Mea Culpa (or, When Grumpy Cat Met Cute Hair)

by UrbanAmazon

Summary

“You are not old enough to retire,” Han said.

Cooper blinked and looked at Han oddly. “Thanks?”

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Once, when Han Cho Bai was a young agent, determined to excel and already feeling hungry for more than his superiors were assigning him, he’d heard a story - the kind of story that qualified as gossip in the counter-intelligence community; some warlord somewhere had been taken out by a resentful, under-appreciated second-in-command. The where, the how, and the why had long become blurry, but the moral of it remained clear: those who did not respect that which supported them, would soon fall, and fall hard. Han took the lesson to heart just like any other tool in his arsenal (because everything could be a tool, or, with sufficient application of force, a weapon), and decided that if he were ever to find himself in such a position of power, it would not be a tool ever used against him.

Many years later, when Han found himself… he preferred to think of it as self-employed, it was the first tool he reached for and put to use. No modern assassin truly worked alone, not if they wanted to sleep for more than a single hour per night, because it would mean doing everything by themselves.

Contract killing wasn’t for everyone, and the paperwork inherent in the job was right there in the name.
It took Han two years - *two years* - of screening and interviews to finally find the perfect support team in Serena (contract offers, target research, and operational logistics) and Vance (ground recon, materials management, and accounting). When he did, he prepared airtight contracts offering competitive salary (tied to his own rates), comprehensive health benefits, and an impressive retirement plan. To be truthful, Han had intended all of this as merely a safety net, to cement the certainty that his support staff would never turn on him. The fact that Serena and Vance turned out to be *utterly brilliant* support staff once offered some decent job security… that was more like a bonus.

Within eighteen months, Han Cho Bai was the fifth-highest-paid non-government-affiliated assassin in the world. Another year after that, not only was he the highest-paid, he was the *best*; highest completion rate, lowest collateral damage, and consistently efficient timelines, all thanks to the support staff that kept everything running as smoothly as a high-performance engine.

However.

Sometimes, no matter how much preparation he might have on his side, no matter how many contingencies *should* have covered every possibility, sometimes the grand, cosmic plan of the universe decided to just shit on Han’s day.

“This… is all Frank’s fault.” It felt better to say the words out loud, even though there was no one else in Han’s office to hear him. If he said it often enough, Han could feel it solidifying into a meditative mantra, grounding him in a world that made sense.

See, it was *Frank Moses* that had drawn Han into the whole Nightshade mess (and the financial repercussions Han would feel for abandoning such a lucrative contract from the American government). It was *Frank Moses* that had driven Han into a simmering wrath of distraction (and a considerable number of complications with Russian authorities that would interfere with his work for the foreseeable future). It was *Frank Moses* that was to blame for the side-trip to London (and the bullet graze on Han’s neck, the lingering scent of Iranian embassy plumbing on Han’s suit, and at least three gray hairs on Han’s head).

So, by extension, it was also completely *Frank Moses*’ fault that Han returned to his office sore, jet-lagged, *soaked* with the stale, sweaty reek of recycled commuter carrier air, and vibrating with the need to just *shoot* someone… and found the office empty of his assistants. In the midst of the Frank-Moses-shaped migraine that had been the last week, Han had completely forgotten about Serena and Vance’s scheduled leave time. The leave time that he had approved despite the double-booking, anticipating a twenty-million-dollar payday and possibly some time off of his own after to celebrate the final end of Frank goddamn Moses.

“This is Frank’s fault. *This is Frank’s fault.*” Han carefully leaned himself down into his office chair and dragged his hands over his face. He supposed he should be glad that it was only a matter of parental leave (for Vance) and scheduled carpal tunnel surgery (for Serena), and they hadn’t been, oh, *stolen and blown up*.

With no one in the office, there was no one to witness the greatest contract killer in the world give a short shriek of frustration into his palms, then breathe, adjust his cuffs, and breathe again.

The thing about having utterly brilliant support staff, though, was that they were *reliably* utterly brilliant. Serena *always* left a contingency list of temporary or long-term replacements, and updated it on a monthly basis to her own exacting standards. The very idea of having to screen another support staff made Han’s skin crawl, but the burden of being the best at anything was that it had to be maintained. If Han was about to let the actions of Frank Moses have any impact whatsoever on his reputation, then he didn’t deserve it in the first place. He needed an assistant,
temporary or otherwise, and then he needed a job.

Han pressed his thumb to the reader lock on the topmost right drawer of his desk, and - yes; a single hardcopy resumé, thoroughly annotated with Serena’s flick-sharp shorthand in the margins, and a single post-it note that read ‘In Case of Emergencies’. He picked up the paper and felt pride surge warmly into his chest. He really did have the best assist--

Wait.

Han blinked, squinted at the name at the top of the sheet. Blinked again.

“... that William Cooper?”

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The story of William Cooper was not a widespread one in the independent agent community. Three years ago, the loudest thunder in the espionage circles had been the downfall of one Vice President Robert Stanton and the posthumous disgrace of Alexander Dunning, with a highly confidential file being released in the least confidential of ways (but still quashed before civilian news networks could get the full picture). The agent running point in the whole clusterfuck, as it were, had been a mere footnote, quickly vanishing under much more entertaining facts as mass murder, war crimes, and corporate control. Han, though, had noticed, because Serena had noticed, and it was always relevant information to know what high-ranking CIA agents might cross paths with Han’s typical field of operations. William Cooper had survived, so William Cooper became a name to take note of.

(Frank Moses had been involved in the incident, but by all accounts, only in a minor capacity. He’d been mentioned in the original confidential file, and he’d survived, but no other first-hand reports had placed him at the scene. Han wasn’t sure he believed those. Frank had to be at fault for something.)

To be honest, Han hadn’t expected Serena to leave him the resumé of an active CIA field agent for use as a temp, but he couldn’t deny that Cooper’s skillset would make for an excellent assistant. Curiosity and faith in Serena’s abilities meant it was worth an interview, at the least… and if the interview didn’t go well, then at least Han would have the nice, distracting challenge of hand-to-hand combat.

Han did not use his office for meetings. That was a level of trust few people had earned. In lieu of Serena handling all electronic communication with the client, or Vance scouting the location thoroughly beforehand, Han supposed the best approach was the direct one; it left the target off-balance, and easy to tip.

According to Serena’s notes, William Cooper lived in a gray house on the Maryland side of the Potomac River, slightly removed from the main road and the rest of the generally well-off neighbours. Not too bad of a commute to Langley, if one prioritized that sort of thing. Han cased the area from behind the wheel of a grudgingly-rented sedan; without Vance’s connections, the best Han could get on short notice was beige Cadillac (luxurious, yes, but nothing as exclusive as his Mercedes-Benz back in Hong Kong, and it certainly didn’t live up to the adrenaline rush of stealing the Lotus in London… and ugh, beige). He waited until the wife’s vehicle was absent from the drive, shortly after 9 AM, before parking neatly beside the black SUV.
There was something slightly… off, that Han couldn’t quite place. Perhaps it was a scent in the air, or a lack of a scent. Perhaps it was a lack of security cameras at all the places on the property Han would expect them to be. Perhaps he’d missed something in Serena’s notes—

No. Han was just being a little extra paranoid (this was Frank’s fault).

Cooper answered opened the door fourteen seconds after Han’s knock. He looked… hmm. From behind the shield of his sunglasses, Han took in the hair (grown slightly longer than what passed as company standard, and ruffled in that clean, fresh-from-bed sort of way), the eyes (a few more lines than shown the CIA ID photographs on file), the clothes (a slightly worn-in sweater and thoroughly worn-in jeans), and the shoes (slippers? slippers?) in a quick sweep. Han blinked again, thrown; Cooper wasn’t even wearing a gun.

“What the hell happened to you?”

A handful of emotions flicked through Cooper’s eyes like heartbeats - surprise, anger, resignation - before settling on a grudging sort of acceptance. “Mr. Han. I suppose I should be relieved you chose to knock,” he grumbled, crossing his arms in the doorway space.

“You know who I am.” Han couldn’t decide whether to be surprised or concerned.

“Please.” Grudging acceptance soured into an annoyed scowl; Han recognized the look, as he’d become rather familiar as of late with the urge to roll his eyes being quashed by the need to never look away from an opponent (this was Frank’s fault). Cooper stepped back to let Han into the house. “I haven’t been retired that long.”

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How had Han not known that William Cooper, rising star of the Central Intelligence Agency, had quit? What the actual hell?

Han turned a slow circle in the space of the living room and did not see the home of a committed, high-ranking field agent of the CIA. Plain walls (not beige, but gray, which was almost as bad) decorated liberally with framed family photographs, complete with candids and childish homework magneted to the fridge. There were potted plants - actual plants, not fake ones - and a faint dusting of cat hair on a half-constructed LEGO project on the coffee table, with a few rainbow bricks scattered on the carpet. A computer desk sat out in the open at the far end of the living room, the desktop monitor humming faintly. The curtains were left loose and rippling in the late spring breeze, offering far too many chances for an external sharpshooter to put a bullet or worse into any possible visitor Cooper might be entertaining.

It was all so… civilian. Domesticated, even.

Then again, on a second turn, Han noted that certain sight lines from the windows fell on gaps in the floor plan, dead space that wouldn’t likely hold any target at all. Cooper closed the front door behind them; there was a slight creak as it clocked shut, possibly denser than it appeared, and the sound of the deadbolt sliding home had the metallic ring of reinforced panelling on either side of the doorframe. Han supposed that looking civilian, especially to an eye as trained as Han’s, might have been part of the point. Not everyone could live in high-security glass penthouses (not that it helped anyone Han had ever met, in the long run).
“Retired.” The word felt foreign on Han’s tongue, and sounded stranger to his ear. “As in… retired-retired?”

“Retired. Took the option for the company’s early retirement package just over a year ago.” Cooper casually circled Han, hands in his pockets. His slippers made no sound on the carpet.

“You are not old enough to retire,” Han said.

Cooper blinked and looked at Han oddly. “Thanks?” He swept Han head to toe with a sideways glance, no doubt marking the weapons on Han’s person. Perhaps the conversation could still come down to a fight. He pointed at the leather folder in Han’s possession. “Is that my resumé?”

“I take it Serena contacted you, then.” The leather folder, one of Serena’s, was a nice one - the steel plate under the front cover could stop either a bullet or a knife at close range, and the rigidity meant it could also be used offensively, to incapacitate or worse.

(On the flight to London, Victoria Winslow had distracted Han from his minor head trauma - Frank’s fault - by arguing with him over the proper place on the throat to strike a target, while conceding that she had customized her technique for using an evening clutch, or sometimes a trashy paperback novel. Han had to admit… the conversation had been a very good distraction, at the time.)

“The day after I left the CIA, actually. And again, three days ago. She left a message asking whether I’d still be interested in being considered for the job if guarantee of private travel was temporarily unavailable.”

(Goddamn you, Frank Moses.)

“And are you?”

“I opened the door, didn’t I?”

“You were a career agent.” Han lifted his folder and gave it a slight wiggle. “This is for a personal assistant position, and not even a permanent one. What could possibly interest you in taking the job?”

There was no hesitation. “Family health insurance.”

Han lifted one eyebrow. “Say again?” Most of the candidates he’d screened had answered ‘money’, or ‘travel’, or ‘personal challenge without concern for union bylaws’.

Despite the fluffy hair and comfortable sweater, Cooper’s expression was steel. “Family. Health. Insurance,” he repeated.

Han flipped the folder open and re-read Serena’s quick, flicky handwriting. Married 11 yrs. Wife, Michelle. Son. Daughter. Poss. home invasion 3 yrs. ago? Something felt familiar for some reason he couldn’t quite grasp fully, and Han guessed out loud, “Frank Moses?”

Cooper’s face darkened for all of a twitch. “No, actually,” he said with an odd lightness. “Cynthia Wilkes.”

Not a name Han could immediately place, which bothered him like an ill vibration in a car engine. “Beg pardon?”

A rueful smile twisted Cooper’s face. He settled himself in the armchair closest to the fireplace.
Han counted three weapons (fire poker, magazine, picture frame) within arm’s reach, but Cooper made no move to reach for any of them. “You know, it’s funny you assumed Frank Moses. Do you know that he broke into my house, a few years ago? Frank broke into my house while I was interrogating his girlfriend, and called me from my own landline. And do you know what he did?”

Han said nothing. Stole your house and crashed it into the next county over? was not a constructive addition to the conversation.

“He offered me some perspective on things. Important things. In hindsight, I was a little distracted at the time. Didn’t quite see the big picture when he talked about old ambitions. About trust. And then, not twenty-four hours later, I’m watching Cynthia Wilkes, my direct superior, point a gun at the head of a civilian hostage, while the CEO of an arms manufacturing corporation shoots the Vice President of the United States in the chest. And then he offers me a promotion if I finish the job and frame Frank for it.” Cooper’s rueful smile cooled. “I had to listen as Alexander Dunning laid out every moment of actual treason like it was a perfectly acceptable plan. Not to mention, I suddenly had to come to terms with the fact that I led a field mission which directly ended the lives of two men that had done nothing more than their own, under-informed jobs.”

There was just a little bit of pinch in Cooper’s eyes. “Let’s just say that seeing the big picture revealed a whole lot of bullshit. If someone like Cynthia Wilkes was allowed to last as long as she did… hell, if Stanton was allowed to make a bid for the presidency despite what was in that file, then the CIA is infected beyond repair by more than just Alexander Dunning. I signed on to keep my country safe, but my family sure as hell didn’t. I am not prepared to risk their safety to fix it by myself. Frank taught me that; he might have broken into my house, but so long as I worked for the CIA, they had a key to the front door.”

“Well, forgive me if I don’t share your shining opinion of Frank Moses,” Han sneered.

“Last I checked, Frank isn’t here.” Cooper didn’t quite smile along with his deliberately innocent tone. “Some online chatter about Russia, last I heard?”

Han’s left eye twitched. “You’re right. Frank isn’t here. Nor is your point, yet.”

“My point is… I can’t not care. Working in the CIA, I had to constantly step with caution around policy, law, redacted files, incomplete mission briefings, corporate manipulation, lack of communication, corruption, countermanded orders, and money. But if I have any direct connection to the best non-government-affiliated assassin in the world, even temporarily… if anyone is actually stupid enough to so much as breathe in my family’s direction, then everyone knows I will have nothing holding me back from putting them in the ground.”

Forget steel; Cooper’s expression could have burned a lesser target alive. “I have no illusions about what you do for a living, Mr. Han, even if your CIA file only covers half of what you’ve done. But that means I’m also aware of and perfectly at peace with who you’ve done it to. If you’re still hiring.”

Well, then.

Han tapped his fingers against the folder’s surface in a low, rolling pace. This was a bad idea. A glowing CIA background was certainly helpful, but even the most amateur of assassins could appreciate the necessity of compartmentalization. Contract killers were action in human form, kept cleanly separate from judgment or decision by a substantial amount of money.

Caring was not a desirable trait. It would lead inevitably to sympathies, and sympathies became weaknesses a target might try to exploit as they were faced with the finality of gasping their final
breaths: money, power, revenge… or worst of all, doubt.

And yet… Frank.

If Han was truly the best because he really didn’t care, then no amount of protests or bargaining about saving a city from a weapon of mass destruction would have deterred him from putting a bullet—several bullets—in Frank’s chest, a week ago in a remote Russian hangar. He could have shot Frank in Russia, or made it look like he’d tripped and fallen into a burning helicopter in London, or even just had Serena coolly bill Frank for the broken contract and vaporized plane, and moved on.

Hell, if Han was really the best in the world at compartmentalizing, he wouldn’t have even considered several bullets, because Frank would have been just another contract, period.

Clearly, Han couldn’t not care about some things, either… so perhaps it could still work.

(… and goddamn it, that was Frank’s fault, too.)

Han flipped open the folder and clicked his pen. “You mentioned insurance. Let’s talk pay.”

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Once, when Han Cho Bai was still newly… self-employed, and therefore devoid of both assistance to pre-screen his work offers or the luxury of being picky, he’d acquired a contract bearing the photograph of a person he recognized. Not that the target was any former co-worker, or classmate, or decent family member: it had been the head chef of his favorite bibimbap restaurant.

Apparently, the man only moonlighted as a chef, and was actually the head of a gang with a penchant for dunking rivals in hot grease (and thoroughly infuriating another gang boss with a side job in real estate that wanted that restaurant property). Fortunately, Han had already developed his own penchant for trying unconventional weapons, and killed the man with the sharpened edge of his own menu.

The details were rather unique to that situation, but the moral of it remained clear: the espionage community was much smaller and more interconnected than one could ever expect. It really did demand that all community members (temporary or otherwise) stay constantly alert for coincidences. That said, no matter how much preparation one might have on their side, no matter how many contingencies should have covered every possibility, sometimes the grand, cosmic plan of the universe decided to just shit on someone’s day… and for once, for a glorious, gleaming once, it wasn’t Han’s day.

Technically, Rome wasn’t the furthest point on the globe from Caracas, but it was certainly a good effort (and it had some of the best cars). It was almost the last place Han expected to find Frank Moses walking into the lobby of the Hotel Savoy Roma with Sarah Ross on his arm.

For one, terrible moment, Han’s stomach plummeted. He fought the instinct to swear and reach for the throwing knife in the inner pocket of his suit jacket, or the nearest drink coaster, or even the heavy ceramic vase on the side table to just… just throw it at Frank Moses’ lying, scheming, plane-stealing, plane-exploding bald head. Six months had passed since London, and Frank hadn’t so much as offered to compensate Han for any of the airline tickets he’d had to rely on just to travel from job to job.
(Sarah had sent Han a thank-you postcard from Caracas, somehow. It arrived via confidential courier the day after he returned from Maryland, and said ‘Greetings from Venezuela! - thanks for helping us save the world, but also thanks for not being a dusky international floozy biatch.’ Han suspected Marvin and his insane data-mining methods might have been involved, and possibly some of his drugs.)

But Han hesitated, and in the end reached for no weapon at all. Frank and Sarah looked... good, if Han was going to be honest with himself. Sarah had a slightly wide-eyed, dishevelled look that suggested she might have just threatened someone with a rocket-propelled grenade or extorted another someone with basic, tourist-manual Italian, and Frank looked oddly proud. Infatuated, naturally, but... proud. Relaxed, in all of the ways he hadn’t been in London. Perhaps the matching rings on their left hands had something to do with it.

The faint bloom warmth in Han’s chest was smugness at being right about their relationship (overpowering the dread that someone was now going to threaten to blow up this city before Han completed his own contract). It was only smugness, only this hard-won inch of superiority over Frank goddamn Moses, and nothing more. At all.

So Han crossed his arms and settled a little deeper into the lobby armchair, but the motion only served to grab Sarah’s attention. Beaming brightly, she waved. “Oh, hi! Frank, look who’s here!”

Frank did not wave. Frank stared at Han like a mongoose staring down a cobra, or like a mongoose holding the hand of another, even more fearless mongoose that was, more than likely, about to give the cobra a hug like an old friend.

Han couldn’t help but smile in return, especially as he realized that he probably wouldn’t mind if Sarah did exactly that. It would be a perfectly acceptable thing to do in a hotel lobby, and work perfectly as a layer of cover for any security or casual observers... and Marvin had been right, all those months ago in a London restaurant. People (and for this purpose, Han included himself as ‘people’) liked Sarah.

There was a strong chance that Frank and Sarah were secure enough in their relationship that Frank’s face wouldn’t make that pinched, startled, end-of-his-wits expression, but Han supposed he would have to settle.

(Like how Han would have to settle for never seeing his plane again, or any recompense for the fifty million dollar price tag on the debacle that was still, and forever would be, Frank’s fault.)

It was at that moment, balanced on the edge of clandestine propriety and battle hardened familiarity, when Han’s assistant emerged from the elevator behind the happy couple, returning from a successful mission to case Han’s target in the thirtieth-floor penthouse suite.

“Hey, Grandpa,” Cooper drawled.

Han figured the look on Frank’s face had to be worth at least... one million, out of fifty.

It was a start.

And after all, Frank had brought this on himself.
A/N -- “mea culpa,” from Latin, literally, "through my fault"

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Dear Yuletide recipient: I am so very fond of the RED series, and I squeed to see your request. Both Han and Cooper are delightfully interesting characters, and I felt robbed that we didn't get any chance for them to cross paths on-screen. Here's to whatever future trouble Frank might inadvertently drag the two of them into (because let's be honest, those chances are pretty dang high).

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