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Most days, Clint Rollins loved his work.

Most days. But not today.

He leaned back in his swivel chair and listened to the hum of voices, computer keys, and his partner's detailed explanation of a new case. Only a week back to work, and he already needed a quiet weekend to rest.

"You listening, Rollins, or still suffering from vacation withdrawal? Maybe it's just too early on a Friday morning."

Steven Kessler's ribbing jerked Clint back to the reality of working in the FBI's Crimes Against Children Unit. Another child missing. No easy cases.

"I'm listening." Clint rubbed the back of his neck.

Too bad criminals didn't care if cops were up to snuff or not. His head still ached from a nasty cold that'd been dogging him for weeks. According to his physician wife, he needed a vacation to recover from his unprecedented two-week vacation. But no one in DC stayed home with just a cold. So he was back on the job in mid-January, doing his second favorite thing.

Putting criminals in jail.

He'd still rather be hanging out with Sara and the munchkins.

"One of Baltimore's finest is heading our way—point cop for the kidnapping case." Steven handed over a new file. "The suspect was spotted with the child at a hotel outside Blacksburg less than an hour ago. His license plate matches the one given in the AMBER Alert. Local cops are keeping watch to be sure no one leaves, and there's a Learjet ready and waiting. We'll head out as soon as Sergeant Moore arrives."

At his partner's no-frills tone, Clint flipped through computer printouts and watched his quiet weekend disappear. "Why aren't the Baltimore or Virginia field offices handling this one?"

"Because we're the best." Steven grabbed paperwork and motioned for him to follow.

Clint checked his Glock and stood. "Cute. More details. Real ones."

"We are the best. But you're right. The reasons go deeper. The boy's mother is Ben Dickson's girlfriend."

"Dickson." Clint frowned. "The Baltimore police chief?"

"Yep. And Dickson's an old pal of Unit Chief Maxwell."

"Interesting queue of string pulling. What else do we know?"

"Wes Standish went missing from the playground after school yesterday. Babysitter called Dickson's girlfriend to say she'd lost him, and a missing-persons report was filed right away. So lots of cops went to work round the clock, and Dickson breathed down Quantico folks' necks to get their data inputted and analyzed."

Clint flipped through the file again as they walked. "They know who snatched Wes?"

"Mom says the ex-husband. A community college professor in Christiansburg named Ed Standish."

"So Mom and the chief want us involved to get a federal conviction when we catch the guy."

Steven shrugged. "Likely. But according to eyewitness accounts, Dad's not the kidnapper. A few people saw Wes leave with a tall, young-looking blond man. Dad's middle-aged, balding, and average height." Steven stopped and held out a second file, this one much thicker. "What makes this case top priority for us is ViCAP flagged three cold cases with a similar MO and victim profile."

Clint grabbed the file as adrenaline shot through him. "A serial?"

"Could be."

Clint scanned the info from the FBI's violent criminal database. "So we have January kidnappings from parks, boys ages five to six, brown hair, blue eyes. No ransom and no bodies. But this one looks more like a domestic, a disgruntled dad who lost custody."

“Whether it’s the dad or not, we need to bring Wes Standish home and nab this suspect.”

Clint froze midstep, staring at pictures in the file. “Any of these boys could be James’s twin.”

Steven’s jaw clamped tight. “Coulda done without that.”

“Sorry. I should’ve kept quiet.”

They continued in silence. Steven’s six-year-old son had been injured in a school shooting in October. His girlfriend, Gracie, had been kidnapped in November. And last summer, they’d been too late to save a little boy named Ryan and a teenage girl named Olivia—failures that still haunted Steven.

They both needed more recovery time. But work wouldn’t wait. Wes Standish needed to come home. Today.

Steven answered his phone as soon as it buzzed. “Stay where you parked, and we’ll meet you there. I’ll drive to the airstrip.”

Pulling up short in front of the outside door, Steven narrowed his eyes at Clint. “Let’s make sure we bring Wes home before he ends up looking like Ryan. I don’t want any more rescued kids never leaving the hospital.”

And that was that. For both of them.



The condescending cop seated facing him grated on Clint’s nerves. Even the high-end business plane couldn’t make this trip pleasant.

He usually managed to keep away from the local and federal ego dances. But this officer was a piece of work, smirking at the Learjet’s fancy mini-conference-room interior and acting like his department had every right to claim the glory when Wes made it home.

“Even before you Feds got on board with our hunch about Standish, we knew we’d be bringing home a prize today.” The over-forty officer crossed his beefy arms and flashed them a blinding smile.

Steven crossed his arms in return. “Enlighten us as to your reasoning.”

Clint rested his throbbing head on the Learjet’s leather seat, rubbing

his temples as Steven and the cop locked wits. He tried to pray, but the cabin's August-in-Texas temperature dampened his concentration.

"You up for this, Rollins?" Moore's curt question bristled. "You don't look so hot."

Steven stifled a chuckle.

Everything in Clint wanted to rattle off how they'd recently taken down an international kidnapper and solved a three-person cold-case murder. Not to mention that all the events involved people he loved like family. But he refrained. "I can handle it."

Moore cleared his throat. "After we found out about the cold cases, Chief Dickson ticked off a list of Standish's favorite gambling places. Said his girlfriend always kicked her estranged husband out after the holidays, and he'd be gone for weeks each time. It's why he lost his job at the University of Maryland last year. They separated after that, and he moved back home to Christiansburg, got a job at a community college. She finalized the divorce this January in honor of their history. That's obviously what set him off."

Steven shrugged. "All circumstantial. And there are other—"

"Look, the guy's a world-class loser. A sleazeball with a Ph.D. Him rotting in jail would be the best thing for his son. But since you can't connect the dots, here's one for your superior profiling. Standish has been teaching early childhood education courses at a community college near where his brother lives in Blacksburg. We're heading to Blacksburg. All the missing kids fitting the same MO for Wes's case match Wes to a T, and they all disappeared in January when Standish was on his benders. And as the chief mentioned to the agent at NCAVC, Standish used to sit in a dark room, watch the kid sleep every night. Guy's a pervert. Case closed."

"Hardly."

Even if the folks at the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime agreed that Standish fit a violent pedophile's profile—and Clint wasn't convinced of that—Moore's speech sounded more like gunning for a promotion than good investigative skills. Good thing they had federal jurisdiction and this Baltimore officer didn't. And thank the Lord not all police they worked with were like Moore.

The Baltimore cops were clearly trigger-happy when it came to Standish's guilt. Just thinking about the other possibilities increased Clint's headache a million points on the Richter scale. He closed that mental file and watched the plane come in for a landing.

Steven's arm punch got Clint's attention. It smarted more than he wanted to admit. "What?"

"Got your picture in place?"

"Always." He slapped his vest under layers of winter wear. "The family Christmas photo is right here."

Steven grinned. "Got mine too." Steven might be the CACU's head coordinator, but he still tended to follow Clint's lead, just as he'd done since Quantico. In most things anyway.

A Blacksburg cop was waiting for them with a car at the Virginia Tech executive airport. Moore took the front seat. "Got an update for us?"

"My sergeant just radioed as y'all were landing. Shots were fired. Suspect tried to leave but opened fire when our guys approached."

"He's gone?"

"Nope. Still out there shooting. They can't get close to the car."

Clint met Steven's hard look. "Let's do this fast and careful so we can get home before midnight."

Minutes later, they eased into a run-down hotel's parking lot and stopped behind two squad cars. Unsnapping holsters, all four exited the car and crouched behind the nearest vehicle.

Clint flashed his credentials, and the local sergeant nodded. "Manager called in the tip, said our suspect checked into room 102 early this morning. When he tried to leave, we moved in. He just dumped the kid in the car and took off into the woods. We've been dodging bullets ever since."

Shots punctuated his report.

Two of the local cops returned fire.

Moore's neck veins bulged. "The boy still alive?"

"No way to tell. He wasn't moving, and we haven't been able to get to him. Backup's slower'n Christmas."

Moore's eyes locked on to the tan Impala's open trunk and grew wide as his face got red. "You shot up the car?"

“No.” The officer stayed in firing position, gun trained on the woods, too busy to care that he’d just been insulted by a big city cop. “Those were from his last volley before y’all arrived.”

Clint studied the car. Tangled trunk metal and busted taillights said their kidnapper wasn’t a sharpshooter. He moved to the front of the patrol car. “I’m going to check on the boy.” He caught Steven’s gaze. “Pray. And cover me.”

With his heart pounding out of his chest, Clint crawled along the black asphalt faster than he’d ever done at Quantico. Reaching the Impala, he paused to listen. Nothing. His back to the tan metal, he reached for a door handle.

Opening the door a crack, he felt inside.

When his hand touched a heavy down jacket, he swerved to face the car. The boy lay unmoving, hands bound with duct tape, a black hood over his head. Clint stripped it off and felt clammy flesh, a flickering pulse.

This boy needed medical help. Now.

Clint’s hands shook as he pulled the boy out of the car and onto his lap, then gathered him into his arms.

Shots rang through the metal behind him. But he had to keep moving. He was ten feet from safety.

He held tight to the boy and lunged toward Steven.

Searing pain ripped through his left arm.

Then everything went asphalt black.