

Trust is not always best

By Amanda Armstrong and Kellen Woods

Jeanette hissed, as the steaming hot coffee sloshed out of the pot and on to her blouse. Hurriedly, she set down the pot to clean up the spill. Unfortunately, the pot shattered upon contact with the cool surface of her marble countertop. The smell of French roast filled the space and her nose.

“Why today?”

Jeanette stared at the mess in her brightly decorated kitchen. She had spent weeks matching everything in the kitchen, to a large oil painting of a red panda amidst a bamboo forest. Now, here sat a puddle of glass and coffee. She slowly walked over to the closet and pulled out a broom and dustpan.

Jeanette’s life had been in a downward spiral since her father, the head of Dynamic Energy Solutions, had gone missing during a typical island vacation. A massive freak storm had hit the island, and nothing was left. It was like God had wiped the island clean. She had been moved from her comfortable HR position to acting head of the company, something she did from time to time if her father was sick or on one of his many vacations. This time was different, this time he wouldn’t be coming back.

She worked fast to clean up the mess and then headed upstairs to her bedroom to change. Today she had to make a good impression. The board meeting would officially make her the permanent chief executive officer.

She rushed back down the stairs, stopping in the kitchen to grab her company water bottle, briefcase, and headed out the door.

Outside was wonderful. The breeze had a slight hint of a winter chill, it made Jeanette pause. She was tempted to turn around to grab a jacket, but she looked down at her watch. There wasn't enough time to find a jacket to match her outfit. She bounded down the stairs towards her car as she glanced next door.

There sat a huge moving truck and a lean muscled man, dressed in kakis' and a light green polo, whose dirty blonde hair matched the slight beard on his face. He turned away from a portly guy in overalls with the trucking company's logo on the back. He noticed Jeanette, waved and jogged over to her.

Jeanette, without thinking, waved back.

"Hello there, new neighbor." He stretched out his hand toward her. "It's nice to meet you. My name's Sam."

Jeanette shuffled her bottle to her hand holding the briefcase and shook Sam's hand.

"Uh, hi." She couldn't stop herself from thinking how beautiful and bright Sam's blue eyes were, they seemed to shine with an inner light. "My name's Jeanette. It's a pleasure."

"Headed to Dynamic?"

Jeanette took a step back. "How did you know?"

Sam chuckled and pointed to her company water bottle. She looked down and laughed.

"Yeah. Big meeting today, which I'm now running late for, it was nice to meet you."

“Oh, sorry to have stopped you. I’m sure we will meet again real soon.”

Jeanette smiled and jogged to her car. She waved at Sam one more time as she pulled out the driveway, blissfully unaware of Sam’s smile melting into a scowl.

###

Dynamic Energy Solutions’ headquarters was bustling with men and women in suits, some of the women in business style dresses. Jeanette was making her way to her office when she accidentally bumped into Sam in the hallway.

"Sorry, I should have... Oh, Sam. It's you." Jeanette said with a slight smile.

"Sorry, I should pay more attention to where I'm going."

"What are you doing here?" Jeanette said with a puzzled expression on her face.

"I'm the new I.T. manager. I wanted to tell you this morning, but you were in a hurry."

"Right, sorry. I had to get to a meeting. They made me the head of the company and now I have more meetings to get to than ever before," Jeanette said as she started to walk off as Sam followed her. "I need to find an assistant since my father’s assistant quit last week. I also need to start looking for a casket for my father's funeral and I just don't have the time to do that much less take a moment for myself."

"I could help," Sam offered as he and Jeanette entered her office with a view of Aurora and Denver just outside the window.

Jeanette moved behind the large oak desk that used to belong to her father. It was now her desk. She stopped before taking a seat. She looked about the office, boxes in the midst of packing up her father’s things and unpacking hers, littered the entire space. She sighed and looked at Sam.

"You don't have to."

She took a seat behind the computer that was on the desk, littered with files and folders full of paperwork.

"You look like you have way too much on your shoulders right now, let me help lessen the load."

"Ok, if you could go through some options for a casket, it would at least help me narrow the list."

"I'll have it ready as soon as possible," Sam said then headed toward the door.

"And Sam,"

Sam stopped and glanced back.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," Sam said as he left Jeanette's office.

###

"I don't even see the point of this," Jeanette whispered to Sam as they stood surrounded by people from the office and family friends, all wearing black. "He's not even in there, just sandbags. They never found his body in the wreckage." She continued looking at the casket.

"It's important that you're here," Sam said placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I know, I know, public relations and all that," Jeanette said slightly shaking her head. "I just want this to be over."

###

"Hey, is that my mail?" Jeanette asked as she stepped outside in a grey woolen coat covering the top of her black business style dress.

Sam looked at her, produced a quick smile, "Just getting it for you," as he handed it over.

"Thanks," Jeanette turned back toward the house.

Sam followed her slowly, his eyes fixed on a letter. Once she was inside Sam stopped at the edge of the porch. Jeanette closed the door behind her while looking at the mail. She paused and stared at the mysterious letter written in Russian that read “Little Brid”. She shook her head, put the letter into her purse, and set the rest of the mail on the kitchen table to sort through later. She grabbed her travel mug already filled with fresh coffee and headed back toward the door.

"Ready for work?" Sam asked with a slight smile as Jeanette stepped back outside.

"Yes, I'll see you there. Are we still on for lunch?"

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

#

Sam watched Jeanette, with predatory eyes, as she walked through the lobby of the restaurant. She looked over at him, waved and walked to his table.

“Sorry, I didn’t think the meeting would last that long.”

Sam smiled and said “It’s ok. I went ahead and ordered for us. I hope you like the ultimate philly.”

“Oh, that’s my favorite. How did you know?”

Sam shrugged. “Lucky guess?”

Jeanette giggled and a blush graced her cheeks. She looked down at her napkin and then up to Sam. He reached across the table, toward her hand, when the waiter appeared causing Jeanette to jump. Sam quickly yanked his hand back.

“Hello, Ma’am. Can I get you a glass of wine?”

“No, thank you. Just a glass of water, please.”

Jeanette sighed as the waiter walked away. She gave Sam a weak smile.

“I’m sorry. I might not be good company right now.”

“Jeanette, what’s wrong? Was it that letter?”

Jeanette looked at Sam with confusion.

“Letter? Oh, that. I haven’t even opened it. I was talking about the board of directors. They have been hounding me for the past few days about starting up one of my father’s old projects. But there is so much paperwork missing that I can’t, in good faith, just restart it.”

“Which project? Maybe I can help find the missing papers.”

“It was something called Project Apollo. It had to do with satellites. I couldn’t find them in his office. I might have to go search his apartment, later today.”

“I could help with that.”

Jeanette smiled at Sam with such an intensity that it brought a blush to his face.

“That would be so helpful. We could even grab some dinner, too.”

The waiter returned and placed the food in front of both Sam and Jeanette.

“Well that’s enough work talk. Let’s eat, and Sam. You’re a great friend.”

Sam looked at her and Smiled.

“Anything for you, Jeanette.”

###

Jeanette and Sam walked into the lush penthouse apartment. The furniture was wrapped in plastic, the tables and countertops covered by white cloths.

“Where should we start looking?” Sam asked as he looked around.

“Maybe the study?”

They entered the study and Sam sat down in the chair behind the desk in the middle of a room and started up the computer that looked like it hadn’t been touched in weeks.

“You got a password for this thing?”

“Yeah, it’s LittleBird the L and B are capitalized and no spaces.”

“Got it.” Sam inputted the password and searched everywhere on the computer while Jeanette looked through the drawers and in the closet full of folders and paperwork.

After a few moments Jeanette went back to Sam. She walked behind the desk and leaned on his shoulders. Sam glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. He could see tears trailing down her face. He stopped looking at the files and stood up, wrapping her into a hug.

Jeanette sobbed and buried her face into Sam’s chest. He held her close until the sobs stopped. Pulling herself out of his arms, she smiled and wiped the tears from her face.

“Sorry. This is harder than I thought it would be.”

“It’s ok. You’ve been through so much. Why don’t we do this later? Let’s just get you home.”

Jeanette hugged him again. She lifted her head and laid a kiss on his cheek.

Sam stood, shock coursed through him as she pulled away and turned to the door. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into an intense kiss, that she greedily returned. After a few moments she pulled away again.

“Sam. Let’s go.”

###

There was a rhythmic pounding to her shoes on the damp sidewalk. Jeanette ran past parked cars on the sides of the road. Not many people out this late at night, especially after that intense storm a few hours ago. Jeanette was so focused on her run that she failed to notice that one particular car had been following her. She turned at the crosswalk headed towards the park on the other side of the street.

The car revved its engine and sped toward her.

Jeanette glanced at the oncoming lights, realized that it wasn't going to stop, and threw herself to the sidewalk in front of her.

It narrowly missed her as it sped down the street.

Jeanette got up, brushed the dirt off her pants. She reached for her phone, but the fall had broken it in half. She headed back to the house.

Limping to the porch, the porch light flickered above her. Her focus was on the light when she pushed open the unlocked door. She still had the keys in her hand, ready to open the door she had locked on her way out. She turned on the hall light and walked into her living room. Everything was broken and thrown about. It looked like a storm had ripped through the house.

Jeanette limped over to the house phone but found no dial tone.

A loud crash came from upstairs.

Jeanette turned around and headed to her neighbor's, being as quiet as possible. She kept looking back at her house and saw a flashlight's beam as it swept past the windows in her bedroom.

She tried to press herself against the wall on the side of the door of her neighbor's house. Knocking on the door, she waited.

Sam opened the door.

Before he could even open his mouth, Jeanette put her hand over his and pushed him into the house. She closed the door, locked it, and turned off the porch light.

"I am sorry about this, Sam. Someone is in my house and my phones broken," she said, showing him her shattered phone.

"Jeanette, oh my god, let me call the police." Sam pointed to the kitchen. "Go sit down, make yourself some coffee."

“Thank you, Sam.” She limped to the kitchen; exhaustion had caused her shoulders to slump.

Sam looked at her for a moment, glanced at the blood dripping down her scraped knee.

“What happened to your leg?”

“Some car almost ran me over when I was crossing West Street right before the park. I barely dodged out of the way.”

Sam shook his head as he picked up the phone. He watched her carefully, as she limped to the kitchen.

“Hello?” said a man’s voice.

“She’s here. You might want to hurry.” Sam hung up the phone and shouted toward the kitchen. “They said to stay put and an officer should be here in a few moments”

“Thank you again, Sam. You are a good friend.”

###

Jeanette winced. She tried to open her eyes, but they were covered by a rough cloth. Her head felt like it had been stuck in a vice grip. Another cloth covered her mouth and made it almost impossible for her to breath. She tried to remove the cloth but found her hands tied behind her back. The only thing she could hear was the rhythmic dripping of a leaky faucet.

A door creaked open on her left.

“You shouldn’t have dodged the car, Jeanette.” Sam sounded almost wistful, “I really don’t like doing this. So, be a dear and tell me what I want to know.”

Jeanette tried to scream through her gag, she could taste dust and oil from the cloth. She tried to pull her legs and arms free of the ropes, but it only caused them to become tighter. The ropes burned her skin as they moved.

“No one can hear you. Just tell me where I can find your father.”

Jeanette grew still.

Sam pulled a knife from the bag, he walked over to her. He removed the cloth from her mouth and her eyes. The room was covered in dust. There was a sink to the left and a table, where a black bag sat, to the right. Her eyes locked onto the knife and then moved to Sam’s face.

“My father? my father is dead. You helped me pick out the casket! You went to the funeral with me! What the hell is going on, Sam? This is not funny!” Tears streamed down her face, leaving trails through the dirt on her cheeks.

Sam stared at her for a moment while she yelled at him. He walked back to the bag, retrieving a needle filled with blue liquid. “I think you actually believe that. How sad is it that he would lie to even his own daughter?” He placed the cloth back over her mouth and roughly grabbed her arm. He stabbed the needle into her and injected the blue liquid.

“You won’t remember any of this.”

Jeanette’s eyes closed as she slumped forward.

###

Jeanette opened her eyes. She sat up on the couch and moaned, putting her head in her hands. She must have passed out from exhaustion. The last thing she could remember was going to the kitchen to wait for the cops.

“I see you’re awake,” said Sam, handing her a cup of coffee. “The police just left. They didn’t find anyone in the house, but they said your house is now a crime scene. No one is allowed to go inside until the detectives clear it.”

Jeanette sipped the coffee, sinking lower into the couch. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“You can stay here for a few days.” Sam smiled at her.

“I don’t know what I would do without you, Sam.”

###

Jeanette sat in her father’s chair. She gazed out the office window to the city below. Sam had tried to get her to stay at his place, to take the day off, but she couldn’t. Her life was a mess and she needed something familiar, something that wasn’t in disarray.

The ringing of the phone caused her to jump. She held her hand to her chest and tried to will her heart to stop its fluttering rhythm.

“Hello, this is Jeanette Aliester.”

“This is Detective Wilson with the APD. I’m trying to reach Mr. Aliester. Is your husband available?”

“I don’t have a husband. You must mean my father.”

“Can I speak with him? This is an urgent matter, Ma’am.”

My father is dead. What do you want detective?” Jeanette’s anger rose to the surface, it went from a simmer to an almost boil at this point. “I don’t have all day, DETECTIVE.”

“Oh, um. I just wanted to get in contact about the break-in at his apartment.”

“First my house and now his?”

“You had a break-in? How long ago was this? What was the address?”

“Just last night. My friend said that the APD made my house a crime scene.”

After giving him the address there was a pause with sounds of typing and papers being shuffled. Jeanette could hear phones ringing in the background of the phone.

“Ma’am, I don’t have a report of a break-in last night. There was no call placed and no units were in the area.”

Jeanette sat there, stunned. Why would Sam lie to her? It didn't make any sense.

“Ma’am? Do you need me to start a report?”

“I need to go —”

“Ma’am. Please, I need to —”

“— call my cell later. But I have things I need to take care of.”

Jeanette hung up on the detective. She then dialed the HR department.

“Hey Brenda, it’s Jean. Can you pull the background check on Sam Holt? Hmm?”

Nothing’s wrong. I just need to double-check something. If you could have that on my desk asap that would be a big help. Thanks.”

###

Jeanette pulled into her driveway. Sam stood waiting for her, hands in his pockets.

Jeanette stepped out into the brisk cool air with a file in her hand.

“Hey, how are you?” Sam asked in a friendly manner.

“Fine,” Jeanette said in a stiff tone.

“You know, you didn’t have to go into work today, with everything that is going on. The police are still investigating.”

“That’s bull and you know it, you lied to me when you said you called the police.”

Sam was struck with silence.

Jeanette shifted her weight. “Enough of the lies, and the friendly act. Who the hell are you?”

“You’re the one who pulled my file,” Sam said as he crossed his arms. “You finally figured out my facade. Enough pleasantries, give me the letter or else.”

“Over my dead body,” Jeanette said as she got back in her car and backed out at high speed, the tires shrieked as she took off. Sam ran toward his car and speed off in pursuit.

###

Jeanette speed down the highway, checked her rear-view mirror, she could still Sam at a distance. *Little further*, she thought as she took the next exit unexpectedly, *hopefully that will buy me sometime*.

###

Jeanette pulled down on a dirt path, to a cabin in the autumn colored forest. She jumped out of her car and ran to the door.

Once inside she grabbed the cordless phone and called the police, but before she could even speak, she heard Sam’s car driving up the dirt path. She looked around, grabbed a frying pan, threw the phone into the freezer, and ran down the hall and hid inside a bedroom closet.

The sounds of his footsteps grew closer. Jeanette could hear him opening doors and held her breath as she saw a shadow pass in front of the door. She peaked out through a crack and saw him turn away from the door.

Jeanette came out with a frying pan and hit him in the head as hard as she could manage. The gun fell to the ground near Sam’s unconscious body. As she reached for it, she realized all too late that he faked being unconscious as he grabbed her hand and tried to wrestle it away.

BANG!

Sam fell forward, with a bullet in his eye. His blood splattered across Jeanette’s face and the wall beside them. Jeanette dropped the gun, crawled backward away from the carnage she had just caused. She heaved and her lunch from earlier now covered the carpet.

###

Jeanette found herself in her father's office as she read the letter.

#

Jeannette,

If you are reading this then I am dead. I want you to know that I am sorry I can longer protect you and that you need to take care of yourself. I wish I could be there, but I can't. Even now as I write these tears fill my eyes as I remember your first steps and everything up to your favorite haiku you wrote yourself at a young age about your favorite bird.

The Mockingbird

The mockingbird fights

The mockingbird protects.

It's babies from evil.

Know I always loved you.

Daddy

#

Tears fell from her eyes as she tried to decipher any hidden messages or something in the subtext. She looked up in frustration as she let herself fall onto the office chair behind the clean desk. The only thing on it, an old computer and a statue of a mockingbird on a branch. She picked up the statue to hold it close and as she did, she heard a rattle inside. She examined it closely and found the branch could twist, revealing a hollow section in the stand with a flash drive.

She tipped the statue, caught the drive in her hand and fired up the old computer. She inserted the drive and searched the various files.

“CIA intelligence reports on every country my father visited. Project Apollo? It’s a spy satellite project. What the hell was my father involved in?” she muttered to herself quietly in shock.

###

The newly fallen snow covered the path. Jeanette glanced around at the beauty of the winter forest. It felt like years ago, but it was only a few weeks since the cops and detectives finally closed their case. Sam had turned out to be Cory Johnson, a low-level hacker with dreams of grandeur.

She walked out of the woods to the lake. Not yet frozen, but still a chilling dark blue hue. The light danced across the lake as a cold breeze rippled the surface. She slipped the flash drive from her pocket. This tiny thing was the cause of so much pain and destruction. She looked at it for a moment. She reached back and tossed it as far and as fast as she could toward the lake. As the flash drive hit the water, a figure stood almost out of sight among the trees. Jeanette tried to call out to it but when she blinked it was gone. *My mind playing tricks*, she thought.

Jeanette waited until the water calmed back down to its normal slow rhythm. She turned and headed back to the cabin, full of hope and a new sense of determination. Her life was just starting, and she was ready to great it head-on.