joe made a break for the door he'd been trying to open but Billy was able to recover and bring his weapon up. "Don't make me! For God's sake, man, *don't make me have to stop you!*"

The other man went still, his eyes even wider than they had been, and for a long moment they simply stared at each other. Switching to a one-handed stance, Billy brought his handheld up. "Lasso Two! You still with us?"

Jenkins' voice was weak, and the words were beginning to slur. "Kinda. Getting lightheaded."

"Stay with me just a little longer. How many broncos are in there?"

"Um...ah, one down. Won't be getting back up. Scarecrow's..." there was a loud crash. "Make that two broncos down. They're going for that locked door."

Billy yanked open the door from the reception area and sprinted through, Joe only a step behind. Francine was hammering at the knob with the butt of her gun. "Steel door, deadbolt," she reported. "Couldn't pick it."

Lee got back to his feet. "Step back. We'll do this together." He motioned a three-count and they kicked hard at the same time. The door quivered but held.

"Again!" ordered Billy, joining them. He was vaguely aware of Joe on Francine's other side but had no time to comment before they kicked again. This time, the door shook hard, and it looked like it might not have been enough, but at the last second two hinges broke. The door's own weight pulled it free of its third hinge. It fell forward, landing on the floor with a metallic clang.

Francine was just a hair faster than Lee getting through. "Zeta!"

"In here! I'm — the kid's —"

Billy followed them into the room. Jamie was tied to a cot, a shirtless Zeta yanking at the ropes. Lee dove in with his switchblade and cut them in a few quick swipes. “Jamie!”

“Lee!” The youth bounced up and into his arms.

Billy reached back to pull Joe forward but was stopped by the sound of machine-gun fire from far too close. Everyone froze.

“Good move,” said the newcomer, who was standing in the doorway. He lowered his rifle to cover everyone in the room. “And how nice of you to all confine yourselves so neatly.”

“We have backup outside,” warned Francine. “And more on the way.”

“Your ‘backup’ is trapped against the side of this building.” The new assailant gestured with the rifle’s muzzle. “Weapons on the floor, please, and kick them away from you.”

There didn’t seem to be any other option besides compliance. Exchanging glances, the three of them — Billy, Lee, and Francine — did as they’d been told.

“Good. *Very* good. We now have five hostages instead of —”

At the crack of another gunshot, their assailant went down without completing the sentence. Blood began gushing out of a wound in his back.

Joe’s arms shook as he lowered the pistol he’d fired. “I ducked down before he saw me. And I’ve never — never actually fired one of these at someone —”

“Easy there.” Billy stepped forward, relieving Joe of the weapon. “Look who we’ve —”

“*Dad!*” Jamie flung himself from Lee’s embrace into Joe’s. “You’re here!”

“— found,” finished Billy quietly before keying his handheld again. “Inside’s secure. Status outside?”

“Clear.” Beaman’s voice was tired, but alert, and came from directly behind him. “Fielder came for backup after Duffy got to the van. He got the one who still had me pinned down.”

In the storeroom beyond, Francine had taken off her jacket to wrap around the bra-clad Zeta. Beaman, who’d been in the corridor, knelt down next to the now semi-conscious Jenkins. Fielder was also there, checking on the enemy operative who’d come in last and then looking up with a shake of his head.

Billy gave himself the luxury of three deep, long, cleansing breaths before keying back onto the line to call the all-clear.

### 33. Lee: Possibilities

Jamie made a face at Amanda. “I already told you I’m fine and I don’t need to go to the hospital.”

“I heard you,” she replied, with more patience than Lee would have had. “I know you don’t feel like you need to go, but sweetheart, you need to go anyway. Sometimes there’s an injury you don’t realize you have until later.”

He cast his eyes down to the ground. “Except that I remember what happened the last time I went.”

Before Amanda could respond, Nancy Zusterakos, who’d been sitting next to him on the stretcher, threw an arm around Jamie’s shoulders and pulled him close enough to give him a knuckle rub. “C’mon, small fry, do like she says. I’ll be in the next ambulance over anyway. Unless you’re too afraid —”

Jamie shoved her hand away. “That’s not gonna work on me. I’m too old for that.”

“Well, all right then, old man. Do like she says anyway.”

With the kind of exaggerated sigh that only a middle-schooler could produce, Jamie gave in, kicked up his feet, and twisted around so that he could lie back on the stretcher. Anxious eyes fell on Amanda’s and Joe’s faces. “You’re gonna be there, too, right, Mom and Dad? Comin’ in right behind the ambulance or at least Nancy’s?”

“Actually,” said one of the paramedics, “your parents can ride with you, if you’d like.”

“I’m not a baby.” But before anyone could react to that, he sighed again. This one was softer than the first. “But it’d be nice.”

After Jamie was loaded, Joe crawled in first before holding a hand out for Amanda. “It’s a little tight in here.”

She levered herself up. “I’m sure it’s fine. Where are we going?”

“Queenstown Memorial,” said one of the paramedics. He glanced at Lee. “You know the address?”

Lee shook his head.

The paramedic rattled it off. “You, ah, you don’t have to stay and give any more information, do you?”

“Not right now.” He’d submitted a preliminary field report already, and he could

file his final report when he went back to the Agency on Monday. Billy had explicitly told them both to take tomorrow to rest and recuperate. Lee was still running on adrenaline and caffeine, but he knew it to be a temporary fix at best. “We’ll see you there.”

“Oh,” said Carrie as they began to turn away. “I almost forgot.” Taking something out of her cardigan’s pocket, she handed it to Amanda. “Here you go. I guess I won’t need these after all.”

The other woman’s lips twisted into a sardonic smile. “Thanks.”

“What was that you gave Amanda?” Lee asked Carrie as they made their way back to the minivan.

“Her handcuffs.”

He momentarily stopped in his tracks to stare at her. “Her *handcuffs*? What were you doing with those?”

Carrie’s tone was matter of fact. “She wouldn’t stay in the van any other way.” Then, seeing the look on his face, she joined his laughter. “I didn’t actually do anything, Lee. The threat was enough.”

He shook his head as he unlocked the minivan’s passenger door. “Lady, I’m sure glad you’re on our side. Do you know, that’s the one thing I never thought about doing during all that time when Amanda wouldn’t stay in the car?”

She continued the conversation after they settled into their seats. “Maybe that’s a good thing. That you never even threatened to handcuff her, I mean. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Amanda so angry. If she’d gotten that angry with you before you began dating, you might not have ever gotten so far.”

“Maybe,” he allowed as he pulled onto the asphalt behind the two ambulances. “But not for the reason you think. She’s saved my life after ignoring those orders. More than once.”

“Perhaps you subconsciously knew she could, so that’s why you never thought of restraining her.” Carrie shrugged. “She and I have a different dynamic than you and I do. A lot of times, there’s open animosity between mother and stepmother. She and I have kept that from happening, thank goodness, and I think we can go on keeping it pretty cordial. But it does mean that, if we feel we need to, we’ll cross each other without thinking twice. And I needed to this time.”

“Hm,” he answered as he turned the minivan onto Romancoke Road. “That nev-

er occurred to me. But you're right; I couldn't call Joe a friend. We still have to be really careful how we talk to each other. We're trying, though. It might get to friendly, perhaps, given some time, but I doubt it'll ever be comfortable. I..." he trailed off, shaking his head. "I've seen Amanda in pain from his decisions too many times."

"And I've seen him in pain from her decisions more often than either one of us would admit," she replied softly. "But, Lee, you and I don't have that sort of history. If you and I became friends, it might help them both."

Lee made the effort to keep himself from retorting that Joe's pain was of his own making, instead giving her a sidelong look. "Does it matter? You two aren't going to be around much longer. You're heading out to Côte d'Ivoire after the holidays, right?"

There was a long pause before she took a deep breath. "Actually, we need to talk to you and Amanda about that. We meant to wait until we had you together, but...no. There's been — we asked for another offer. If we could be stationed stateside, at least for a few years." She continued with the details, and the longer she spoke, the more he found himself smiling.

It probably wouldn't ever be a close friendship, and it would take work. But maybe the two of them could be friends after all.

• • •

By the time they got back to his bed, Jamie had already been assessed and hooked up to an IV. He was also feeling better enough to complain about it. "But why can't you let me eat?" he kept asking. "Because I'm hungry. They never gave us food."

Carrie glanced over at Lee and Amanda. "I thought your agent said —"

"It was a coded message," he replied. "The ones we arrested don't speak English very well. Zeta told me she'd figured that out pretty early on, so she was willing to take the chance. All she had to do was keep her tone even and cheerful."

"Are you talking about Nancy?" asked Jamie.

"Yes," Lee replied. "That is her name. We call her Zeta because it's easier."

He frowned. "Nancy' isn't that hard."

Amanda jumped in before he could reply. "It's a little more complicated than that, sweetheart, but nothing you need to worry about. You can keep on calling her Nancy if she's okay with it."

The last response Lee had expected to that was a small, dopey smile.

“Look, sport,” he started. “You need to concentrate on getting better, all right? Because, when you’re out of the hospital, we — ah, the people that Nancy and the other operatives work with — they’ll need you to go in and answer some questions.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“You’re getting out that soon?”

Joe was the one who spoke up this time. “Yeah, tomorrow. He’s bruised and dehydrated, but it doesn’t look like there’s any permanent damage. They’re keeping him overnight to be sure, but if he’s still feeling fine in the morning, they’ll let him go home.”

He glanced over toward Amanda. “And Zeta?”

“A little worse,” she replied smoothly. “But there’s a decent possibility she’ll be discharged tomorrow as well.”

“In that case, could Nancy be the person who asked me the questions? Her being there with me helped a lot.”

“We’ll ask,” Lee told him. “They might say no.”

“But they might not.” The smile was spreading now, reaching all the way up to his eyes. “And I owe her a ‘thank you.’ I hope I get the chance to say it to her. You are going to let me do that, right?”

“Of course we will, sweetheart. We may not be right there when you get the chance,” Amanda continued, “but we won’t be far away.”

“Good. ’Cause I kind of like her.”

At least, thought Lee, he was admitting it.

Carrie managed to hold her chuckle until they were far enough away not to be overheard. “I suppose it’s about the right time for that to start.”

“She treated him like a little brother, though,” he observed. “Didn’t he realize?”

“At his age? Probably not.” She pointed toward the waiting room. “Why don’t you go see your operative, and I’ll see about getting us something to eat at the cafeteria. If I don’t get to sleep, I at least want to do that.”

“Why wouldn’t you get to sleep?”

“Lee,” she chided gently. “Do you really think any of us is going home tonight? Even though all four of us need rest?”

“We might.” But then he relented with a nod. She was as right about this as

she'd been about them becoming friends. It seemed like a distinct possibility, at least. Lee found himself looking forward to finding out how that would go.

• • •

Zeta tried to sit up when he came up to her bed. "Mr. Stetson. Sir."

He gave her a faux-scolding look. "Don't start with that, Zusterakos. I'm not that old. Besides, Billy's your supervisor. Not Francine, and definitely not me."

She glanced around, but it was Francine who asked the next question from where she was sitting on the other side of the bed. "Where is Billy, anyway?"

"Still doing cleanup," he told her. "They're going to be out there for a while yet, going back over the scene." He dragged a nearby stool over so he could sit down himself. "We won't need to give our formal statements until tomorrow at the earliest, and it'll be at least Monday for Amanda and me. I imagine we're going to end up staying the night here."

"That'll be two all-nighters in a row," Francine pointed out.

"And I'm feeling every minute of them." It was already taking a tremendous effort not to yawn. "I might even be able to actually sleep in the waiting room for a change." He looked back at Zeta. "I'm also going to apologize in advance."

"For what?"

"Looks like you have a schoolboy crush on your hands."

She started to laugh, but her expression contorted with pain, and her breath hitched painfully.

"It's all right," Zeta finally gasped after a few moments. "Bruised ribs. Not broken."

He frowned at her. "You pulled Jamie over next to you on the stretcher."

"He needed it more than I needed to be still." She was still trying to breathe through the pain. "He's a good kid, Scarecrow. He really held it together, even when they were in there waving weapons around and threatening to hurt or kill one or both of us. Have you put him through the agency family classes yet?"

"Not yet." Doing that would mean having to tell Jamie what, exactly, he and Amanda did for a living. He wasn't sure it was quite the right time for that yet. He suspected it might be soon, though.

"Scarecrow." Francine broke into his thoughts, her tone acerbic even though

the smile on her face ruined the effect. “I would appreciate it if you had a little consideration for my partner.”

“Partner?” That was news. To his knowledge, Francine had never had a regular partner.

The women exchanged a glance before they shrugged in unison.

“And don’t worry about Jamie, sir — Scarecrow,” Zeta added. “I have a nephew and niece his age. I’ve just been treating him the same way I would treat them if I needed to keep their spirits up. If I keep on doing that, he’ll refocus the minute he comes across someone more appropriate.”

Lee scrubbed his hand over his eyes. “Oh, goodness. You mean this isn’t going to just vanish completely? Jamie’s more resourceful than Phillip ever was, and we’ve caught Phillip sneaking at least once. Which means he may do more. Or worse.”

At that, both Francine and Zeta began chuckling, though Zeta didn’t last very long.

“Time for more pain meds?” asked Francine.

“I’m fine,” the younger agent muttered past the tears in her eyes.

“Ugh,” was the response. “What is it about you kids that you always want to be so macho? There is absolutely nothing wrong with taking pain medication if you need it. Scarecrow, since you’re the one that keeps making her laugh, you can be the one to go to the nurse’s station and ask for it.”

“Why me?”

That earned him one of Francine’s prettiest smiles, though it was full of teeth. “Because I asked you to? Nicely?”

Shaking his head again, Lee ducked out of the curtained-off area and stopped by the desk to pass the message along before heading out to the waiting area. Carrie, he saw, had already returned with coffee and a sandwich for him. Lee smiled again. It was a BLT. His favorite.

### 34. Amanda: Traditions

Carrie's version of the Christmas goose was different from their norm; during cooking, she'd explained that she'd used épice, which was a sauce made from peppers, garlic, and various herbs. She'd also included more traditional spices and a basic bouillon, so the dish was as familiar as it was different. Amanda had been a little skeptical at first, but now that she'd tasted it, she knew it was the perfect choice for this year, and could potentially become a new tradition.

They were lingering over the dinner table at Joe and Carrie's townhouse, chasing the meal with apple crisp, ice cream, and, for the adults, eggnog. Jamie had a large mug of hot chocolate instead. Conversation had been light, with a minimum of awkward pauses and no little amount of laughter. As she nursed her drink, though, Amanda couldn't resist asking the question that had been on her mind ever since she'd first seen Phillip's civics report.

"Why," she began, "do you think Phillip made up his sources in his project on the Segal Report?"

Jamie's head came up at the question and a profound silence fell. Amanda came close to taking the question back, but ultimately decided against it.

Joe was the first to speak. "I don't think we'll ever know for sure. But when I went back and checked the source work itself, most of the sources were valid. It was the quotes and citations that weren't. Phillip hadn't yet been sophisticated enough to mimic some of those periodicals' editorial tones, which is why it felt 'off' to Lee and then me. But he got close enough to fool his teachers." He shook his head. "With work like that, he might not have made a bad journalist himself one day."

"Except that he hated writing papers," said Jamie, his face flushed.

Amanda narrowed her eyes. "Is there something you're not telling us?"

At that, he dropped his gaze back down to his dessert.

"Jamie?"

The boy sighed. "Phillip didn't write that school report. I did."

"Including the conclusions?" Lee sounded as though he wanted to believe Jamie but hadn't quite managed to do so.

"No. Those were from both of us. The more we researched things, the more complicated they got, and that *couldn't* have been right. We'd already been to the li-

brary a few times to try and figure it out, and in fact we'd been asked to leave once 'cause we got a little loud while we were arguing. I guess..." he trailed off. "That may have been how those bad guys figured out they needed to watch us. What I don't understand is why they took Nancy, too. She wasn't one of our sources, and she isn't one of our teachers!" His hands shook slightly. "I mean, I'm glad she was there and all, and maybe that's what we might not ever know for sure: why they took her."

There was another long pause as the adults exchanged significant looks.

"What..." Amanda hesitated. "Jamie, what do you know about what Nancy does for a living? And why they took her?"

"She couldn't tell me a whole lot," he reported. "She said she wasn't allowed to. All I know is she works for the government, in intelligence, and that she'd been trying to follow up on a case. Is that what Phillip and I kept running into, every time we found something that didn't look right? Was there something —" he shook his head. "I don't know. Phillip thought it was just my imagination running wild, but I was afraid we'd found some deep dark secret."

Amanda met Joe's, Carrie's, and Lee's eyes in turn. "This does change things, doesn't it?"

"Definitely," said Lee. "I'll talk to...to one of our managers first thing Monday morning."

"Why?" asked Jamie.

The adults exchanged glances again before Joe stood up. "Why don't you top everyone off, Carrie, and then we can take this to the living room."

Jamie hung back a little so that he could give Amanda a wide-eyed stare. "Did I do somethin' wrong, Mom? Am I in trouble again? 'Cause I still don't know why you guys aren't punishing me for running away."

She wrapped her arms around him. "You're not in trouble, Jamie, at least not for Phillip's and your research. You're just..." how could she explain it without coming across as condescending? "I guess you're growing up a little faster than we all thought you had been. As for running away," she continued, "you're right. That wasn't okay. Neither was going snooping in your dad's and Carrie's bedroom. But given everything that happened afterward, we all figured you'd been punished enough already. You're not going to do anything like that again, are you?"

His eyes were wide. "No!"

“Then that’s enough. Come on. They’re waiting on us.”

In the living room, Joe and Carrie had settled onto their usual couch and Lee was keeping a place on the love seat for her. The fire had been lit and the lights turned down a little. The room was too small for a full-size Christmas tree, but there was one on a tabletop, with wrapped presents stacked on the floor nearby.

Jamie looked between the two couples and then opted for the bench in between them. “Will you just tell me what’s going on? Don’t try and tell me it’s secret or anything, ’cause I know it’s more than that.”

Lee’s hand wrapped around Amanda’s before he started. “There are secrets, Jamie. We can’t tell you all of them. But it looks like you may have already stumbled into a few.” Then, using simplified language, he explained the Agency and its mission. By the time he was done, the child’s jaw had dropped open.

“I had no idea!” he exclaimed. “How do you know about this Agency?”

Amanda allowed herself a deep breath before answering him. “Because that’s where Lee and I actually work.”

He jumped up. “You’re — you work in *intelligence*? Not making films? But —” he cut himself off. “You know, that explains an awful lot. But why didn’t you just tell Grandma and Phillip and me the truth from the beginning?”

“Because,” said Joe, “everything has to be kept absolutely confidential. Most people don’t know the Agency even exists, and it needs to stay that way. We didn’t want you or your brother to give it away, even by accident. Your mother...” now it was his turn to trail off. “Your mother didn’t realize how close the two of you had already come to its operations. Neither did I. None of us did, actually.”

“Did you know?” he asked his father.

“Yes. But only because they’d been the ones to help me out of a...a situation that happened right when I came back from Estoccia.”

“A situation,” echoed Jamie. Then he turned to Lee. “I guess you’re not going to be allowed to tell me what kind of situation, are you?”

“No,” said Lee. “But that one got —”

Amanda squeezed his hand before cutting him off. “What Lee means is that we can’t tell you all the details, but it was that time that the guys came after you in the school gym. Remember how your dad and I were also there?”

“Yeah, and —” his jaw fell open again. “Lee! That was *you* who fought with the

guy with a gun then, wasn't it?"

Lee nodded.

"I always thought you looked a little familiar," he remarked with a brief smirk. "It also explains why you left before we could tell say 'thank you.' Mom's always real big on that, but she wasn't that time. Once we got over being all scared and stuff, both Phillip and I thought it was weird she hadn't." He shrugged. "But it wasn't any weirder than anything else that had happened the last year or two before. You've been with this Agency all along, haven't you, Mom?"

"Not as an agent. That only happened fourteen months ago. Before that I'd been working there part-time, helping out whenever I could."

"Wow," he breathed, dragging the word out. But then, without any further prompting, he sobered. "I guess I can understand why you didn't tell any of us. Grandma, well, Grandma was something of a motormouth. I don't know if she'd been able to keep the secret, and this is so cool that I don't think Phillip and I could have either."

"Can you now?" asked Joe. His tone was as serious as Amanda had ever heard it. "This is important, son, and it's a big responsibility. Lives depend on it, including ours."

"I kind of have to, don't I?" Then he took a deep breath. "But I understand why you didn't tell me before. I..." he trailed off. "It was really scary, being kidnapped like that. Who were those men, anyway?"

"In English, they were called the HVA Irregulars," said Lee. "It's an East German splinter group that had been secretly funded by the KGB. It looks like most its members had been scooped — er, um, fired from their regular jobs with the regular HVA, because they were too sloppy and careless. As far as we can tell, they were trying to prove something so they could get hired back. We're still looking into it." Then he met Jamie's eyes squarely. "But you do understand we're not going to be able to tell you about whatever we find. Right, sport?"

He cocked his head. "Were you even s'posed to tell me that much?"

"No," admitted Amanda. "Not really. Except that you really do deserve to know something about why it happened, sweetheart." She glanced over at Lee. "Jamie's probably right. Someone overheard that loud argument, someone who understood both English and German, and that's how they latched on to us. It was an informant,

maybe, since only one of the men we arrested spoke English.”

Jamie paled. “You mean it was *my* fault Grandma and Phillip got killed?”

“No!” All four adults said it at once, making the word louder than they’d intended. Jamie visibly flinched.

“Nobody made the HVA Irregulars go after our family,” said Amanda softly. “They hadn’t even been ordered to do so by their government. *They’re* the ones who killed Grandma and Phillip, and they’re the ones to blame. Not you.” She shook her head. “Never you. All you did was get into an argument with your brother.”

“I guess,” he mumbled, his eyes back down on the floor, and Amanda made two mental notes: the first, to bring this back up in therapy; and the second, to alert Francine about the possibility of moles or leaks via the library branch.

Right now, though, Jamie was more important. “I don’t have to guess, sweetheart. I *know* it wasn’t anything more than that, plus the wrong person being in the right place at the right time.”

“Maybe. But I still miss them.”

“We all do,” said Carrie. “We’re all going to. We always will. It’s normal, and it’s all right. You...” she trailed off. “Jamie, a long time before you were born, before you were even thought about, my parents had to run away from their home in Haiti, just to stay alive. They still miss it and grieve for it today. But that’s all right, and so are they. The point is, some things are too much to ever just ‘get over.’ The best you can do is get through.” She glanced at Lee and Amanda. “Um, why don’t we open presents now? Your dad and I have something we want to show you.”

There was wariness in Jamie’s voice. “About you going to the Ivory Coast?”

“Yes,” said Joe even as he reached for two of the boxes. “Hang on a minute. It’s these two, right, *chérie*?”

She nodded to confirm, and they began ripping open the wrapping paper at the same time. They also held up the contents simultaneously: a set of art charcoals for Joe, and a Ginsu starter set for Carrie.

“I don’t get it,” said Jamie.

“These are things we couldn’t take with us,” explained Jamie’s stepmother softly.

“Then why’d you get them?”

“Because we’re not going,” said Joe, his voice equally soft. “At least, not for a

while yet, and maybe not ever. Carrie never gave notice at her job with the school, and I...there's things I can do from here." He met Jamie's eyes, but his expression was sincere, not challenging. "I can't promise you we're never going to go again. But we are going to wait at least until you're a little older, and we're going to talk to you before we make any decisions."

"That's your big Christmas gift from us," said Carrie. "We told your mom and Lee a week or so ago, right around the time you were rescued. They agreed to keep the secret until Christmas, but no longer than that."

Jamie's eyes had become suspiciously shiny, and his voice quavered. "Except it's not Christmas yet. That's tomorrow, not today."

Amanda picked up the thread of conversation again. "I know, sweetheart. But remember how we always used to let you and Phillip open one present each on Christmas Eve?" She indicated the pile. "Why don't we keep that going, the way it always has been. Go ahead and pick one of them to open up."

She'd expected Jamie to dive right in to the pile; after all, it was a Christmas present and he was still a child even if he wasn't her baby anymore. So she was surprised when he launched himself at her instead, knocking her backward against the love seat with the strength of his hug. She couldn't stop the tears from starting, but this time, she didn't feel like she needed to. Because they weren't from grief. They were from happiness.

### 35. Jamie: The Last Time

His mom had warned him she'd turned the house's heating down as low as she could without causing damage. It had gotten really cold overnight, though, so it still felt good once he walked through the door. He started to kick off his shoes and shuck his coat, but she stopped him. "You'll want those back on before too long. Besides, that's something you do when you're at home."

"But this is home," Jamie pointed out. "It's a bit weird to see it all empty like this, but it's still where we live. Or where we used to." What were you supposed to call one of your old houses? He'd never moved before, until earlier this month. "I'm going to miss it."

"I'll miss it, too," said Mom softly. "There are an awful lot of memories here."

Was she going to get mushy? Jamie watched her for a moment before deciding she wasn't. Besides, if she really missed it that badly, she could have just had Lee move in once everyone knew they were married. He shook his head. It was probably a good thing that wasn't going to happen. This house belonged not just to Mom and him, but to Grandma and Phillip too. He hated leaving it, but it made sense to change their home after so many changes to their family.

Besides, Lee's decorations were way cooler than Mom's. Not that he'd ever admit that to her, of course. Some things were just too private to say out loud, even to your mom.

"What's going to happen next?" he asked her instead.

"Well, the realtor's already showed it to a couple of people, but they decided it wasn't what they were looking for. It's still good news, though, because showings are usually pretty slow around the holidays. If we got some already, it means we might get a lot more after New Year's. Now that we've fixed those doors that were closing funny, he thinks it won't take too long before I get an offer."

"An offer?"

"From someone who decides they do want to buy it. That's how it works," she explained. "If someone decides they want it, they'll make me an offer. Then I'll decide if I want to say yes or no, or if I want to negotiate." She laughed softly. "The process is the same as when your dad and I first bought this house, but you won't remember that. You were barely a year old when we moved in."

He'd lost count of the number of times she'd told him that story, but right now didn't seem like a good time to remind her. Parents could be weird sometimes.

Take earlier this morning, for example. After dinner last night, they'd started a game of Monopoly and they'd all ended falling asleep, right there in Dad and Carrie's living room, before they finished. They'd woken up after the sun was up, looked around, laughed, and started opening the rest of their presents.

Carrie had put her hand to her mouth when she opened one of them, refusing to take it all the way out of its box. Dad, seeing what was in it, turned red as a beet, and they'd started speaking French at each other. After a few exchanged sentences, Lee had joined the conversation with some comment that made all three of them laugh pretty hard. Jamie didn't think that was very nice, talking in French when they knew he and his mom couldn't understand.

But Mom had been laughing, too. "All right!" she'd cried. "That's enough. I shouldn't have to learn French just to understand my own family!"

His dad had looked at Carrie. "Looks like our secret code's blown."

Her smile had been sweet, but her eyes had danced with merriment and mischief. "I told you I'd teach you Kreyòl if you asked me to."

Dad had made one more comment in French, making all three of them laugh again, before scooting over to sit next to Jamie. "Why don't I start teaching you the French words for all these presents of yours."

Jamie was sure he wouldn't remember them all, but it had been a fun conversation, especially after his mom had sheepishly admitted she'd forgotten all the French she'd taken in high school.

"I suppose," she'd said, "I probably should try and learn it again. Especially with some of the things I've been transcribing lately."

"Mom!" he'd begun. "Couldn't you wait until *I'm* in high school and we can learn it together?"

Lee had given Mom a significant look. "Sounds like a good idea to me. Besides, that way I can teach you the best parts of French myself."

At that, his mom had turned the same color of red that his dad had been at first. Dad and Carrie had started laughing so hard they'd doubled over.

"Jamie?"

Oh. He'd been staring at the empty bookshelves a little too long. There was

nothing there to see anymore. “Sorry, Mom. Did you ask me something?”

“Yes,” she answered, though she didn’t seem upset about him not listening. “I just want to satisfy my own curiosity. Why did you come back here the day you got kidnapped? There wasn’t anything you could take with you.”

Jamie briefly wished at least one piece of furniture might still be in here, since it was kind of awkward to shuffle your feet in front of your mom without something to lean on or hide behind. “I don’t know. I don’t even really know why I came here except that I just — I just really had been missing this house, and remembering everything the way it had been, and I’d wanted it all to come back for a while. Kind of stupid, really, but Phillip’s not here to call me a worm brain anymore.”

“Small favors,” his mother replied gently. “But it wasn’t stupid. In fact, it sounds pretty normal to me. There’s a lot here worth missing, even with the house completely empty.” She turned in a circle, right there while they were standing in the den, and when she was done her expression was a little sadder. “Missing everything just reminds us how much we loved them.”

“I’d probably have gone home before dark,” he admitted. “Maybe even before you guys knew I’d skipped school. I mean, yeah, I planned it out and all that, but that was just so I wouldn’t get caught.” Jamie sighed. “Which I did anyway.”

“Were you inside when the HVA Irregulars caught you?”

“I hadn’t made it that far. Haven’t been upstairs since the day we moved the last of our stuff out.”

Mom pursed her lips. “You know what? I have an idea. Why don’t we go all the way up to the attic and then start working our way down, room by room, so we can say our last goodbyes. We’ll tell each individual room our favorite memory from it. We can do the garage and gazebo, too.”

It sounded awfully silly to Jamie, but then again, it might be fun. “Sure. But things don’t seem so bad now. We were happy here, but we were happy this morning, too.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah,” he told her. “It was different. I’ve thought about it, though, and I bet it would’ve gotten different here too, eventually. Especially once Phillip started driving.”

“It probably would have,” she answered. “Although we’d have had more time to prepare. Still, different isn’t always bad.”

Jamie considered that for a second. “No. And it felt good to be so happy this morning. Maybe...maybe we’ll find more ways to be happy again this next year. The five of us, I mean.”

His mom smiled. “I’d like to think so.” Then she held out her hand and they went up the stairs together for the last time.

## Afterword

This story began with a simple question: what would it take to “break” Amanda King? We viewers had seen Lee Stetson hit personal walls in episodes such as “We’re Off to See the Wizard” and “Unfinished Business,” but there were few, if any, equivalent moments for Amanda during the series.

You can blame Stephen King (from his memoir) and Jamie Nash (of *Save the Cat* fame) for this, by the way. It was their comments about being very mean to their characters that sparked the question.

Because I have been asked: I intend to continue being hard on Lee and Amanda in future stories. It makes for some great plot lines. However, as of this writing there are no plans to kill off any other main characters. The continued success of the Stetsons’ marriage is also one of my non-negotiables, although it will suffer from stress and strain at times.

At the time I began writing, I figured the story would be fairly short – maybe 3 to 5 chapters – so I didn’t do any prewriting or outlining. By the time I got to Chapter 18, I had realized how utterly wrong I was; and after I wrote myself into a corner along about Chapter 21, it was clear that I needed to scrap the story as it then existed and start over from the beginning.

This time, I used an outline. As is usually the case, I ended up deviating from it in a few places, but the story in your hands benefited greatly from the decision to start over (even though that decision easily could have alienated readers). I am so very appreciative of everyone’s patience, and I hope that the final result has proven to be worth the wait.

You might note that this story is labeled “Restless Hearts #1.” I had planned a sequel to this story’s original version all along, and then, during the re-do, I figured out that one of the reasons I’d ended up in a corner was because I was trying to do too much. As such, I split the original into two stories, which turned the project into a trilogy.

The next story, which takes place during the first half of 1988, is tentatively titled *All That Mattered*, and the one after that (set during the second half of that year) currently has the working title of *A New Horizon*.

Once I realized that my “three to five chapter” story had become a flat-out series, several more story ideas occurred to me. At this point I am focusing on the initial trilogy, but if time and circumstances permit, I already know how I could add on to that.

When it comes to fan fiction, I’m not a fast writer. I have a full-time “day job” and I also write original fiction using the separate pen name of Jennie St. Thomas.

That said, the *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* fan community has been enormously welcoming and their reactions have kept me motivated. It might take a few years, but I’m going to get at least the initial trilogy done!

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One of the comments I got while posting this story online was that I must have done quite a bit of research when writing it. That’s 100% correct, and there are places in *Standing in the Dark* where it felt as though I had to research something on every single page.

All errors are my own, but here is more information:

*Chapter 1:* During the 1980s, the U.S. Department of State really did offer spousal security clearances as I describe here. However, the practice has since been discontinued.

*Chapter 3:* The Sierra Leonean parliamentary elections were held on May 1, 1982. The U.S. Peace Corps was active in Sierra Leone during that same time.

Catholic clergy in Haiti gradually shifted from using French to using Kreyól during the 1970s and 1980s.

*Chapter 9:* Waldo from *Where’s Waldo* was one of the most popular Halloween costumes sold in October 1987.

*Chapter 10:* *The Running Man* was released on November 13, 1987.

Leopold’s Kafe and Konditorei is located in Georgetown, but it opened in April 2005. Interestingly enough, the development company that owns it really was first established in October 1987.

*Chapter 13:* The combination-lock-and-passkey setup at Arlington Heights Middle School is based on the actual setup used by my own middle school during the same time period. So is Jamie’s bus corral in Chapter 19.

*Chapter 14:* The Sturmgewehr 44 was one of the first (possibly even *the* first) assault rifles to be successfully put into mass production. It was developed for the German Army during World War II.

*Chapter 17:* The Cavalier Motor Court opened in what was then Kitty Hawk, NC, in May 1950. It now known as the Cavalier-by-the-Sea.

The two-lane Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel opened in April 1964. An additional two lanes were added in 1998.

Tchaka is made from hominy, beans, pumpkin, and salted or smoked pork. It has multiple regional variations.

*Chapter 19:* Claude A. Swanson Junior High School opened in January 1940. It is the oldest surviving middle school in Arlington.

*Chapter 20:* Carrie's bacon cheddar corn casserole recipe can be found on the Pillsbury web site.

*Chapter 22:* Dr. Konstantin Frank Célèbre is a medium-sweet Riesling from the Finger Lakes region of New York.

The Voice of America broadcasted news and information outside the United States from February 1942 through March 2025.

*Chapter 24:* The WMATA bus routes as described here were the ones that existed when I was writing the story. They were probably different in 1987.

*Chapter 25:* The Segal Report, named for its primary author, was a part of Operation Denver, a Stasi-operated, KGB-supported disinformation campaign. It was first presented to the world in September 1986, and its effects can still be felt today.

*Chapter 26:* There seem to be several different systems for scoring shooting drills. For the sake of simplicity, I'm using a hundred-point scale with a qualifying score of sixty-one and ten-point spreads on the rankings.

*Chapter 27:* The Main Directorate for Reconnaissance (HVA after the German initials) was responsible for Stasi operations outside of East Germany. Division A XVI was responsible for sabotage and counterintelligence, in addition to running their shell companies. The HVA Irregulars named in Chapter 34 are my own invention.

*Chapter 30:* The different cries of American herring gulls and laughing gulls (which is what Lee is remembering) are as described.

Bay Bridge and Easton Airports are actual general aviation fields and are located as described. Yankee Air Services is fictional.

*Chapter 31:* Production of the Beretta 21A Bobcat semi-automatic pistol, which was designed for easy concealment, began in 1984 and continues today. Its “tip-up” barrel is considered a defining feature.

*Chapter 34:* The tradition of choosing one present to open on Christmas Eve comes from my own family life while growing up.