

W°NDER CITY ST°RIES

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APOLOGY IS POLICY

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## APOLOGY IS POLICY

Suzanne steered as gently as possible over the speed bumps in the hospital driveway so as not to jar Ira. He said he was having a lot less pain in his chest, but she didn't actually believe him.

"Who the hell puts in speed bumps at a hospital?" Andrea groused from the back seat. "Stupidest planning ever. When I had the breast lump out, I would've screamed over every goddamn one, even with that bandeau thing they had me strapped up in. Can't even imagine people with abdominal surgery dealing."

Ira embraced his red, sort-of-heart-shaped-but-mostly-oblong pillow to his chest over the next speed bump, confirming Suzanne's suspicions. (He'd been given the pillow to clutch and brace his sternum against when he had to cough.) "Sadists," he muttered grimly.

He dozed after they got onto the regular streets, waking up only if she accidentally hit a pothole (she managed to dodge most of them, but clearly the Wonder City road crews hadn't yet gotten to the area around the hospital). She and Andrea exchanged occasional looks in the mirror, but didn't say anything. What was there to discuss, after all?

Ira leaned on her arm as they walked into Andrea's house. Andrea held the doors and Ira pattered in slowly, Suzanne behind him in case he stumbled.

He stopped and stared into the living room. Andrea and Suzanne gave each other tight little smiles as they waited for his reaction. The two of them had rearranged it to ease his navigation from living room to kitchen and bathroom, and Suzanne had brought over his favorite recliner from her house.

"Oh, girls," he said, his voice shaky. "My chair. And everything. Oh, girls." He reached up and rubbed at the corners of his eyes.

"Well, I have some experience with you guys with your heart surgery," Andrea said, referring to her late husband David and his long saga of heart issues. "We got in a hospital bed as well, so you can prop up until you feel better."

"So much trouble," he mumbled. "You really shouldn't have. I could have managed."

Suzanne said, "It wasn't much work at all, Ira. And you deserve to be comfortable. After all," she added with a wry grin, "you *did* help save the world."

"Ha!" he said, turning to hug Andrea, then Suzanne. "Yeah, I guess I did. One more time," he said, winking at Andrea, "for old time's sake, right?"

Andrea visibly restrained herself from shaking his shoulder. "I'm just glad you made it through, you blasted old goat."

"Me too, me too," he said, shuffling over to his chair and slowly lowering himself into it. "I think I'll be well enough to go to that memorial for Jane."

"Don't push yourself," Suzanne said.

Andrea snorted. "He'll be fine. They're still planning it. It'll be weeks before it happens, you know. They have to get the President in and all."

"She never got to meet this one, did she?" Ira said with a faint smile. "She was always so proud of meeting every president since FDR."

"I think we can put it down as a posthumous meeting," Suzanne said.

Andrea waved a hand dismissively. "I'm going to make some lunch. You keep him company, Suzanne."

Ira appeared to doze off immediately, leaving Suzanne to sit on the couch and check her email on her StarPhone. She was considering an email from an ex-coworker asking for a recommendation with some dismay when Ira said, "Have you called him yet?"

Suzanne looked up, slightly alarmed and distracted. "Who?"

Ira opened his eyes. "Simon."

She dropped her gaze back to the tiny screen. "Oh... no."

"Why not?" he said.

Why did he have to ask her hard questions now? He was supposed to be recovering from major surgery! "I... I just haven't."

"But you remember him now," Ira said, one of his hands rubbing lightly over the well-worn tweedy fabric of the chair arm.

Suzanne looked away from the screen, away from Ira, face burning with shame. "Yes. Yes, Renata helped me with... with that."

"Things aren't going to get any less awkward by avoiding the phone call," Ira said gently.

"I know but... he's probably got a whole new life now, a new..." She swallowed the word "girlfriend" and let the sentence trail off.

"I'll tell you something," Ira began, but he grabbed his pillow and coughed several times. After he was done, he fished a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed at his eyes,

where the pain had sprung tears. "Okay, *now* I'll tell you something," he said with a weak smile. "I'll tell you that boy made you happier than I've ever seen you, and I've known you at least thirty years now. You *glowed* when you came home from seeing him. I don't care what garbage that flim-flam artist filled your mind with about Simon and other... dammit, why don't I have a brain? ... other people like him, but *you* know it's garbage and *I* know it's garbage, and you need to do your best to put that garbage out on the curb. You're not going to do that by sitting around feeling bad."

"Oh, Ira," she said, biting her lip and trying not to cry. "I don't know what to say to him."

Ira laughed a little, hugged his pillow and coughed. "Oh, sweetheart, just call him and say you're sorry, and ask him how he is."

She did cry then, and said, "Maybe it's just better to let it go entirely. It's... it's been almost a year since I knew who he was."

He reached over to her and gripped her hand. "Life is too damned short, Suzanne. You've lost a year you could've had with him — it was taken from you by those damned *assholes* on that spaceship. Yes, it may be over, but you need to *know* whether it's over or not so you can move on. And it may *not* be over. You won't know until you call him."

Suzanne folded over his hand and wept harder than she had since she thought Ira was going to die. At some point, Andrea pushed a box of tissues into her other hand and sat on the couch with her arm around her shoulders. And at some later point, she promised both of them that she'd call Simon.