

#### Collateral 4.b: Amicus Curiae

Alan Barnes would do anything for his family. *Anything*, if it meant their safety and happiness. For his beloved wife, his two baby girls, *anything and everything*.

He thought he'd known what that meant, once, like many fathers probably did. He thought he'd had some idea of what *anything* was, how far *everything* went. He'd assumed, with a confidence only an ignorant fool could feel, that he knew, that he *understood* the promise implied in those words.

Any father should, shouldn't he? Know that there might be trials and hardships entailed in raising a helpless infant into a complete human being? Know that he might one day have to get his little girl fitted for braces, ferry her to her friend's house for sleepovers, teach her how to drive, buy her a tub of ice cream after a bad breakup (although, naturally, no boy would ever be good enough *anyway*) — even, sometimes, grin, bear it, and make nice with people he couldn't stand, just because their kids happened to miraculously get along.

The *worst* thing any father expected might be having to pick his daughter up from the police station, bail her out after one of her friends dragged her to a party where some idiot's stupid, irresponsible parents had left the liquor cabinet unlocked. Alan Barnes was not naive enough to forget what it had been like to be a teenager, what sorts of things teenagers got up to when they thought their parents would never know.

*That* was always what Alan had assumed would be the worst thing to ever happen to his girls, the farthest that *anything* would stretch. Like all fathers, he dreaded still more things — that Anne or Emma would get addicted to drugs, that some horny teenage boy just wouldn't take *no* for an answer, that there'd be a terrible car crash the first time they went out by themselves and *everything* would suddenly mean *burying* one or even *both* of his daughters...

In the aftermath of Annette Hebert's death, that last one in particular had featured more in his nightmares than he wanted it to.

But those were the secret fears that plagued *all* fathers, and at least when he was awake, he could allay them and comfort himself by thinking, no, those sorts of things weren't common and he had no reason to expect them to happen, so there was no reason to get himself worked up over them. A handful of kids getting themselves killed because they were texting and driving at the same time was not a valid reason to take away Emma's phone — especially since Emma wasn't yet even sixteen, and so she couldn't legally drive *anyway*.

Then, two years ago, Alan was faced with what *everything* meant, how far *anything* went, and had been forced to realize that even *anything and everything* wasn't always enough.

What good was his money, in the face of that violence, that sheer malice? It certainly wouldn't have bought them any mercy from those thugs. They would have taken whatever they wanted, and then done whatever they wanted to him and to Emma, and offering more money wouldn't have changed anything.

What good was his skill as a lawyer, in the face of those who flouted the law? In those moments, in that situation, how would it have protected him or his baby girl? As though they would have backed

off simply because he threatened to sue — a lark if ever there was one. They would have offered it the only thing such an attempt would have deserved: open, mocking laughter. It would not have stopped them.

(Too, he was only a divorce attorney; even if threats like that worked, he was not a criminal prosecutor and had no power to follow through with them.)

What good was his love and his devotion, if neither one was enough to protect his children from some punk with a gun? It certainly wouldn't have saved Emma the disfigurement that she had been threatened with, that day.

In those moments, Alan had never felt more powerless.

A hand on his shoulder brought Alan out of his thoughts. When he turned and looked over, it was to find his wife, Zoe, leaned over the back of his chair. She smiled a little.

“Hey, you.”

Alan offered her a smile of his own, but his heart wasn't quite in it. “Hey, you.”

Her other hand came down, and gently, lovingly, comfortingly, she began to slowly rub his shoulders.

“Everything okay?” she asked quietly, breath tickling his ear. “You looked like there was something bothering you.”

“No,” was his immediate response. But after a moment, as though the hands massaging him were drawing out the truth, he reluctantly admitted, “Yes.”

The hands stopped, and Zoe came around his chair to rest her weight on the top of one sturdy arm. One hand remained on his opposite shoulder, one slender arm wrapped around him to offer support and love, and the other trailed down, ghosting feather-light across his skin, and entwined her fingers with his.

“So?”

“Just...thinking,” he told her. “Worrying. About Emma.”

The pad of one thumb, tracing soothing circles over his shoulder, stopped for a moment, then started again, a little firmer than before.

“How she's taking it, you mean.”

“Yes,” said Alan.

The news had broken about Shadow Stalker's death. Alan imagined, if he knew anything about the criminal justice system, that the PRT and the Protectorate had probably wanted to keep it under wraps, maybe even sweep it under the rug and quietly handle the issue themselves. The internet, however, from what he'd been able to gather, had had other ideas.

“FOUL PLAY IN BROCKTON BAY?” had been the opening story of Wednesday’s evening news. “LOCAL WARD FOUND DEAD IN QUIET NEIGHBORHOOD” had been the headlines of Thursday’s newspaper, plastered over the front page. In the following days, a furor of speculation and crackpot theories had been all over the place, all of them trying to work out what had happened and how.

Even before that, however, there had been rumors making the rounds at the office. Quiet whispers tossed about at the coffee maker and the vending machine, gossip spread during the lunch hour. Alan hadn’t believed any of it, at first, because there was always talk like that, about the latest capes and their daring dos, about which cape was secretly in a relationship with which. There was no reason to believe this one any more than there was to believe that Dauntless and Miss Militia were secretly having an illicit affair.

Until Emma had come home, that was, red-eyed and hollow-faced, looking as though someone had pulled the world out from under her feet.

*Anything and everything.* Except, what did that mean, when he had no idea what he was supposed to do?

“I *told* you that girl was no good,” said Zoe.

Alan sighed. “Zoe, please, not now.”

“I did!” she said defensively, pulling away from him. “I told you, I told you, she was going to get herself hurt or do something stupid and pull Emma along with her. We never should have let her into this house —”

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” Alan snapped impatiently. “Emma wouldn’t even come out of her *room* until Sophia pulled her out of her funk! It’s only because of that girl that Emma started to smile again —”

“At the cost of letting our daughter hang out with a violent *delinquent!*” contested Zoe. “We should have just gotten her therapy, instead, because that’s *certainly* a better idea than allowing her to traipse around with that *thug!*”

“And I told you then, I’m not going to *force* her to go *anywhere!* If she doesn’t want to go to therapy, I’m not about to drag her there, kicking and screaming!”

It was an argument they’d had several times before.

Alan was well aware that Sophia Hess — Shadow Stalker — was not the stablest or the most well-adjusted of individuals. He was well aware that she was somewhat violent and not altogether very nice. He’d have to have been a fool not to notice. Before the alleyway, she was exactly the sort of girl he wouldn’t have let within five *miles* of his little girl, let alone in the same room or the same *building*.

But...in that alleyway, she’d saved his little girl. Whatever else her faults might have been, she’d been there and she’d averted the terrible fate that had awaited them. It was because of her that Emma was safe and unharmed, but for the hair that had been lost, which was easily regrown. It was because of

her that his little girl hadn't been horribly disfigured, hadn't had her nose or her ears cut off or one of her eyes gouged out.

And then, she brought Emma back. His little girl, who had spent a week holed up in her room, who had refused to talk to anyone and didn't even come out to eat with her family, and Sophia Hess had managed to drag her back, to give her life, again.

Alan had been willing to overlook a lot for that. For both of those things, really. He'd been willing to vouch for her a year later, when she'd been put before a judge to decide whether she would be sent to juvenile detention or remanded to the PRT's Wards program. He'd been willing to let them have their friendship, if it meant his darling little girl could start to smile, again.

Maybe... Maybe therapy might have been a good idea. No, Alan wasn't a fool, therapy *would* have been a good idea.

But... Emma had been so *fragile*, after the alleyway incident. Like glass. It had damaged her, beyond repair, he'd feared, and he'd been so afraid of doing something wrong, of pushing her too far or too hard and making things *worse*...

So, he'd made the decision to let *her* choose. If Emma wanted to talk to someone about what had happened, wanted to let someone *help* her, then he'd set up an appointment the moment she said the word. Until then... Until then, he'd let her try and come to terms with it on her own. Even if that made him feel helpless and powerless.

Naturally, Zoe hadn't been pleased with the idea, but she'd grudgingly agreed to it, at the time. Every now and again, however, she brought the subject up again, and they'd rehash the same argument, which always ended the same way.

"She's not a child anymore, Zoe!" Alan said.

"No," his wife agreed, "but she's not an *adult*, either!"

For a moment, neither of them said anything else, they just stared at each other, refusing to back down. As any married man must know, the greatest of his allies would always be his wife, and therefore so too was the bitterest of his enemies.

"Alan," Zoe began, softer and gentler, "Alan, there's no Sophia Hess to pull her out of it, this time."

"Taylor," Alan started, but couldn't finish.

"When was the last time you remember seeing Taylor and Emma so much as talking to each other?"

It went deeper than that, Alan knew. How deep, he wasn't really sure. But it was obvious something had happened, something that had broken the two of them apart. Two years ago, Taylor had vanished from Emma's life — suddenly, without warning. He suspected Emma's new friendship with Sophia had something to do with it, even that they might have become bitter enemies afterwards, but as he hadn't seen Taylor and hadn't talked to Danny, Alan didn't really know anything beyond that.

“That... That other girl,” he tried instead. “The third one, what’s-her-name, Milly, Missy —”

“And when have you heard Emma even *talk* about Madison, Alan?” Zoe countered. “About what she likes, about the fun they have together... When’s her *birthday*, Alan? You couldn’t even remember her *name*.”

It was true, it really was, and he couldn’t deny it. It was always about Sophia — always. Even when their other friend, Madison, was brought up, it was always in the context of Sophia — always, “I’m going to the mall with Sophia *and* Madison,” or “I’m going to hang out with Sophia *and* Madison.” Never just with Madison, always with Sophia *and* Madison.

Did Emma have any other friends? If she did, he couldn’t recall her ever talking about them.

“We *need* to do something, Alan,” Zoe told him. “We can’t just let her sit in her room for a month, wasting away. And the school will be calling within a week, asking where she is. She needs to learn to deal with...with *this* in a healthier way than just locking herself in her room.”

“Zoe...”

“I *know* you don’t want to force her,” she cut him off. “I understand. I do. But this is about *helping* her, and leaving her alone is *not* helping her.”

For a moment, all Alan could do was look her in the eyes, the intense, beautiful blue eyes he had fallen in love with as a young man. Then, he sighed, looked away, and gave in.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. You’re right. I’ll call and set up an appointment for as early as I can.”

Zoe smiled slightly and reached down to take his hand, gave it a squeeze. “Thank you.”

“But first,” he added, “we have to —”

*Ding-dong!* went the doorbell, interrupting him.

Alan frowned. “Are we expecting anyone?”

Zoe shook her head. “No, we’re not.”

“A package of some kind?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Besides, it’s Sunday.”

“Right, right.”

“Maybe it’s the neighbors?”

*Ding-dong!* the doorbell chimed again, followed by a series of knocks.

“Coming!” Alan shouted towards the door.

He shared a look with his wife, and then the both of them left the office and made their way through the house. If it was, indeed, one of their neighbors, it likely wasn't anything particularly pressing, and they could be sent away after some idle talk and a platitude or two.

Unless it was Missus Hendrickson. *She* could talk up a storm and spend a whole hour discussing the condition of next door's flowers and how it meant Mister Carlyle was taking a little sugar on the side.

What Alan was *not* prepared to see when he opened the front door was a pair of men in suits, each with a badge hanging from his belt.

"Mister Barnes?" asked one, grim-faced.

"Can... Can I help you, officer?" Alan found himself asking. His mouth was suddenly dry, because there was a feeling of foreboding coiling deep in his belly.

"I'm Detective Doyle," said the first officer, then pointed to his partner, "this is Detective Richards. Can we come in?"

Alarm bells started going off immediately in Alan's head. He wasn't a criminal defense attorney, but even a first year law student knew the answer to *that* one.

"Actually —"

"Mister Barnes," the other one, Detective Richards, interrupted, "I don't think you want to do this in front of the neighbors."

For a moment, Alan hesitated, and then, across the street, he could see Missus Hendrickson peering over from her porch, looking down her long nose in his direction.

Alan swallowed thickly, and, feeling as though someone else were moving his body, he stepped back and to the side to let them in. "Thank you," Detective Doyle said as he and his partner walked through the door.

When the front door was closed behind them and Missus Hendrickson could no longer be seen, Alan turned to the two detectives.

"What's this about?" he asked faintly.

Detective Doyle reached into his suit and pulled out a sheaf of folded papers from the inside pocket. "We have a warrant," he said as he unfolded them and handed them over to Alan, "for the arrest of one Emma Barnes."

Zoe, who had been standing back, gasped loudly.

"On what grounds?" Alan demanded, voice rising.

Detective Doyle looked him straight in the eyes. "The attempted murder of Taylor Hebert."

“What?” Alan choked out.

“Oh my god,” said Zoe. “Oh my god. No, no, it can’t be true. They’ve been best friends since they were kids!”

“Missus Barnes —”

“No,” Zoe said, starting to sound hysterical, “no, you can’t! It’s not true! It can’t be true! Emma would *never*...! To *Taylor*? Why would she —”

“Missus Barnes!” barked Detective Richards. “There’s two ways we can do this. The first way, you let us to our jobs and you can visit your daughter later and prepare her defense or whatever you need to do to get through this. The second way, you try to stop us and we have to detain *you*, too, for interfering in a police investigation.”

Zoe stepped back, face white as a sheet. Alan could only imagine that his own complexion wasn’t much better.

He’d known something was wrong with their friendship. He’d known that they’d had some kind of falling out. But Emma? His *little girl*? *Attempted murder*?

“We’ll cooperate,” someone said into the sudden silence. It took Alan a second to realize it was him.

“Good,” said Richards. “Now, where is Miss Barnes?”

“She’s in her room,” said Alan. “She hasn’t left ever since she heard about her friend dying.”

“Alan!” said Zoe. He couldn’t bare to look at her and see the betrayal on her face.

The two detectives shared a dubious look.

“We’ll need you to take us to her room, then,” said Detective Doyle.

Of course, Alan realized a moment later. They were Emma’s parents, so if they went alone, one of them could sneak her out the window or say she’d left. That was why they weren’t letting him or Zoe do it by themselves.

“This way.”

This had to be some kind of horrible dream, a nightmare. This couldn’t be *real*. Could it?

“Alan!” Zoe cried again, but he couldn’t listen. If he did, that would mean it was *really* happening.

Feeling as though he were watching from outside his own body, Alan led the two detectives up to Emma’s room.

“This is it,” he told them when they reached her door. Detective Doyle reached for the knob and turned it, to no avail. “She’s locked herself in,” he added belatedly.

Detective Doyle shared another look with Detective Richards.

“Do you have the key?”

“We lost it,” Alan found himself admitting. “We... We figured Emma must have...have hidden it or thrown it away, after the...after the incident in the alleyway.”

“Incident in the alleyway?” asked Doyle.

“Two years ago,” Alan clarified. “Emma and I were attacked by a group of ABB thugs. We got out okay, because...because Shadow Stalker saved us, but...”

This time, the two detectives shared a frown.

“She refused to come out for a week.”

“And that was the only one? You don’t have any spares.”

“No.”

Detective Doyle frowned deeper, then turned back to the door and rapped his knuckles on it sharply.

“Miss Barnes! Miss Emma Barnes! We need to speak with you!”

There was no response. There hadn’t been one for that week she’d spent in there last time, either.

“Miss Barnes! This is Detective Kevin Doyle with the Brockton Bay Police Department!”

He knocked again, firm and forceful. There was still no response.

“Miss Barnes!”

One more time, he tried. Nothing.

Detective Doyle turned to Alan and Zoe. “Mister and Missus Barnes, please, stand back.”

Alan hesitated a moment, then took a step back. Zoe fretted silently next to him, wringing her hands.

“What are you going to —”

Detective Doyle braced himself, then threw his shoulder against the door. *THUMP* — but it didn’t budge.

“Wait,” Zoe said, “stop, you can’t —”

“Stay back, Missus Barnes,” said Detective Richards, holding up a hand to ward her off.

Detective Doyle braced himself again, then threw his shoulder against the door a second time. There was another *THUMP*, but it still didn’t budge.



“You okay, there, Doyle?”

“It’s like it’s made of friggin’ marble, gimme a sec,” said Doyle, rubbing his shoulder.

After a moment, he squared up and tried a third time — *CRACK*. The door splintered around the knob and banged open, bouncing off the wall, and the minute it had, a sudden stench wafted out of Emma’s room.

“Christ, that’s ripe!”

It was the smell of sweat and urine and body odor, and even Alan had to recoil from it as it hit his nostrils.

“Fuck,” said Richards. He pinched his nose shut. “The hell is up with that?”

“Emma?” Alan asked. He made to enter her room, which was dark and had the curtains drawn.

“Emma, sweetie, are you okay?”

Doyle’s arm stopped him.

“What?” he demanded. “Why are you stopping me?”

Doyle didn’t answer; he reached into Emma’s room with his other hand, felt along the wall blindly, then flipped the lightswitch — and revealed the mess that took up her room, with all of the posters torn down, books and clothes strewn about the floor, papers and ink all over the desk, and there, lying on the bed, was Emma herself, curled up into a ball and hugging her knees as she faced the far wall.

“Emma?” Doyle’s arm fell and Alan rushed into the room, uncaring of what he stepped on.

“Emma? Sweetie?”

The stench only got worse as he got closer, and when he reached her and turned her over, she fell bonelessly onto her back. Glassy, unseeing eyes stared up at him from behind smudged, smeared makeup, surrounded by a halo a greasy, oily hair, and he thought, for one terrible, awful moment, that she was dead. For that single second, his heart stopped and the world fell away beneath him.

But after a few breathless seconds, he realized that her mouth was moving and she was breathing. He shook her.

“Emma? Emma?”

She didn’t respond.

“Emma, honey, you’re scaring me.”

“S not true...”

“Emma?”

Alan leaned down and pressed his ear closer to her mouth.

“S not true,” she muttered again. “Can’t be true. S not true. Can’t be true.”

“Emma?” he shook her again, but she only flopped limply.

“Mister Barnes, if I may?” Detective Doyle said.

Alan let himself be pulled back by Richards as Doyle crouched down over his daughter and checked her over — felt for her pulse, held his phone in front of her mouth to see if it fogged, waved a hand in front of her eyes, then pulled out a flashlight and shined it first in one eye, then the other. When he was done, he hung his head, shook it, and sighed.

“Christ, what a fucking mess,” Alan heard him mutter.

“Doyle?”

“Richards,” said Detective Doyle. “Call an ambulance. And while you’re at it, see if you can’t get the number for the closest psychiatric hospital. Get one of their shrinks over to take a look at her.”

“Roger.”

In the background, Zoe let out a sob, and Alan felt his knees weaken as he stumbled back into Emma’s desk chair. It gave a dangerous, threatening creak, but he couldn’t bring himself to care whether it would collapse beneath him or not.

When? He wondered. When had it all gone wrong? Just a week ago, things had been... Not perfect, but good. They’d all been happy, healthy, smiling. Emma had been normal, going out with her friends to spend time at the mall or see the latest movie out in theaters.

But now, it was all falling apart again, and he could do nothing but watch. There was another knife at his throat, pressed tightly to his jugular, and it was shaped like helplessness and despair.

Alan Barnes would do anything for his family, his wife and his two baby girls. *Anything and everything.* He *thought* he’d known what that meant. But now... Now, he wasn’t sure that he ever had.