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Synopsis: A retelling of the first season episode "Saved By the Bells", set in the "False Start" universe.

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### **Send in the Clowns (False Start 3)**

"Amanda, can I ask you something?"

She nodded, looking up from the slip of paper she was perusing. Ginger, cinnamon ...

"I thought you said this was going to be a small dinner with just your family."

"It is," she replied absently, trying to recall which ingredient for pumpkin pie she'd forgotten to include on her shopping list. Nutmeg, brown sugar, molasses ...

Lee gestured at the sizeable amount of food in the shopping cart he was pushing. "Then do you have seven or eight other children you haven't told me about yet?" His attempt to steer the cart with one hand immediately caused it to veer off to the side.

"Careful," Amanda cautioned, reaching out to prevent a collision with a towering stack of Crunchy Crawlers cereal. "This thing doesn't exactly corner like your Porsche."

"You can say that again." He kicked at the closest wheel, trying in vain to get it to face the same direction as the other three. "What kind of sadist designed these things anyway?"

“The same one who invented one size fits all pantyhose, I imagine,” she answered, tucking the list back into her purse. “Getting back to your original question, it’s just going to be the five of us. But we always have a traditional Thanksgiving feast. When I said turkey dinner with all the trimmings, I meant exactly that. Besides, this way we’ll have enough leftovers so Mother and I don’t need to cook for a few days.”

“You mean a few weeks.” He shook his head as she added a box of seasoned bread crumbs to the pile. “You’ve got more food here than I’ve had in my apartment the last six months.”

“Don’t complain; you’re the one who said you wanted to spend the day with me,” she reminded him.

“That was before you suggested we go on a grocery shopping expedition that somehow turned into a forced march. You do realize that right now I could be on a Bermuda bound 747.” Lee closed his eyes briefly, as if envisioning himself in a tropical paradise. “Sand . . . sun . . .”

“Without me? I don’t think so, buster.” Amanda shook her head. “Just because Mr. Melrose gave you a few days off doesn’t mean I get the same treatment. Since I wasn’t involved in Rostov’s capture, I was lucky to even get one day and I need it to get ready for the holiday.”

“Wait a minute; what’s this?” Lee pushed aside the sweet potatoes and dug into the pile of groceries. He pulled out a bottle and inspected the label. “Sparkling Muskatel?” he read in a tone of contempt. “When exactly did you sneak this into the cart?”

“I didn’t sneak it in,” she protested. “You were busy interrogating the manager about why they don’t stock the Enoki mushrooms you wanted for the stuffing. It is customary to have wine with a special dinner, you know.”

“You mean, you were, actually, really, going to **drink** this?” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “Amanda, this is a lot of things, but believe me, it is not wine. A substitute for turpentine, maybe, but not wine.”

She reached for the bottle, but Lee held it just out of her grasp, and continued to read the label mockingly. "One of the finest vintages of Idaho. Ooh, and it's fresh too."

"Oh, shut up," she said, her teasing tone offsetting the harshness of her words.

"Okay, Amanda, but I'm putting my foot down." He stubbornly refused to relinquish the bottle. "Since you and your mother are doing all the cooking, how about you let me bring something more suitable to drink?"

"Fine," she gave in. "If you're that determined, then you go put it back on the shelf, while I wait in line to pay for all of this."

"Gladly. Which aisle do they keep the 'swill' in again?"

Amanda rolled her eyes. "The \*wine\* is in aisle six." Suddenly realizing what item she'd forgotten, she added, "Oh, and I need two cans of pumpkin puree."

As Lee headed towards the back of the store, she took over the cart and pushed it into place at the end of a long line of customers. Of course, the next queue over immediately seemed to speed up. Amanda watched in frustration as the customer her cashier was currently waiting on dug through an enormous handbag. Apparently she had spent the last five years hoarding every bit of loose change she could find and today was the day she'd chosen to cash it all in.

She sighed and switched her focus to the nearby display of tabloids. Honestly, who thought of those articles -- "I Was Hypnotised By My Stuffed Bird", "Scientists Investigate The Sensual Impact of Feet", "Secret KGB Consortium Controls Shopping Malls". Did anyone really believe any of them?

"Hello, Amanda."

She looked up, startled at first to hear her name, then even more when she recognized the person approaching her. "Dean," she greeted him without enthusiasm.

"So . . . um, how have you been?" he asked haltingly.

“Fine.” The customer in front of her moved up at last and she followed, pushing her cart a few feet closer to the checkout.

“And your mother and Phillip and Jamie?” Dean awkwardly shifted the carton of milk he was carrying from one hand to the other.

“They’re all fine too.” She was puzzled for a moment, wondering why her ex-boyfriend seemed so short before it occurred to her that she’d already become accustomed to looking up at Lee, rather than across at Dean.

He took a step closer to her. “You know, I miss being part of your family. But most of all, I miss you.” When she didn’t respond, he added, “Amanda, I still care about you.”

“Well, you have a funny way of showing it.” Idly she realized that any feelings she had ever had towards him – whether positive or negative – seemed to have vanished completely. It was as if their relationship hadn’t involved her at all or was much further in her past than just a few months. And yet she knew there had been a time when Dean had been someone very special to her. It was odd, looking at him now and feeling nothing.

“What happened was a huge mistake, one I’ll always regret.” Dean reached out and put his hand on her arm.

“Really? That must explain why you didn’t even call to apologize,” Amanda pointed out, immediately shrugging away from his touch.

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me to call. I figured you’d just hang up on me. So when I saw you here, I thought it might be fate, giving us another chance.” He looked at her hopefully.

“I don’t think so, Dean.”

“Please, Amanda, just say you’ll think this over,” he pleaded earnestly. “You have to believe me, I’m so sorry you were hurt by our misunderstanding.”

“It wasn’t just a ‘misunderstanding’,” Amanda retorted, discovering that she did in fact have some remnants of anger towards him left. “You were cheating on me.” Catching curious glances from several shoppers in the next line, she lowered her voice. “Dean, I don’t think a grocery store is exactly the right place for this discussion.”

“Then can we get a coffee somewhere and talk?” he persisted. “I really have missed you, Amanda. Just tell me what you want – ”

“Right now, I think she wants pumpkin puree.”

Amanda turned to see Lee approaching them, several tins in hand. He walked up to her, remarking nonchalantly, “I hope I picked the right kind. I find it hard to believe that there actually is a place in today’s consumer market for five different brands of pumpkin puree. Hasn’t anyone heard of a bakery?” Depositing the cans into the shopping cart, he straightened up and casually put an arm around Amanda’s shoulder. “So, aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“Lee, this is Dean McGuire. Dean, Lee Stetson.” She gestured to each of them in turn.

Lee started to extend his hand but abruptly drew it back. “Dean?” he repeated, looking at the other man with narrowed eyes.

Dean’s gaze hardened as his glance flicked between the two of them. “I see you haven’t wasted any time,” he said spitefully. “At least now I know why you didn’t miss me.” His scowl deepened as he added, “So is this something new, or did you start seeing him before we broke up?”

An expression of anger flashed across Lee’s face as he lunged forward. Dean quickly stepped to the side, keeping the shopping cart between them.

Amanda reached out and put a restraining hand on Lee’s arm. “Lee, don’t. He’s not worth it.” She gazed at her ex-boyfriend steadily. “I don’t think we have anything left to say. Good bye, Dean.”

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“You want me to what?”

“Wait in the car. And I didn’t say I wanted you to, I said you could if you wanted to.” Amanda stopped the station wagon at a red light and turned to look at Lee. “Earlier you seemed a bit nervous about this whole idea. I’m sure that most of your dates don’t take you home to meet their mothers.”

The thought of Katya and Katrina, a mother-daughter act from the Moscow circus briefly flitted through Lee’s mind, but he quickly concluded that wasn’t the same thing at all. “Amanda, I am not going to hide in the car from your mother. If I can handle tackling a Russian spy disguised as a nun, I think I’m up for this challenge too. I said I wanted to meet your family and I meant it.”

“Okay, but be prepared to answer a lot of questions. Mother really grilled me the other night when I was getting ready to go out to dinner with you.”

“So what you’re saying is that Rostov’s going to have an easier time today with the Agency interrogators?” Lee grinned over at her.

“Not quite.” Amanda laughed. The light changed and she turned off the main road into her neighbourhood.

“But close.” Lee watched as they passed a school, a playground and a skate park in quick succession. “Well, after what happened with the last guy you went out with, I can’t say I blame her for feeling protective. That jerk Dan really is a piece of work. I can’t believe he actually thought the two of you would get back together.”

“You know darn well his name is Dean,” Amanda said as she checked her watch. “Less than ten minutes. I think you broke your previous record.”

“What are you talking about?” He glanced at her before turning his attention back out the window.

“Lee, it’s okay,” she reassured him. “I happen to think you’re cute when you’re jealous.”

“Jealous?” he sputtered. “I’m not jealous. I’m just surprised he even had the nerve to speak to you again.” He paused then added, “I suppose I could have been nicer to him though. In fact now that I think of it, I should have thanked him. If he hadn’t been such a monumental idiot, I wouldn’t be with you right now.”

“Hmm . . . when you put it like that, maybe I’m the one who should thank him.” Amanda leaned across the seat and briefly put her hand on his before returning to the ten and two positions on the steering wheel.

Clearing his throat, Lee said, “You know, I was wondering . . . that night in my apartment, if you and I hadn’t . . . if we’d never . . . you know . . . gotten together, how do you think you’d feel about running into Dean again? Do you think there would’ve been any chance you’d take him back?”

To his relief, Amanda immediately shook her head. “I really don’t think that ever would have happened. He actually referred to his cheating on me as a ‘misunderstanding’. Unbelievable.”

“Good,” Lee said emphatically. Catching an amused look in her eyes, he added, “I mean, I just don’t see the two of you together. Even if I wasn’t in the picture. Which I most definitely am.”

“And I’m really glad you are.” The expression in her eyes dissolved to one of such affection, he felt his pulse jump.

As they continued towards her house, Amanda said, “Now it’s my turn to ask a what if. What if I hadn’t gone to your apartment that night, do you think we would still have ended up dating?”

“Of course,” Lee said without hesitation, even as a small frisson of doubt ran through his mind.

“You know, I’m not so certain about that at all.” Amanda shook her head. “In fact, I think you might not have asked me out ever.”

“Sure, I would have,” he protested. “Maybe not right away, but sooner or later.”

Amanda eased on the brakes as they approached a cross street then made the turn onto Maplewood Dr. “Sooner or later,” she echoed skeptically. “Considering your track record, I think it would have taken you at least a couple of years to even notice me, much less ask me out on a date.”

“This is so unfair,” he objected. “You’ve been listening to the office gossip mill again, haven’t you?” He turned to glare at her.

“You know, you’re cute when you’re indignant, too.” Amanda said as she pulled into her driveway and turned off the engine. They got out of the car, opened the back hatch and started to unload.

“Okay, this is it,” Amanda warned him. “Last chance to run.”

“I’m ready.” Lee lifted two of bags of groceries, straightened his shoulders and said with a protracted sigh, “Take me to your mother.”

## **CHAPTER TWO**

“Thanks again, Lee, for helping me with all this shopping. I know it’s not how you usually spend a day off.” Amanda balanced a bag of groceries against her hip as she rooted through her purse for her house keys. Fishing them out, she opened the back door.

Lee followed her into the kitchen and put his load of groceries on the counter. “Hey, it was kind of fun. Like visiting a whole other world.”

“I wonder where Mother is.” Amanda glanced into the den. “I thought for sure she’d be waiting at the door. Mother, we’re back,” she called out but the house remained silent.

“I think she left you a note.” Lee pointed towards the fridge.

Amanda removed the slip of paper from behind a magnet. Quickly scanning it she explained, “She just ran over to one of the neighbours’ to borrow their ice cream



maker.” She frowned as she reached the bottom of the note. “And I’m supposed to call Pretzel.”

“You actually know someone named Pretzel?” Lee asked incredulously as he began to unload the groceries onto the counter.

“That would be Pretzel the Clown,” she explained.

“Oh, so you’ve been running around with some clown behind my back.” He shook his head in disapproval.

Amanda laughed. “Not exactly. Pretzel’s the entertainment for Jamie’s birthday next week. He wants a circus theme for his party.”

“Pretzel the Clown,” Lee echoed. “As in ‘A little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down your pants’?”

Amanda shook her head. “You’re thinking of Chuckles the Clown from ‘The Mary Tyler Moore Show.’ Pretzel’s specialties are making balloon animals and doing magic tricks. The kids all love him.”

“I’ll remember that the next time my club wants suggestions for their big New Year’s Eve gala.” Lee rolled his eyes. “Like I said it’s like visiting a whole other world. Why don’t you call and see what he wants while I grab the rest of the stuff from the car.”

“Are you sure there’s no way . . . Yes, I understand but . . . Thanks anyway.” Lee brought in the last of the groceries just in time to see Amanda hang up the phone, a thoroughly frustrated look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” He quickly set down the bags and walked over to her.

“I don’t believe it. Of all the childish, immature . . .”

“Amanda, what did he want?”

“I told you that Pretzel’s really popular with the kids and almost impossible to get and you have to book him way in advance. So Dean called him months ago and arranged for him to be at Jamie’s party. Of course, this was before we broke up and I’d completely forgotten that Dean was the one who’d made the original arrangements.”

Lee interrupted as she paused for breath. “What did that jackass do?”

“The reason Pretzel called was to double check my address so he could send back my deposit. Dean must have raced to the nearest telephone he could find and told Pretzel we wouldn’t need him anymore.” She sighed. “What am I going to tell Jamie? He’s going to be so disappointed. How on earth do I get into these kinds of messes? None of this would have happened if I hadn’t run into Dean while grocery shopping. Talk about being at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Couldn’t you just explain to this Pretzel guy that it was a misunderstanding? There’s no way he got another booking so quickly,” Lee pointed out.

Amanda shook her head. “I tried that. He said he wasn’t available any more. For all I know, Dean paid him off. Oh, I don’t believe this. I can understand that Dean’s upset with me, but Jamie’s just a little boy. How am I supposed to explain to him . . . ”

“Amanda, this isn’t your fault. It’s Dean who’s behaving like a jerk.” Lee reached out and put his hands on her shoulders. Rubbing his thumbs in soothing circles he reassured her, “It’s going to be okay.”

“No it’s not. Unless you happen to know another clown I can book on short notice.”

“We’ll think of something.” He picked up a can of whipped cream from the counter. “Maybe I can help after all.” After shaking the can he carefully dotted Amanda’s nose with a blob of cream.

Despite herself she smiled. “Lee, stop that. I’m trying to be serious here.”

“So am I,” he said innocently, guiding the nozzle over each of her eyebrows in turn. “I thought you said you needed a clown.” He inclined his head and slowly ran his tongue along her left eyebrow. “Mmm . . . this could be a whole new party game.”

Amanda laughed. “Except that Jamie and his friends are still at the age when they think girls have cooties.”

She reached up to wipe her face but Lee quickly caught her fingers in his. Setting the can back down on the counter he captured her other hand as well, bending down to leisurely lick off the remaining bits of whipped cream. “Those boys have no idea what they’re missing.”

“Distracting me isn’t going to solve this problem.” There was a slight catch in her voice that indicated she wasn’t totally opposed to his diversionary tactics.

“You’re sure about that.” He covered her mouth with his, the sweetness of the whipped cream paling in comparison to the taste of her lips. Amanda’s eyelids fluttered shut as she leaned into the kiss, the birthday party crisis forgotten at least for the moment.

Lee slowly drew his lips back from hers, then pressed a series of lingering kisses along her jaw and neck. Amanda slipped her hands out of his grasp, trailing the fingers of her left hand up over his cheek and into his hair. Lee smiled as she used her other hand to lean against the counter, apparently needing the extra support. He slid his arms around her waist, pulling her more firmly against him. Nipping gently at her chin, he leisurely recaptured her mouth.

“Lee . . .” Amanda’s breath was shaky and damp against his face as she whispered his name. He quickly took advantage of the opportunity to press his tongue against her parted lips, deepening the kiss. She groaned in approval, moving her hand back down his neck.

Even through his shirt, the sensation of Amanda running her nails over his chest and torso was unbelievably arousing. She shifted her hand even lower, lingering tantalizingly on his belt buckle. Lee gasped in surprise as she slowly eased two fingers into his waistband. He closed his eyes, savouring the overwhelming

sensation as she . . . grabbed the can of whipped cream and jammed the nozzle into his pants.

“Amanda!” Lee exclaimed. “What are you doing?” He tried to pull away but she quickly hooked her fingers into his belt loop and cut short his escape.

“We don’t have any seltzer,” she explained with wide-eyed innocence, “so I thought I should improvise. What, now you don’t want me to be a clown?”

“You wouldn’t dare,” he taunted her.

“No?” she said. “Are you sure about that?”

“Amanda, put down that can right now or I’ll . . .”

“Or you’ll what?” she challenged him. “I don’t think you have a lot of options right now, Stetson. In fact I think I’ve got you right where I want you.”

“Amanda! Open the door please. I’ve got my hands full with the ice cream maker.”

Dotty’s voice coming from the back door startled both of them and they jumped. Amanda inadvertently pressed her finger on the can’s nozzle, ejecting a large quantity of whipped cream down the front of Lee’s pants. Lee grabbed at her hand, forcing the can upward. The container fell to the floor but not before the front of his shirt had become a splattered mess.

“I am so sorry,” she exclaimed as she hurried to the door and to let her mother in. She took the box Dotty was carrying and put it on the counter before turning back to Lee.

“Mother, this is . . . Lee Stetson.” Amanda gestured weakly in Lee’s direction.

“Lee, my mother, Mrs. West.”

“It’s very nice to meet you.” Dotty said slowly, staring as a large glob of whipped cream dripped off Lee’s chin.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, “we were putting away the groceries and we . . . um . . .”

“Had a little accident,” Amanda broke in.

“So I see.” Dotty’s amused gaze moved from one flushed face to the other.

Lee ran a nervous hand through his hair only to realize he’d transferred whipped cream to that as well.

“You know, Mother, I should probably take Lee back to his place so he can clean up. I’ll be back later to get started on those pies.” Amanda all but pushed Lee out of the back door, across the patio and into her car.

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“I don’t believe it,” Amanda said as they walked into Lee’s apartment. “This place is even more of a mess than the last time I was here.”

“Well, I didn’t think we’d be making a stop here this afternoon. We were supposed to go out for lunch after shopping and then you were going to drop me off at the Agency, remember?”

“Can I just say again how sorry I am – I never would have done that if Mother hadn’t startled me.”

“It’s okay, Amanda; it was an accident. Sort of.” Lee began to unbutton his stained shirt. “Not exactly the way I’d planned to meet your mother though. Just give me a chance to get showered and we’ll head out for lunch.”

“You know,” Amanda remarked casually as she walked over to the coffee table, “maybe I could tidy things a bit while you get cleaned up. You know to make this up to you.”

Lee felt a mild tremor of panic run through his body. “You don’t need to do that,” he protested hastily.

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all,” she said, giving him a shove towards the bedroom. “You go hop in the shower and I’ll just tackle a few odds and ends. Starting with some fresh air.” She crossed over to the window. “This room smells like the place where old gym socks go to die.”

Lee gave up and headed into the bedroom. He grabbed a change of clothes and continued into the bathroom. As he turned on the shower and adjusted the spray, he heard the sound of the phone ringing. “Just let the machine get it,” he called out to Amanda.

“What?”

“Don’t answer the phone.”

“Okay, I’ve got it.”

“No, I said, don’t answer it.” He stuck his head back into the bedroom.

“Unbelievable,” Amanda called from the next room. “Your friends are even ruder than you were when I first met you. They hung up as soon as they heard my voice.”

He laughed. “Just let the machine pick up if there are any other calls.”

As he stripped down and got into the shower he wondered who had phoned. One of the many numbers from his black books? Idly he realized it had been almost two months since he’d bothered to call any of them. Maybe he should just toss his books and be done with it.

Or was that too radical a step? The fact that he was even considering the matter at all showed how different this relationship with Amanda was. Hell, the fact that he even referred to what they had as a ‘relationship’ was a seismic shift in his usual thought processes.

Maybe this whole thing was going too fast. What was he thinking – meeting her mother, planning to come over for Thanksgiving dinner. Maybe he’d taken

complete leave of his senses. Or maybe he was finally headed in the right direction after all this time

Lee got out of the shower and towelled off. "Amanda, the next time you pull a stunt like this, I'm going to make you help me get cleaned up." No answer. "Amanda?" he called, "everything okay out there?" Still no answer.

Hastily wrapping a towel around his waist he hurried into the other room. It was empty and the front door was ajar.

Lee rushed into the hallway, just in time to see the elevator doors close. He caught a quick glimpse of Amanda, eyes round with fear, her arm caught in the tight grip of the man next to her. The man standing on her other side had a gun jammed against her ribs.

Lee swore under his breath and took off down the staircase. Halfway to the ground floor it occurred to him that he didn't have his gun or car keys with him, not to mention that all he had on was a towel. He hesitated only a fraction of a second before continuing down the steps. The main thing was to catch up to Amanda's kidnappers before they got out of the building.

Unfortunately the elevator stood empty by the time he reached the lobby. Mr. Feller, the doorman was nowhere to be seen. Lee ran out the front door, continuing to curse as a blue van raced away from the curb. He glanced around wildly and saw one of his neighbours getting out of her car.

"Mrs. Lowell." He rushed up to her. "I'm sorry but I need to use your car."

"Mr. Stetson! What are you wearing? What are you doing?" she shrieked as he grabbed her keys out of her hands.

"I'll explain later." In a series of fluid movements he wrenched open the car door, jumped in, started the motor and took off down the street after the van. A quick glimpse in the rear view mirror showed Mrs. Lowell standing in the middle of the street, shouting after him.

### CHAPTER THREE

“Damn it. How the hell could something like this happen?” Billy Melrose demanded, glaring out into the Agency bullpen as if this would somehow conjure up an answer.

“Maybe it’s not as bad as it looks,” Francine said unconvincingly. “Maybe it’s a joke. You know Lee – always the class clown.”

“Well I’m not laughing. And the Intelligence Oversight Committee is going to want a hell of a lot more to go on than a can of fish food before they even consider trading back the most important Russian operative we’ve captured in the last two years.

Walter Reilly appeared at the door. “Lopez and Shane just called from Lee’s apartment. They found the front door wide open and the apartment empty. One of the other tenants discovered the doorman an hour ago tied up in a storage room.”

“So it looks like this is on the level.” Francine frowned.

“Apparently the doorman was pretty shook up but they’re getting a sketch artist over there anyway.”

“I’d better inform Dirk.” Billy’s scowl deepened. “Thanks, Humbug.”

“I’d offer to help but since being a messenger boy seems like all I’m good for this close to retirement, I’ll be heading back to my desk.” Reilly heaved a theatrical sigh before closing the door.

Billy reached for his phone but it rang before he could pick up the receiver. “Melrose here,” he growled. “Lee,” he continued in surprise. “Are you okay?” He punched the button to put the call on speaker.



"I'm fine," Lee said. "Billy, I need your help. I'm at a call box just on the Virginia side of the Woodrow Wilson bridge."

Francine broke in, "Lee, what can you tell us about the people who abducted you?"

"Abducted me? Francine, what are you talking about?"

"A package with a tape arrived thirty minutes ago. Just listen to this." She pressed play on the tape player sitting on Billy's desk. "We've got the Scarecrow," a heavily accented voice said. "You have Rostov. We want to trade. Please understand, if you don't make this trade in twenty four hours, Scarecrow will die."

"Dammit, this is even worse than I thought."

"What is it? Lee, if they don't have you, who do they have?" Billy demanded.

"Amanda." Lee's frustration came through loud and clear.

"What did you say?" Billy asked in disbelief.

"They've got Amanda. They grabbed her at my apartment while I was in the shower. Listen, Billy, they're in a dark blue panel van with a logo saying 'Antiques' on the side, DC license C848F9. I've been following them since my place but this is the first time I've been able to make a call. They've had to wait at the bridge since the drawbridge is up but it won't be much longer."

"Okay," Billy took charge, "We'll have the local police put out an APB on their vehicle. Bolling Air Force Base is just on the other side of the Potomac from you. We'll get a chopper in the air on the lookout for the van and your Porsche."

Lee interrupted, "I'm not actually in my Porsche. I'm in a lavender Lincoln Continental with vanity plate LIPSTCK."

There was silence in the room for a few seconds. "You're in a what?" Billy echoed in shock.

“A lavender Lincoln Continental. I borrowed it from one of my neighbours. Listen, the drawbridge is starting to close; I’ve got to get back to the car. Just get that chopper in the air, asap. Oh, and can you bring me some pants.”

Francine and Billy stared at each other in the silence after the connection was broken. “Bring him what?” Francine finally got out.

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“I like my bike; I like my room; I even like my brother. But most of all, in all the world, I really like my mother.”

Amanda’s eyes stung with unshed tears as she clutched the piece of paper and read aloud the poem Jamie had so proudly given her. Was there any chance at all that she would see her boys again? If only she could convince the men holding her captive that she wasn’t a top spy but rather a victim of mistaken identity.

She had a sudden inspiration. “Oh here, now this will do it.” She dug into her wallet again. “This is my cheque cashing card from the Zippy Market. Now they’re very difficult to get.”

Zinoviev, the man who seemed to be the one in charge, gave a short burst of laughter. She glanced up to find him looking at her in frank admiration. “Agency covers are improving. Who would believe that one of America’s biggest agents is a bourgeois suburban housewife. Quite convincing.”

He stood up and walked over to the bar. “Would you care for a drink?” he asked as if she was a guest at a cocktail party he was hosting and not someone who was being held against her will. “We may have a bit of a wait.”

“Why may we have a bit of a wait?” Amanda was pretty sure she didn’t want to know the answer to the question but asked anyway.

“I have arranged to trade you for one of our agents, Rostov. So far your people have not responded. But they still have time left before the deadline.” Zinoviev poured himself a drink and took a sip.

“What if they won’t make the trade?” This time she was positive she didn’t want to know the answer.

“Scarecrow, do I have to tell you?” He looked disappointed in her.

“Yes,” she managed to choke out.

“Obviously to maintain my credibility in my community, I may have to terminate you.” The casual tone of his voice was almost as frightening as his words.

“Oh.”

“Stimulating as our work is, it also takes one down a peg or two to realize we are all disposable. Don’t you agree?”

He pulled on one of the books on the shelf and the entire middle section of the wall unit pivoted so that the bar could no longer be seen.

Jameson, one of the other men spoke up. “Mr. Ricardi, Mr. Zinoviev, we’ve got to get going.” The three of them moved towards the door, leaving only one man to guard her.

“Wait a minute.” Amanda called after them.

They turned and looked at her in expectation. “The place is surrounded,” she said feebly.

Zinoviev raised his eyebrows and replied in all seriousness, “Oh, then I shall be very careful.” He followed the other men out of the room.

Amanda looked over at DeLong, her remaining guard. He sat stiffly upright in the chair opposite her, keeping his gun in plain sight, as if daring her to try something.

Okay, so they thought she was Lee. Then what she needed to do was to start thinking like him. What he would do if he had been kidnapped? She glanced slowly around the room, trying to figure out what if anything she could use as a weapon.

The vase of flowers? The Wedgewood candlesticks from the china cabinet? The plaster bust on the table between the windows? There was that secret room behind the bar - maybe she could use that to her advantage. Of course with the way her luck was going she'd pull the wrong book and not be able to get it open in time.

She wondered what Lee was doing at that moment. Maybe he was at the Agency, helping deal with Zinoviev's request to trade her for Rostov. A line from one of those action movies Jamie and Philip loved came to mind. Something about how the government never negotiated with terrorists.

At the sound of a sudden commotion out in the hallway Delong jumped up and grabbed her roughly by the arm, dragging her out of her chair. "If you make one move, I'll kill you," he hissed.

••••

Lee carefully crept up to a window and peered in. Amanda was sitting on a couch, with an older man sitting opposite her. Three other men stood around the room. Four against one, well two if he counted Amanda. And her hands were tied. Not good odds.

As Amanda awkwardly dug through her wallet and held up several pieces of identification he realized in alarm what she was doing - trying to convince them that they'd abducted the wrong person.

This was one time when her lack of experience could land her in serious trouble – she didn't seem to realize that their misidentification of her was the only thing keeping her alive. If they believed she wasn't part of the Agency, they would have no use for her and would undoubtedly dispose of her in short order.

He watched as three of the men left the room. A few minutes later the van pulled out of the driveway and headed down the street.

This was it – with some of the men gone, this would be his best chance to rescue Amanda. He quietly crept around the house, not really expecting to find any open windows on the ground floor.

There was a flat topped garage on the other side of the house, which afforded more possibilities. Lee carefully climbed up a trellis conveniently leaning against the rear of the garage. Once on the roof he fastened his towel securely and moved towards a second floor window. It was also shut but there was a much greater likelihood that it would be unlocked.

The sound of a low growl caused him to freeze in his tracks. Looking down at the ground he saw a German Shepard staring at him with a menacing gaze.

“Good dog; nice dog,” Lee said in a tone he only hoped the dog would find soothing.

The dog though apparently was in no mood to be soothed. It growled again before bursting into a series of loud barks. A face appeared at one of the ground floor windows.

Clutching the towel around his waist Lee ran for the back of the garage, judged the distance to the ground and leapt, the soft ground of the lawn helping to cushion his fall. He rolled over once, got to his feet and prepared to run.

“Stop right where you are,” a voice came from behind him, “and turn around. Slowly.”

He put his hands in the air and turned. An older woman stood there holding a gun on him. She stood no higher than his shoulder, but what she lacked in stature she more than made up in attitude. “Don’t move or I’ll be more than happy to shoot you.”

“Roscoe,” she yelled over her shoulder, “I’ve got him.” An older man hurried around the side of the garage, also brandishing a gun. “Take him inside and put him in the root cellar,” the woman instructed. “I’ll call Zinoviev and tell him to get back here. He can deal with this mess.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Where are you taking me?” Amanda couldn’t keep her voice from shaking as she was forced down a narrow flight of stairs.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Keep moving.”

When they reached the bottom of the stairs Delong opened a door, pushed her inside and quickly closed it.

“Amanda!”

“Lee,” she exclaimed in equal parts relief and disbelief as she caught sight of him.

He rushed over to her. “Are you okay?”

She choked out, “They were going to kill me. They tied me up and stuffed me in a crate.”

“I know.” Lee nodded as he began to work on the ropes tied around her wrists. “I am so sorry.”

“They thought I was you. I tried to tell them I wasn’t but they wouldn’t listen to me.” He could hear tears in her voice that she stubbornly refused to let fall.

Finally he managed to untie the last knot. He put his arms around Amanda, and pulled her into an embrace. “I know. I know. Take it easy. It’s going to be alright.” He slowly ran his hands over her back.

She snuffled a bit against his chest. “I don’t know how anyone could mistake me for you; you’re so much taller.”

He had to smile at that. “I know. I’m sorry you had to go through that.” He led her over to the wall. “Why don’t you just sit down for a bit. Hopefully they won’t come back for a while.”

“Is there any way out of here?”

He walked over to the door and gave it a small kick. “Unfortunately not from inside. That door is the only way in or out and it’s solid as a rock. It opens out and there’s nothing to barricade it with anyway.”

“Lee, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He looked over to where Amanda sat on the floor, legs bent and elbows resting on her knees.

“They want the Agency to trade Rostov back for you.” He nodded. “But it was such a big deal the other day when you captured him. So, would they actually make this kind of trade?”

Lee looked her in the eye. “Which answer would you rather have? The truth or the one that will make you feel better?”

She gulped. “Never mind.” After a short pause she said, “Can I ask you something else?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why are you wearing a towel?”

He carefully sat down beside her and grinned self-consciously. “Hey, I was in the shower when they broke in, remember. I figured that you’d probably want me to try to catch up to you and those guys rather than take time to change.”

“I was so scared when they grabbed me.” Despite her best efforts Lee could hear a small tremor in her voice. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so frightened in my life.”

Lee moved to close the gap between their bodies. “Hey, I was scared too,” he said, putting his arms around her and drawing her closer. Amanda sighed and leaned against him. For one brief moment Lee shut out their predicament and just savored the warmth of her hands as she slid them over his bare chest.

“Lee,” she said sometime between half a minute and half an hour later.

“Mmm.” He tightened his hold on her.

“They said they were going to kill me if the Agency wouldn’t make the trade. So I guess they’re planning on killing you too.” She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed.

“Probably.” He pressed his lips into her hair.

“Okay. Just asking.”

“Look, it’s not over yet, right?” He pulled away just enough to look her in the eye. “I contacted Billy and they’ve got a helicopter and a team of agents in the area looking for us. We just need to keep them from taking us to another location. So we need to think of a diversion to use if they try to move us.”

“What kind of a diversion?”

“I don’t know – just a diversion.” He gestured vaguely with one hand. “It doesn’t have to be anything elaborate. Just something to catch them off guard so I can get the drop on them and you can run for the door in the confusion.”

“Me? What about you?” She tightened her hand around his arm as if she had no intention of letting go.

“Don’t worry about me; I’ll be fine,” he reassured her. “Listen, I parked the car just down the street so even if their van isn’t here anymore the Agency team will know we’re close by. I left the keys in the glove compartment. You just need to find the team and tell them where the house is.”

“I don’t know how to drive stick shift,” she pointed out.

“No, it’s not my Porsche; it’s a lavender Lincoln Continental.”

“It’s a what?” she asked in disbelief.

“A lavender Lincoln Continental,” he said sheepishly. “It belongs to Lydia Lowell, one of my neighbours. She works for Lovely Lady Cosmetics and won it last year



in some contest. I rode up in the elevator with her the day after it was delivered and I got to hear all about it. Longest eight flights of my life.”

“Back up a sec, I’m just supposed to leave you behind,” she said skeptically.

“Well yeah, they tell us to say that.” He smiled at her.

“Lee, I know we’re in a lot of trouble here.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“But there’s one more thing I have to say.” There was determination in her voice.

“What’s that?” he asked cautiously.

“That really is a fetching outfit you have on.” She traced one finger along the top edge of the towel.

“Thanks.” He smiled; apparently he wasn’t the only one who was determined not to succumb to panic. “Maybe I’ll wear it the next time I go to the opera at the Kennedy Centre.”

“Now there’s an idea. Green is definitely your colour. It brings out your eyes.” She looked up at him. “You have the most beautiful eyes, you know.”

“Spoken by the woman who has the most amazing eyes I’ve ever seen.”

He reached up to gently caress her face. Amanda turned her head just enough to be able to brush her lips against his palm. He slid his hand down to her neck and slowly but determinedly pulled her closer. Amanda’s eyelids drifted closed as Lee drew in a slow breath of anticipation, moving his lips even closer to hers, until at last . . .

The door opened abruptly and a voice called out, “Scarecrow!”

“Yeah,” they both answered, pulling away from each other.

“You and your friend need to get out here. Zinoviev is back and wants to see the two of you.”

••••

Followed closely by the two guards Lee and Amanda climbed the staircase and returned to the library where Amanda had been held earlier. Zinoviev as well as the older couple were there waiting for them.

“I might have known, Scarecrow,” Zinoviev said. “A spy of your caliber - of course you would find some way to have one of your associates be able to track you. Unfortunately this means I will have to accelerate my plans somewhat.”

Roscoe spoke up. “There really isn’t much time left. And even if the Agency does make the trade for Rostov, I still say we should see what information we can extract from them.”

“This is Scarecrow we’re talking about,” Zinoviev pointed out. “We could torture her for hours and she’d remain silent.”

Lee took a step forward. “Don’t you dare put a hand on her.”

Zinoviev looked at Amanda and sighed. “Tell the big fella to keep quiet.”

“Quiet, big fella,” she muttered in his direction.

Zinoviev motioned to his henchmen. “Jamison, Delong, retrieve the crate from the garage. We’ll have to move them to the warehouse. If the Agency turns down the trade we’ll simply include the two of them with our shipment. Moscow can have the pleasure of interrogating them.”

The two men moved towards the door, only to stop when Lee said authoritatively, “Take one more step and she’s a dead woman.”

“What?” Jamison asked, clearly confused.

“You don’t think the Scarecrow would let herself be taken alive, do you?” Lee paused for effect.

Before he could say anything else Amanda reached out and grabbed Lee’s towel. She yanked it off his body prompting the older woman to let out a shriek. Quickly Amanda swung the towel and caught Jamison fully in the face causing him to drop his gun. Instantly Lee tackled Delong and wrestled his weapon away from him.

Amanda grabbed the gun from the floor and pointed it towards Zinoviev. “Everybody freeze!” she yelled. “One more move from anyone and your boss is history!”

Everyone in the room immediately froze including Lee, who looked over at Amanda in disbelief.

“She means it,” Zinoviev said, “Everyone knows the Scarecrow is ruthless.”

“Hands in the air,” Amanda commanded. “Now hold very still while my assistant disarms you.” She looked over at Lee. “Assistant, you may proceed.”

“Thanks so much,” he said sarcastically. He picked up the towel and draped it around his waist again. “Okay everyone, up against the wall, hands above your head, nice and slow.” He quickly moved down the line collecting their guns.

A sudden movement out in the front yard caught his attention. “It’s about time,” he said, opening one of the windows. “Francine! We’re in here! We’ve already got things under control but it’s nice of you to show up.”

Amanda looked over at Zinoviev and said complacently, “I told you the place was surrounded.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Amanda, glad to see that you’re back and still in one piece,” Billy Melrose called to her as she entered the bullpen.

“Thank you, sir.” She walked over to the coffee station where he was adding sugar to his drink. “I was looking for Lee. I thought he’d be done his debriefing by now.”

“Oh he is. He just went to put some clothes on.”

Amanda smiled. “I expected him to do that before his debriefing not after.”

“I’m sure he wanted to. But Agent Corington insisted that the debriefing take priority.” He frowned at his coffee. “This is my sixth cup today. Jeanie would have my head but it’s just been that kind of day.”

“Oh.” Amanda’s thoughts weren’t on Billy’s coffee consumption but rather on the previous week when Agent Corington had just happened to drop a pile of folders she was carrying right in front of Lee’s desk. And the week before that when she had tripped in the hallway, once again conveniently in Lee’s vicinity.

“So how did your debriefing go?” Billy’s interrupted her reflections.

“Just fine. It’s a lot easier talking about everything that happened now that it’s all turned out okay.”

“Well you did an outstanding job today.” He headed for his office.

“Thank you, sir. I have to admit though that I’ve never been so scared in all my life. Maybe I’m not really cut out for field work.”

He shook his head. “It’s not whether you are afraid or not. It’s what you do when you’re afraid that counts. Some people’s natural reaction is to just freeze right up. Lee said you kept a level head, created a distraction when it was needed and helped take down the bad guys.”

“Oh, she created a distraction alright.” Amanda turned around to see Lee walking up behind her. “Amanda, if you’re ready to go, I was hoping you could give me a lift home.”

“Sure, if there’s nothing else I need to do here.” She turned to Billy.

“No, go on home. And Amanda, since your day off wasn’t exactly a day off, we’ll work something out next week.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Lee hung back for a moment. “Billy, I was wondering, how did the team know which house to go to anyway? The Russians’ van was in the garage when we came out.”

“The helicopter pilot spotted the Lincoln so we knew your general location. And then the police got a call from an ice cream truck driver about some weirdo peeping tom he saw lurking around a house on his route.”

“Weirdo?” Lee looked affronted.

“Hey, his words not mine.” Billy walked into his office and closed the door. Lee and Amanda headed out of the bullpen into the hallway.

“Everything go okay dropping off the car on the way here?” Lee asked.

“Oh sure. Mrs. Lovell was really glad to get it back. And she says she wants to have a chat with you when you get home.”

“I’ll bet she does,” Lee said ruefully.

“Well at least this time when you talk to her you’ll be wearing clothes.” Amanda pushed the button for the elevator and kept her eyes straight ahead as she added, “Although I hear Agent Corington really liked your previous outfit.”

“Kimberly? I guess so.”

“Oh,” Amanda said shortly. She reached out and jabbed the button again, this time more forcefully.

“You know something?” Lee asked. “I happen to think that you’re cute when you’re jealous too.” He reached out and took her hand in his. “And speaking of

my previous outfit, did you really need to be quite that extreme with your diversion back there with the Russians?”

“After everything I went through today I just figured it was time I took matters into my own hands,” Amanda replied.

“Not to mention my towel.” Lee shook his head as the elevator doors opened. He pushed back the row of coats with one hand and held them aside for Amanda.

“What are you complaining about?” she asked as they got on the elevator. “My diversion worked, didn’t it?”

“Oh, it worked alright.”

“Well what were you going to do?”

“I was going to tell them that there was no way Scarecrow would be taken alive and that you had a cyanide capsule clenched between your teeth,” he explained. “Then you could have pretended to collapse giving me the chance to get the jump on them.”

Amanda shook her head. “Sounds way too complicated. My diversion was much simpler. I saw an opportunity and seized it.”

“Not to mention my towel.” “Not to mention your towel,” they said simultaneously.

“Besides I wanted to prove that Zinoviev was right about you.”

“Right about me what? That Scarecrow is a top agent, ruthless and not someone the Russians should mess around with?”

The elevator opened and they walked out into the Georgetown foyer.

“No, not that.” Amanda had an impish gleam in her eyes. “Come on, big fella, let’s get you home.”

••••

“Okay, that’s enough football for one day. You fellas scoot upstairs and get into bed.” Amanda turned off the television. “It’s already way past your bedtime.”

“I still can’t believe the Steelers lost this afternoon,” Philip grumbled.

“They didn’t lose; they were annihilated,” Jamie pointed out helpfully. “The score was 45 to 3!”

Amanda broke in before their bickering could escalate. “Well you can’t expect your team to win every game. Besides, the announcer said it was the first time the Lions beat them in more than twenty years. Now say goodnight to Grandma and Lee, then it’s up to bed.”

“Night,” the boys mumbled in chorus before heading up the stairs.

“Billy Bartlett is going to be a total dweeb at school next week.” They could hear Philip continue to complain. “He’s such a big Lions fan just because his grandpa lives in Detroit.”

“I think we’ve still got another bottle of wine left,” Amanda said to Lee as she got up and headed after the boys. “Why don’t you pour us a glass while I get them tucked in?”

Dotty followed Lee into the kitchen. “I’ll have some, too. The wine you brought is so much better than the stuff Amanda usually brings home from the supermarket.”

“Well it was the least I could do to repay you and Amanda for cooking dinner. It was absolutely delicious.” Lee uncorked the wine with practiced ease.

Dotty reached into a cupboard and took out three wine glasses. “Plus you gave me that beautiful gift basket. You really didn’t need to do that.”

Lee filled their glasses and handed one to Dotty. "That's okay. One of my neighbours works for Lovely Lady and I owed her a favour. She was more than happy to take my order."

"That must have been some favour you owed her - I think she sold you every item in their Floral Fantasies line."

"You have no idea." He shook his head.

"So how long have you worked for IFF?" Dotty asked.

Apparently with Amanda out of the room, it was time for the interrogation to start.

"Just over ten years – part of it doing background research around the globe, the last while as a director." Lee used his standard cover story.

"You know I never pictured Amanda getting involved in film work," she said thoughtfully. "Despite a minor in photo-journalism in college, she always manages to cut off everyone's heads when she takes pictures."

Lee laughed. "Well, we'll be sure to keep her out from behind the camera then."

"And you grew up here in the DC area?"

"Umm... originally. But we moved around a lot most of the time." Lee didn't want to go into the details of his childhood, knowing that the phrase "My parents were killed when I was five" was a surefire way to put a damper on any conversation.

"When I went to college out in California I got interested in vineyards and wines. A friend of mine's parents owned a vineyard and his dad taught me about pairing wines with food. Most people prefer a white wine with turkey, but I've always been partial to reds, like this Merlot." He took another sip from his glass.

Apparently Dotty could take a hint as she followed his change of subject. "Would you like some more dessert with your wine? Maybe some pie?"



“Thanks, but I’m still stuffed from dinner,” Lee said as Amanda came back down the stairs and into the kitchen.

“Are you sure? There’s an entire pumpkin pie left over.” Dotty paused then added slyly, “We seem to be running a bit short on whipped cream though.”

“Mother!” Amanda protested while Lee choked on his wine.

“All right, all right.” Dotty laughed. “I’m taking my wine upstairs to enjoy with my new Moonlight and Magnolias bubble bath, so I’ll leave the two of you alone.”

Lee groaned as he and Amanda picked up their wine glasses and headed into the den. “I’m not going to live that down any time soon, am I?”

“I’m afraid not,” Amanda laughed. “So are you okay? Today wasn’t too much for you? Not too much scary normal family stuff?”

He sat on the couch and pulled her down next to him. “As I told you before, if I can handle a bunch of Russian agents, I can handle the suburbs.”

“Yeah but those Russians didn’t submit you to a solid half hour of ‘grosser than gross’ jokes.”

“Good point.” Lee took her wine glass and set it with his on the coffee table. “So how are you going to make it up to me?”

Amanda tucked her legs up onto the couch, snuggling against him. “Hmm...I’ll need to work on that.”

“Let me know if you come up with anything.” He slipped his arm around her, running his fingers along her shoulder.

Amanda reached up to stroke his cheek. “Nothing comes to mind at the moment.” She slowly kissed her way up his neck, flicking her tongue out when she reached his earlobe.

“Now that’s a real shame.” Lee’s voice was raw and husky. “Maybe I can help.” He moved her hand from his cheek to his lips, pressing soft kisses against her palm.

“Speaking of helping, you’ll never guess who called me earlier,” Amanda said.

“No idea.” He shrugged his shoulders. “It wasn’t that idiot Dan, was it?”

“No, not \*Dan\*.” She rolled her eyes.

“Don? Dave?”

Amanda grabbed a throw pillow and swatted him with it.

“Daryl? Dillon? Dwayne? Drew?” Lee held up his hands to ward off the series of blows she continued to rain down on him. “Donnie? Derek? Drake?” By then he was laughing so hard he could barely get out any more names.

“Stop! Stop! I give!” he finally gasped out.

Amanda held the pillow over his head threateningly. “Are you quite finished?”

“Yes, I’m done; I promise.”

“Okay.” She lowered her weapon.

“Darren?”

“That’s it.” She stood up. “I’m getting the whipped cream.”

“Okay, okay,” he reached out and drew her back down beside him. “If it wasn’t \*Dean\*, who was it?”

“Pretzel the Clown.” She turned slightly to watch his reaction.

“Really?” he asked in apparent surprise. He reached out and stroked a finger down along her neck.

“Really.”

“Must have been important for him to call you on Thanksgiving.” Lee didn’t meet her gaze, evidently intent on pushing aside her shirt collar.

“It was. He’s going to do Jamie’s party after all.”

“That’s great.” He nuzzled against the hollow at the base of her neck.

She arched her neck, encouraging his caresses. “Know why he changed his mind?”

“No idea.” Lee pushed her shirt back a bit further, then pressed a kiss against her collarbone.

“Really. It seems that someone had a friend who works at the IRS call and threaten him with an audit back to 1965 if he didn’t do the party.” There was a breathy quality to her voice as if she was having difficulty keeping her mind on the topic at hand.

“Imagine that. I didn’t know you had friends in the IRS.” He brushed his lips along her neck.

“Lee.” She put her hands against his chest and drew away slightly.

He moved just far enough back to look her in the eye. “What?”

“Thank you.”

He shrugged. “It wasn’t that big a deal.”

“Yes it was. I was so angry at Dean and you, mmm . . .”

He covered her mouth with his, cutting off whatever else she was going to say. Slowly he moved his lips against hers, taking control of the kiss and relinquishing it, demonstrating his desire and accepting the passion she offered in return.

Amanda moaned and shifted in his arms, insistently pushing him down onto the couch. He slid his left hand into her hair, cradling her to him as they deepened the kiss.

As their lips finally parted, he straightened up, both of them breathless and a little shaky. He moved his arms to her waist, snuggling her close to him again.

“It really was a nice thing for you to do, Lee,” she said after a few minutes. “I still hadn’t figured out how to fix this whole birthday party mess Dean created.”

“Well, it’s hardly your fault if Dean took one look at your new boyfriend and was consumed by jealousy. And you can’t blame him for that. I mean, that guy you’re seeing now is very charming.” He dipped his head and kissed the tip of her nose. “Not to mention incredibly handsome.” He moved his lips to her cheek and tightened his hold around her. “And an all-around great catch.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “He’s modest too.”

“Well, yeah,” he grinned.

“But you know the best part?” She leaned down and brushed her lips against his ear.

“What?”

“I’ve still got him right where I want him.”

**The End (for now)**