

**FRAUD, WASTE, AND MURDER:  
Silencing the Civil Servant**

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**BOOK ONE**

**Prologue**

Daphne took the stairs to the basement level of the San Francisco Federal Building, muscle memory guiding her through the turns. Left, right, right. The air was warmer down here, damp, carrying the sour tang of old pipes and concrete that never fully dried.

The crooked nameplate clung to the wall outside B-22. National Federation of Government Employees, N.F.G.E. Local 10. Someone had re-taped one corner. Daphne paused at it, a small ritual she'd developed over recent months, ever since the administration had moved the Union down from the 23rd floor to this broom closet. A reminder that they were still here. For now.

She knocked twice. The door opened fast. Derek stood in the frame, no smile.

“Sit down, Daphne.”

That wasn't how their check-ins started. Their check-ins started with Derek complaining about the coffee machine or asking about her weekend. She sat.

“What's wrong?”

Derek closed the door. The fluorescent light overhead buzzed faintly, casting everything the same flat gray. He leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

“The Office of Personnel Management issued some things since our last meeting.”

“Okay, and...”

Derek cleared his throat. “First, they’ve given the agency a go-ahead on implementing Trump’s executive order to break up the union. No more collective bargaining agreement.” He gestured at the half-packed boxes lining the walls. “That’s why I’m packing up. First they moved us to the basement. Now we’ve been told to move out completely.”

“So what does that mean for my grievance hearing?”

“There won’t be one.”

Daphne felt the floor shift beneath her. She gripped the armrests of the desk chair, the vinyl cold under her fingers.

“Well then, I’ll just go to the Office of Special Counsel with my retaliation claim.”

Derek opened the folder sitting on his desk. She recognized the grievance form from nine months ago, her handwriting on the first page, the date circled in red.

“Remember when we sat here and I walked you through your options? You could file the grievance through the negotiated procedure in our contract with the agency, or you could go to the Office of Special Counsel for whistleblower retaliation. I told you it was a one-way door. Once you chose one, the other was closed.”

“I remember.”

“You said you didn’t want to make a federal case out of it. You just wanted the agency to stop what they were doing.”

“That’s what I said.”

“So you filed the grievance. That was your election. Under the law, that choice bars you from going to the Special Counsel for the same retaliation claim.”

Daphne's hands went still in her lap. "And now the grievance procedure doesn't exist anymore."

"The agency will argue exactly that. You elected a remedy that no longer exists, and that election still bars the alternative."

"That's a trap."

"It's the law. Or at least it's the argument they'll make." Derek exhaled. "Look, N.F.G.E. National is already fighting the executive order in court, and when the contract is reinstated, the grievance picks up where it left off. That's the plan. But there's something else."

She watched his face change. Whatever came next was worse.

"Do you work on policy at all?"

The question seemed to come from nowhere. "What do you mean?"

"Policy. Agency policy. Working groups, committees, anything where you review or develop changes to how the agency operates."

Her stomach tightened. "I'm on the national loan underwriting working group. We review proposed changes to loan underwriting criteria based on market conditions. I've been on it for two years. Why?"

Derek picked up a section of the printout from the folder and held it up. "The new rule lets the agency reclassify positions as Schedule Policy/Career if the duties are considered policy-influencing. There are no real standards. No classification criteria like you'd see for a normal position. Just guideposts." He set it down. "Reviewing and suggesting proposed changes to underwriting policy based on market conditions? That's textbook policy-influencing language under this rule."

"I'm a GS-13 loan analyst, Derek. I don't make policy. I review data and make recommendations that six levels of management can override."

"Doesn't matter. The rule doesn't distinguish between making policy and touching policy. If they reclassify your position, you become an at-

will employee. They can fire you for virtually any reason they dream up, with no notice whatsoever or right of appeal except in very narrow circumstances, and not without it costing you a small fortune in attorney fees to fight it.”

The basement office was silent except for the hum of a pipe somewhere behind the wall.

“And my whistleblower claim?”

“If they reclassify you, you’d still be barred from going to the Special Counsel, and you’d have to bring your retaliation complaint to a new internal department within the agency.”

“The same agency that’s retaliating against me.”

“Yes.”

Daphne looked at the crooked nameplate through the open door. N.F.G.E. Local 10, barely clinging to the wall with that extra strip of tape.

“So, they take the union. They take the grievance. They take the Special Counsel. And then they investigate themselves.”

Derek said nothing. There was nothing to say.

She stood. Her hands were steady. Her voice was flat and clear.

“This isn’t broken, Derek. This is exactly what they’ve built.”

## NINE MONTHS EARLIER

1.

Rebecca dialed John's number.

Three months. She'd been Daphne's therapist for three months and now this.

"Crossroads Counseling, this is John."

"It's Becca. I need to refer a client."

Pause. John never paused unless something seemed off.

"Well, this is a first. What's going on, Becca?"

Rebecca pressed her palm against her forehead. "Complex PTSD. Beyond anything I've handled."

John gave Becca all the silence she needed.

She turned away from her desk and lowered her voice into the phone

"Last session. She started talking about a murder."

"Tell me about the client."

"Federal employee. Thirty-six. Loan analyst. Came to me after workplace issues triggered severe depression and rage."

"Workplace issues?"

"That's what I thought at first." Rebecca pulled up Daphne's file. "But the history reveals more. Mother died when she was an infant. Drug overdose, probably. Father unknown. Grandparents raised her but refuse to discuss it."

"Avoidance pattern."

"Worse. The family photo albums stopped when her mother was twenty-five. Like she ceased to exist. Any stories about her, nothing past her mid twenties."

John's voice sharpened. "What aren't they telling her?"

"She's been piecing it together. The grandparents used to fight. Grandfather is a Korean War vet, an alcoholic, but sober now. When they argued, things would slip out. Grandmother blames grandfather's drinking and abuse for pushing the mother into drugs. Grandfather blames grandmother for getting the mother into teenage modeling, which led to, his words, 'those fucking flesh peddlers.'"

"Sex work."

"Exactly. Drug addicted sex worker who overdosed. But the grandparents never confirmed it. Just fought, then sobbed while my client learned to make herself invisible."

"Neglect through avoidance." John exhaled. "So why now? What triggered her?"

"Her job. She underwrites loans for apartment buildings, that kind of thing. Recently reviewed applications from people with organized crime connections. Flagged them for money laundering."

"And?"

"John." Rebecca's voice dropped. "This particular criminal network had ties to the porn industry and massage parlor sex trafficking in the Bay Area around the time Daphne's mother died."

Silence on the line.

"That's the trigger," John finally said.

"Drug addicted sex worker destroyed by traffickers. Now my client's having to review loans for people who might have done, or still be doing, the same thing her mother's predators did. And when she reported her findings to her supervisor, when she refused to approve the loans, her agency retaliated against her. Washington came down on her like a hammer."

"Wait." John's tone shifted. "They're angry she found the fraud?"

"They're angry she won't sign off on the loans."

"Classic bureaucratic corruption. I saw it at the VA. The problem isn't the fraud. It's the employee who won't look the other way." John exhaled. "That's a hell of a therapeutic knot, Becca. Unresolved grief from childhood abandonment mixed in with institutional betrayal as she's being retraumatized in real time by her own employer."

"Which brings us back to the murder," Rebecca said.

"What exactly did she say about it?"

Rebecca pulled up her session notes. "She was talking about the loan applicants, their organized crime connections. Then she mentioned using AI to research them. Said she found links to an unsolved murder. Nineteen eighty-eight. San Francisco police detective."

"She's investigating on her own?"

"Obsessively. Says she's building a profile of the real killer. Apparently, the police named a suspect but refused to arrest them. Daphne says that suspect is a classic patsy and that the real killer got away with it."

"Becca, that's not healthy coping. That's..."

"I know what it is, John. That's why I'm calling you."

John paused. "Does she understand she's looking for what stole her mother from her?"

"Not literally. But psychologically? Yes. She can't save her mother, so she's going to solve this murder instead. Get justice where she's been given none."

"Transference of unresolved grief into an obsessive investigation." John sighed. "And you think I can help?"

"You've treated VA whistleblowers, right? You know how institutional betrayal compounds trauma."

"I did. But this is more complex."

"She's not breaking laws. She's researching public information."

"While her employer retaliates against her for doing exactly what she's supposed to do."

"Exactly."

"Okay." John's voice became decisive. "I'll take her. Have her sign the HIPAA release and send me the full file. When can she start?"

"That's the other thing. Trump is bringing federal employees back to the office. Her schedule's about to get tighter and being back in the office will probably increase her anxiety."

"Right. DOGE and the mandate for return to office." John paused. "Becca, one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"This murder she's investigating. Does she think the same people involved in the case from the eighties are connected to the current loan applicants?"

Rebecca looked at her notes. "She hasn't said it directly. But the way she talks about them? Yes. I think she believes it's the same criminal network. Then and now."

"So in her mind, she's not just solving a cold case. She's exposing the people who might have actually destroyed her mother."

"And her agency wants her to approve their loans anyway."

John was quiet for a long moment. "Send me everything, Becca. This woman needs help before she gets herself killed."

The line went dead.

Rebecca set down her phone. Before she gets herself killed. She hadn't thought of it that way.

But John was right. Daphne wasn't just investigating a murder. She was hunting the people who made her an orphan.

2.

Daphne's eyes flickered across her computer screen, the glow illuminating her face in the brightly lit office of the Government Housing Finance Administration. GHiFA for short. After almost five years of working remotely, being back in the office felt suffocating. The fluorescent lights, the constant hum of activity, the loss of the quiet focus she'd grown accustomed to.

The SharePoint loan application queue blinked. 17 new entries.

"Daphne!" Marek appeared at her cubicle entrance, coffee mug in hand. "Welcome back. Good to see you in the office for a change." His smile was perfunctory. "Those new Shire applications from L&M need attention. They're on a tight schedule. D.C. cleared Shire's last deals, so just a brief memo for the file will do for these new ones."

He tapped her desk twice and walked away before she could respond.

Daphne turned back to her screen and clicked on the first entry. Borrower: Shire International Real Estate. Property location: Daly City, California. Loan amount: \$47 million.

Her jaw tightened. She scrolled down.

Contact: David Lutz, Lutz & Myers Commercial Mortgage Co.

"That's strange?" she whispered. She scrolled back up, then down again. No Trent Hanover. David's name was the contact on all three new Shire applications.

Daphne grabbed her phone and dialed.

"Lutz and Meyers, how may I direct your call?"

"Hi, this is Daphne Carter from GHiFA. I need to speak with Trent Hanover."

A pause. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hanover is no longer with the company. Is there someone else who can assist you?"

"No longer. Since when?"

"I'm afraid I don't have that information. Would you like to speak with David Lutz? He's handling most of Mr. Hanover's accounts now."

This landed exactly where she didn't want it to. The last few times she'd dealt with Trent, he'd been under pressure. Lutz pushing him to push her. But Daphne had known he was struggling too. The Shire loans hadn't sat right with him any more than they had with her.

"When did Trent leave?"

The receptionist's tone cooled. "I'm not at liberty to discuss personnel matters, Ms. Carter. If you have questions about ongoing business, I'd be happy to connect you with Mr. Lutz."

"No. That's fine."

Daphne ended the call.

She stared at the screen. The Shire logo, a custom coat of arms with a golden shield and interlocking swords, seemed to pulse at the top of the application. Beneath the shield, the Gaelic phrase "Teaghlach gu h-àraidh" that Daphne had looked up months ago: Family Above All.

She murmured to herself almost in disbelief, "Tim and Nora assigned to me again -why?"

Her cursor blinked on the first header in the notes field: Reviewer Comments.

Daphne stood abruptly, steadying herself against the desk. The fluorescent lights seemed to pulse with the beginnings of a headache. She grabbed her water bottle and walked down the hallway to Marek's office.

She knocked on the doorframe. "Marek?"

He looked up from his computer. "Yeah?"

"I'm not feeling well. Migraines again." She rubbed her temple. "I'm going to take some sick leave. I'll get to those new Shire deals first thing in the morning."

Marek studied her for a moment, then nodded. "Okay."

She hesitated at the doorway. "Marek, did you know Trent's not at L&M anymore?"

His expression hardened. "I heard he had a drinking problem and they let him go. Not our concern. Go home, feel better, but I need that memo tomorrow, Daphne. First thing."

He turned back to his computer, dismissing her.

"First thing," she echoed, already turning away.

**3.**

The half drawn blinds of Daphne's apartment did little to block the evening sun. Her desk was covered with printouts, and her laptop was covered in browser tabs. The Shire International research project was opened in her personal AI account.

She should've been writing the memo for Marek. Due tomorrow morning. Instead, she was sitting in her desk chair, as if in a trance, sifting and scrolling through months of research on Tim and Nora.

Daphne paused on one chat, opened it, and clicked on a link.

A browser window opened to an Erin Weekley article from June 27, 2005, with the headline: "Irish American Philanthropic Foundation to bring relief to victims of The Troubles."

"Belfast born Timothy McQuinn and his niece Nora McQuinn-Wexler broke ground this week at two locations. One in Dublin (EU) and the other in Belfast (UK). For their charitable organization, 'Troubles No More.'"

"The Troubles claimed the lives of Ms. McQuinn-Wexler's mother and father, Catherine and Patrick McQuinn. Patrick was Tim's younger brother. The authorities had originally classified their death as accidental. However, the investigation was recently reopened, and 3 former British loyalist paramilitary members have been named as persons of interest in their deaths."

Daphne clicked on the next link in the same chat.

This one took longer to open. It was a Belfast Post article from Monday, March 22, 1976. Scanned and digitized. The headline barely visible in the poor quality reproduction: "Tragedy in Falls Road. Couple Killed in Accidental Explosion."

The grainy black and white photo showed a damaged rowhouse, police tape, and neighbors gathered in the street.

Daphne leaned closer to the screen, reading:

"Patrick McQuinn, 35, and his wife Catherine, 33, were killed instantly when an explosion destroyed the home of Timothy McQuinn in The Falls Road area on Saturday afternoon. Authorities believe the couple was handling volatile materials when the blast occurred.

"The couple's daughter, Nora, 8, was with a friend of the family in a nearby playground at the time of the incident and was unharmed. She has been placed in the care of family members.

"Patrick McQuinn's older brother, Timothy, could not be reached for comment. Sources indicate he has not been seen since the incident and his whereabouts are unknown."

There was no more mention of Patrick McQuinn's older brother, Timothy McQuinn, in the Irish news until 2005, when he and Nora opened their philanthropic organization in Dublin and Belfast. Daphne had spent the last several months scouring public records of every county in Ireland. She had found none. Tim left Ireland in 1976 and did not return, at least not officially, until the new millennium.

*So, almost 30 years after his whereabouts were unknown, Tim returns to Ireland as some sort of saint to help those afflicted by the pain and suffering he helped cause? How fucked up can you get?*

She'd hesitated to show Marek this 1976 article when she was rejecting the first Shire deals. Should she bring it up now? All of it? What's the point? She let her eyes close. The exhaustion was physical now. A weight pressing down on her chest.

Her phone rang.

The sudden sound made her jump. The screen lit up with a photo: silver hair, twinkling eyes, the smile that had raised her.

Nana Sophie Calling.

**4.**

Daphne stared at the phone. Sunday dinner reminder.

She answered. "Hey, Nana."

"There's my girl! I was starting to think you'd moved to another country without telling me."

"Sorry. Been busy with..." Daphne glanced at her screen, at the Belfast Post article, at the damaged rowhouse and the words "volatile materials." "...work stuff."

"Work stuff on a Wednesday night?" Nana Sophie's voice carried gentle concern. "Sweetheart, you sound exhausted."

"I'm fine, Nana. Just finishing up a project."

"That's what you said last week." A pause. "Sunday dinner. Five o'clock. I'm making your favorite lasagna. You'll be there, won't you?"

Daphne looked at her screen again. At all her research spread across multiple tabs. At the connections that nobody else wanted to see.

"Absolutely," Daphne said. "Especially with lasagna on the menu."

"Good. Because we need to talk, dear."

Daphne's stomach tightened. "About what?"

"About you. About what's really going on." Nana Sophie's voice softened. "I know my granddaughter. And I know when something's wrong."

On the screen, the damaged McQuinn house stared back at Daphne. Patrick and Catherine McQuinn, dead. Their daughter Nora, orphaned. Timothy disappeared.

"Nothing's wrong, Nana. Just work stress."

"Work stress." Nana Sophie didn't sound convinced. "And how are you otherwise? Still taking that break from dating?"

"Yeah. Between work and everything, I don't have much bandwidth for romance right now."

Nana Sophie's laughter bubbled through the line. "Oh, sweetheart! Remember, sometimes the heart understands what spreadsheets cannot. But don't worry. If Mr. Right doesn't come along soon, at least you'll have my lasagna to keep you company."

"That's the plan," Daphne said, smiling despite herself. "The lasagna never disappoints."

"That's my girl. Do what makes you happy, and everything will fall into place." A pause. "Just don't forget our dinner date on Sunday. And please, darling, try to get some sleep before then. You sound like you haven't rested in weeks."

"I promise, Nana. Can't wait. Love you."

"Love you too, dear."

Daphne set down her phone and stared at the Belfast Post article. At the McQuinn family tragedy. At eight year old Nora, sent away to relatives.

Tim could've been an IRA bomber, and nobody really cares. She resigned herself to consider for the first time just how pointless all of this could be.

Nobody gave a shit about Timothy McQuinn's past. Nobody would question it. Nobody wanted to question it. They just wanted to do business with him.

She opened a new document to start a draft of the memo for Marek.

Her fingers paused over the keyboard.

Just do what they want. Clear the deals for underwriting based on D.C.'s prior approval. You're following a direct order. No shame, no blame.

Her phone buzzed. A text from Nana Sophie:

*PS, Bring your laundry on Sunday. I'll wash it while we eat. You're welcome.*

Daphne smiled. Then the smile faded as she looked back at her screen.

Another text appeared:

*And please eat something besides coffee and anxiety.*

She should eat. She should sleep. In the morning, she'll write the memo for Marek and move on.

**5.**

Daphne stared at the Shire applications on her screen. Her cursor blinked in the empty memo field.

Eight hours of sleep after eating a whole small pie from Victor's Pizzeria had given her new resolve.

She could just type: "Reference the D.C. clearance." Close the file. Move on.

Her fingers didn't move.

Six months ago, she'd flagged the first Shire deals and refused to approve them. Then David Lutz and Trent had shown up at an industry conference, cornering her by the bar with their smiles and veiled threats about "team players." When she still wouldn't sign off, David escalated it to Washington. D.C. cleared it right away, and Marek was forced to sign off in her place.

And now Trent was gone. Strange.

The new applications sat in her queue. They wanted her name on these deals. Her complicity. Her silence.

Daphne opened a new document. She pulled up the Shire files. All the same scenario: in house real estate loans from a foreign entity to a related domestic entity for acquisition of the asset, then straight to GHiFA's inbox for a cash out refinance with government guaranteed loans. Laundered nice and clean.

She began typing, copying, cutting, and pasting.

Six hours later, having worked straight through lunch, she had twenty pages laying bare the financial subterfuge. A blueprint of how illicit funds were being veiled and rerouted through GHiFA.

She attached the report to an email, typed Marek's address, and hit send. Then she grabbed her gym bag and left for a late lunch.

When she returned, Marek was standing at her desk. His face was red.

"My office. Now."

She followed him in. He slammed the door.

"I asked for a memo!" Marek slapped his hand on the desk. "Not a dossier. You were to reference the clearance from D.C. That's it."

"That clearance only covered the borrower's background check," Daphne shot back. "After completely ignoring their past, but fine, so be it! It said nothing about their financials. My report shows where the money comes from. The shell companies, the foreign wire transfers, everything. A clean background from D.C. doesn't mean clean money."

"Dammit, Daphne!" He paced behind his desk. "It's like you've made this personal. It's just a few more transactions. Why the vendetta? I said a simple memo referencing D.C.'s approval. That's it."

Daphne sat in the chair across from him. "With my name on it, right? My signature approving loans I know are dirty?"

"This is your stance?" Marek stopped pacing. "You're refusing a direct order from your supervisor?"

She met his eyes. Said nothing.

"That Branch Chief 120-day detail slot D.C. is about to post. I hear you're thinking of applying." Marek smirked. One corner of his mouth up. The opposite eyebrow raised.

"And?" she asked, not taking the bait.

"I'm just saying, well, you know how it works around here, Daphne. A reference from me can go a long way. Whereas, if they call me and want to know how you're doing, your production numbers, whether you're a team player... well, you're an intelligent woman, Daphne, you certainly realize any number of ways that conversation could go."

He paused. Looked at her posture. Spine straight, chin up, hands gripping the armrests.

He knew.

She wasn't backing down. And yet at the same time Daphne wanted out. One way or another, this had to stop.

Daphne stood up and exited Marek's office in silence, stopped in the hallway, pulled out her phone, started a new email...

*To: [derek.jackson@nfge.org](mailto:derek.jackson@nfge.org)*

*Subject: Need to Talk*

...and hit send.

**6.**

Daphne sat in a worn leather armchair, its comfort at odds with her obvious tension. John's office was a far cry from Rebecca's almost sterile environment. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with psychology texts, war memoirs, and surprisingly, a collection of vinyl records. Above his desk, a simple wooden frame held a quote: "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Albert Einstein.

John, a man in his early forties with an easy smile, sat in his chair across from Daphne. His attire was casual. A faded band t shirt under an unbuttoned flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled in a military fold up to his elbow. A prosthetic leg peeked out from beneath his left pant leg. His graying hair was slightly disheveled. A large, intricate tattoo of a phoenix was visible on his left forearm.

"So, Daphne," John began, "welcome to my little sanctuary. Before we dive into what's happening at work, I want to make sure I have your background straight from Rebecca's notes." He glanced down at his notepad. "Your mother passed away when you were an infant, likely from an overdose, though your grandparents, who raised you, never directly discussed the circumstances. There's this... gap in your family history, where your mom's life after age twenty-five just isn't talked about. But you've pieced together some things?"

Daphne nodded slowly, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her oversized sweater. "Yeah, that's right. Grandpa Joe would drink and fight with Grandma Sophie about it. She'd blame his abuse for Mom's addiction, he'd blame her for pushing Mom into modeling, which led to... other things."

John glanced at his notes. "And your father. Rebecca mentioned he's unknown?"

Daphne's laugh was bitter. "Not on the birth certificate. Never mentioned by anyone." She paused. "My best guess? Just some john who paid for an hour. Maybe less."

John nodded slowly. "So not just abandoned by your mother through death, but never claimed by a father who..."

"Who probably didn't even know I existed. Yeah." Daphne's voice flattened. "I'm the child of a nameless transaction."

"And recently at work," John continued gently, "you encountered something that stirred all this up. You found connections between loan applicants and sex trafficking operations. When you reported it, instead of support, you faced retaliation. Is that accurate?"

"Yes," Daphne said quietly. "But there's more. Something new came up in the AI research I was doing on those same borrowers." She paused. "I found an outlier in the data. A murder case. A cold case, actually, an SF cop named--"

"Daphne." John's voice was gentle but firm. He gestured toward the framed quote on his wall. "Before we go down that road, I want you to look at something. Have you seen that quote before? Do you know what it means?"

Daphne's mouth closed. She glanced up at the Einstein quote. "Einstein, right? Something about... not being able to fix problems with the same mindset that caused them?"

"Exactly." John's voice was deliberate. "And what just happened right there? I asked you about your mother, your father, the abandonment you experienced, and retaliation at work. Heavy stuff. Painful stuff. And immediately, you pivoted to..."

"The cold case." Daphne's voice was flat.

"Yes. Someone else's trauma," John confirmed. "Here's what I'm thinking Daphne. You're dealing with something that happened to you

when you were an infant. Abandonment, loss, a family that couldn't process grief. Your nervous system learned to operate in a certain way to survive that. Hypervigilance. Obsessive seeking of patterns. The need to solve what can't be solved."

Daphne's jaw tightened slightly.

"And now," John continued, "you're encountering the exact same type of predators who likely destroyed your mother. Your brain is doing what it was trained to do. Investigate, expose, find the answer. But that thinking, that survival strategy? It was created by the trauma. You can't heal the original wound by using the same mechanisms the wound created." He paused. "Fighting fire with fire will not work. Take it from someone who tried."

Daphne was quiet, studying him. The prosthetic leg. The phoenix tattoo. Someone who tried.

John shifted in his chair. "Have you ever heard of EMDR?" he asked. "It stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing."

She looked back at him, uncertain. "Rebecca mentioned it as something we might try eventually. But we never got that far."

John nodded. "EMDR uses bilateral stimulation. Moving your eyes back and forth, or alternating sounds or taps, to help your nervous system process traumatic memories anew. It's not about thinking harder or understanding more. It's about changing the hardware, not just the software."

He paused. "Here's what I want you to consider: investigating this murder, building profiles of criminals, trying to solve what happened in 1988. That's your traumatized brain trying to fix the original abandonment. It feels productive. It feels like justice. But it's keeping you stuck in the very thinking that the trauma created."

Daphne's fingers stilled on her sweater. "So what am I supposed to do? Just... let them get away with it?"

"That's not what I'm saying." John's voice was firm but compassionate. "What I'm saying is: you can't see clearly what's actually happening now. What your real responsibilities are, what healthy boundaries look like, what genuine justice versus repeating trauma looks like, until we help your nervous system process the original wound. The abandonment. The terror. The rage that no one protected her. That no one protected you."

He gestured again to the Einstein quote. "Different thinking. Not more investigation. But a fundamentally different process."

Daphne stared at the quote for a long moment. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. "So you're saying I need EMDR. To... process what happened to my mom. What happened to me."

"I think EMDR could help you get unstuck from the loop you're in," John said gently. "And then, once your nervous system isn't in constant response to threat, we can figure out what to do about your job, about the fraud you found, about all of it. But from a regulated place. Not from the place of the terrified infant who lost her mother."

The clock on the wall ticked softly, punctuating the moment of silence that followed.

Daphne looked up at him, her eyes glistening. "When do we start?"