

Kiss And Say Good Spy

Book 12 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

By Diane Henders

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The town of Silverside and all secret technologies are products of my imagination. If I'm abducted by grim-faced men wearing dark glasses, or if I die in an unexplained fiery car crash, you'll know I accidentally came a little too close to the truth.

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CHAPTER 1

Driving through the cold grey November morning, I belted out an off-key version of 'My Own Way To Rock' along with the radio. Burton Cummings's bouncy tune might have been enough to energize me for a day at the office, but it couldn't dissipate the perpetual current of low-level anxiety buzzing in the back of my mind.

I stopped murdering the song and switched to foolish optimism instead.

No need to worry. I could just relax and be myself: Aydan Kelly, ordinary middle-aged bookkeeper. My undercover assignment had dragged on for months with no discernible progress, so maybe my potential arms buyer had lost interest. Or gotten arrested. Or better yet, killed.

Or maybe he'd seen the error of his ways, repented, and joined a monastery to spend the rest of his days ministering to the poor and infirm...

The ring of my burner phone shattered my fragile bubble of wishful thinking.

Heart thumping, I swerved over to stop by the side of the road. After a single deep breath that was supposed to be calming, I thumbed the Answer button and barked, “Arlene Widdenback” in my best hardass-bitch voice.

“Good morning, Ms. Widdenback.” Frederick Labelle’s rich radio-announcer’s tones oozed through the small speaker like warm butterscotch syrup, stirring queasiness in the pit of my stomach. “I hope you are well.”

“Fine,” I said shortly. “I’ll be even better if you finally have a deal for me.”

“Not quite yet.” He infused the words with all the synthetic regret of a weatherman predicting hail, tornadoes, and plagues of locusts. “However, you’ll be pleased to hear that our client will be coming to Calgary soon, and he’d like to meet you face to face.”

Fear tightened my throat, and I held onto Arlene Widdenback’s no-bullshit voice with an effort. “You’re supposed to be my broker, so do your job and bring me a deal. I don’t do face-to-face meetings.”

Annoyance chilled his voice, congealing its former sweetness into something quite a bit less pleasant. “That’s what I told him. I’ve been working on this deal since August, and I don’t appreciate being cut out at this late date.”

“So tell him to go piss up a rope,” I snapped.

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. He was quite... insistent.”

Mentally agreeing that gangland bosses could be remarkably persuasive, I sat in silence that I hoped would radiate disapproval.

Should I just repeat ‘I don’t do face-to-face meetings’ and hang up?

But the last time I'd refused a meeting, Labelle had sent a very cranky man with a gun to collect me. And if a middleman arms broker like Labelle kept a cranky gun-toter on staff, a high-ranking gang member like Benoit Riel probably had a whole stable of cranky gun-toters.

And even that thought didn't scare me as much as what the Department might do to me if I bungled this mission...

"He hasn't given me an arrival date yet," Labelle said into the silence. "Likely early next week. I do hope you'll be able to meet him. I think his visit is a positive sign that he's ready to move the deal forward."

Stall.

I grunted, putting as much contempt into the sound as I could. "Maybe. Call me if he actually shows up."

I pressed the disconnect button and collapsed back in my seat, willing my pulse back down into normal range.

After a few moments of fruitless yoga breathing I abandoned the effort and activated my small bug-detecting device. Its indicator light glowed a green 'all-clear', and I pulled out one of the Department's secured phones and hit the speed-dial.

As usual, Director Charles Stemp answered on the first ring with a crisp, "Yes?"

"It's Aydan," I said, trying not to sound as anxious as I felt. "I have a development. Benoit Riel might be coming to Calgary to meet with me in the next few days."

"Excellent. Briefing at zero nine hundred."

I checked my watch. Eight thirty. My civvie clients would have to wait.

I held in my sigh. "Okay. I might be a few minutes late, though."

"Very well. I'll inform your partner."

The click of his disconnect sounded before I could utter the words, "Wait, what partner?"

Uh-oh.

As I jogged across the frosty parking lot to the entrance of Sirius Dynamics, my heart thumped in a rapid rhythm that had nothing to do with exertion. Who would I get? Please, let it be someone I liked and trusted...

Dammit, I didn't want a new partner; I wanted my first and best one back. A vision of John Kane's steady grey gaze and reassuringly broad shoulders warmed my mind. If only he hadn't resigned...

I puffed out a harsh breath as I hurried into the building. Too late for that. Get over it.

The security guard gave me a cheerful 'Good morning, Aydan', and I managed a smile while I jittered through the sign-in procedure. I took the stairs two at a time, then paused at the top to dry my sweaty palms on my jeans and give myself a mental pep talk.

I could do this. I was getting closer to being the experienced agent I'd been impersonating for the past year. I'd taken some courses, and I had a few missions under my belt. And despite turning forty-eight a couple of months ago I was in the best physical shape of my life. Everything would be fine. Piece of cake.

I headed for the meeting room with my feet dragging as though I was already knee-deep in doom.

Outside the door, I plastered on a smile that I hoped would look convincing, then stepped inside.

“Hi...” I began. My greeting faltered at the sight of the occupants of the room, and I faked a cough to cover my dismay before continuing, “...Greg; Ch...” I added another strangled cough when my attempt to force Stemp’s first name from my lips failed. “Scuse me; something in my throat,” I croaked. “Director.” I nodded to Stemp and slid into the nearest chair, hoping I hadn’t sounded as idiotic as I felt.

“Hey, Kelly!” Greg Holt greeted me, his steel-blue eyes glinting like broken glass in the craggy landscape of his face. “Long time no see. Team Anger-Management, boo-yah!”

Forcing a laugh, I reached across the table to reciprocate his proffered fist-bump. His gaze flicked behind me and I spun, but let out a pulse-calming breath at the sight of Clyde Webb’s beanpole figure.

Thank God. At least I could count on Spider.

“Hi, Spider!” My relief burst out on my face in a wide smile and I jumped up. “Here, take this chair. I’m going to-”

“...sit with your back to the wall,” he finished along with me, his mischievous grin making him look more like a high-school kid than a twenty-seven-year-old techno-genius. Then he turned a repentant expression toward Stemp. “I’m sorry I’m late. I got, um...” His cheeks went pink. “I was a little late leaving the house this morning...”

Holt guffawed. “Three months married and the honeymoon’s still not over, eh?”

Spider blushed scarlet. Dropping into the chair I'd just vacated, he mumbled, "Sorry, it won't happen again," with a guilty glance at Stemp.

Stemp's impassive façade eased enough to allow a quirk at the corner of his mouth. "You're forgiven. Agent Kelly just arrived moments ago, too."

"Oh, good..." Spider gave me a flustered glance. "I mean, um... not that I'm glad you were late, too, just... I'm glad you weren't waiting on me."

Giving him a smile and a pat on the shoulder, I rounded the corner of the table and sat down with my back to the protection of the wall.

"Now that everyone is present..." Stemp began.

Shit.

I had been clinging to the hope that my real partner would arrive at any moment. But no; apparently I was getting Holt.

Good God. As if I wasn't already scared enough.

I dragged my attention back to Stemp's voice as he brought Holt up to speed.

"...Agent Kelly has been posing as Arlene Widdenback, a dealer in arms of all kinds, but particularly in technologically advanced designer weapons. Three months ago Frederick Labelle, a former broker for Fuzzy Bunny's now-defunct arms empire, initiated contact on behalf of one Benoit Riel, who is high in the gang hierarchy in Montreal."

Holt glanced over at me. "What did you sell him?"

“Nothing, yet.” I slouched a little lower in my chair. “It’s been frustrating as hell. Labelle keeps hinting that Riel will put in a big order, but it hasn’t happened. Then this morning he called to tell me Riel is planning to come to Calgary and wants to meet me.” Hiding my fear at the thought, I added, “Who knows, though? He doesn’t know when Riel is supposed to arrive, so it could be just talk. He’s been oozing butterscotch-flavoured bullshit for months now.”

“That’s weird,” Holt said. “If Riel’s using Labelle as his broker, why would he want a face-to-face?”

“No idea. I told Labelle I didn’t do face-to-face meetings and he should do his job as a broker and bring me a deal.”

Holt raised an eyebrow. “Huh. Are you going to stick to that if Riel shows up?”

“Probably not,” I mumbled.

“Good call,” Stemp said. “Keep playing hard to get, but you should definitely meet with Riel if he comes. Holt will be your backup.”

Holt’s lips tightened, and I could almost see the thought-bubble above his head. He was a top agent. He should have the leading role.

Stemp continued smoothly, but I knew he hadn’t missed Holt’s reaction. “The analysts have uncovered a complex web of interrelationships, so it will be ideal that Holt is unknown to Labelle, Riel, Tawny Harchman, and James Helmand.”

I blinked. “I see the potential connection with Tawny Harchman since we know she had ties to Fuzzy Bunny, but what does Helmand have to do with this? He’s in prison, and he never even knew about my Arlene Widdenback cover. He only knew that Fuzzy Bunny wanted me

as Aydan Kelly and he was going to make a tidy profit by handing me over.”

I didn't bother to add 'after he beat me and tried to rape me', but memories of pain and terror stirred darkly in the back of my mind nonetheless.

“Helmand was incarcerated with the former members of Fuzzy Bunny and they got to know each other,” Stemp replied.

My mouth went dry. Oh, shit...

Stemp went on, “The latest intel indicates that Tawny Harchman also had contact with Helmand through her connections with Fuzzy Bunny; and we've discovered that Helmand knows Benoit Riel through his gang connections.”

My heart thudded to the bottom of my belly. “They all know each other. Great. Absolutely fu-” I bit off the incipient f-bomb and substituted, “...fine. Marvelous.” I massaged my temples, where a tension headache was already throbbing.

Stemp nodded. “Not ideal, I agree. Now that Helmand has been released-”

“*What?*” My voice came out in a strangled squawk, and I cleared my throat and forced a level tone. “It's only been a year.”

Stemp gave one of his infinitesimal shrugs, his mouth flattening into a sour line. “We couldn't prove he had intent to jeopardize national security, so the money laundering and assault cases were tried in civilian court and the charges were plea-bargained. He has been a model prisoner, and yesterday he completed two thirds of his sentence and was released on parole.”

Oh, God. That vicious bastard was free. Sick fear flooded my belly at the thought of him coming after me.

But at least I was armed. What about Nichele? He knew where she lived. After brutalizing her once, he wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

Shit, I had to call her right away...

"So do we know where he is?" I tried to hold my voice steady but it quavered slightly despite my best efforts.

"He's in Calgary, but the conditions of his parole prevent him from contacting his victims, including you, your friend Nichele Brown, and Helmand."

Holt frowned. "Helmand? Isn't that who we're talking about?"

"James Helmand is the parolee," Stemp replied. "I was referring to his younger brother, Arnold Helmand. For clarity, let's refer to them by their first names."

"Arnold... oh. Hellhound?" Holt asked. "Big ugly bearded guy covered in tattoos; sniper and weapons specialist?" Stemp nodded and Holt's frown deepened. "His brother is a gang kingpin? Isn't that a hell of a security risk?"

"Arnie would rather die than even give James the time of day," I snapped. "He doesn't associate with James at all."

"Arnold's loyalty isn't in question, nor is it relevant to this briefing," Stemp said. "But it is relevant that James knows your cover story and your subsequent dealings with Fuzzy Bunny. He'll think that Arlene Widdenback's connections with corrupt law enforcement were what resulted in his arrest."

“Great,” I muttered. “So not only is he going to be pissed that I escaped and he didn’t get his money from Fuzzy Bunny, he’s going to be super-pissed that I got him arrested.”

“Very likely,” Stemp replied, as though he wasn’t the least bit concerned that I was the target of a murderous lunatic with a vendetta.

And why should he worry? He thought I was an experienced agent who could easily handle the situation, not a bookkeeper scrambling just to stay alive...

“Inform me as soon as your meeting with Riel is scheduled,” he went on. “Webb, get wiretaps on Riel’s and Labelle’s phones as soon as possible. Holt, I’ve given you security clearance to access the complete dossier on Arlene Widdenback and the developments in this case to date. Questions?”

Mute headshakes were his only reply, and he rose with a nod. “Dismissed.”

As he strode out the door, I sprang up and followed him.

Hurrying down the hallway, I tried to pluck some reasonable arguments from the storm of fearful protests hurtling through my brain. Why did I get saddled with Holt? How could I request somebody I trusted?

“Yes?” Stemp inquired, and I realized I had trailed him into his office and he was regarding me with a quizzical eyebrow raised.

“Oh. Um... I was wondering if Carl Germain might be available for my partner. Or maybe Jill Francis?”

“No, they’re both assigned to other missions.” Stemp’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“I, uh... I just... I haven’t worked with Holt very much, and, um...”

“So this will be an excellent opportunity to remedy that,” Stemp said. “Was there anything else?”

I nearly blurted, ‘Yeah, he scares the shit out of me.’

But that would only make me look like a coward and a whiner. And besides, Holt wouldn’t have been reinstated to active duty if his psych evaluation didn’t show he was over his anger issues.

Theoretically.

Although if he knew how to game the evaluations like I did...

Defeated, I mumbled, “No, nothing else,” and plodded out the door.

CHAPTER 2

Creating mental priority lists, I hurried back to my office. First, call Nichele and warn her about James Helmand. I dropped into my desk chair and hesitated, hand hovering over the phone.

No, maybe calling Nichele should be the second thing.

I picked up the phone and dialed, then sat jiggling my knee up and down while the ringtone sounded over and over. At last a clipped but welcome voice came over the line.

“Dave’s Trucking, Dave here.”

“Hi, Dave, it’s Aydan,” I began.

“Hi!” The shortness in his tone vanished and I could hear his smile when he spoke again. “Good to hear your voice! How the heck are you?”

“I’m fine, but there’s a bit of a situation...”

The phone made a hollow sound as though he’d cupped his hand over the mouthpiece, and he dropped his voice. “Where are you? Do you need help?”

Thankful as always for his unhesitating loyalty, I replied, “No, thanks, I’m okay. Where are you?”

“Moncton, New Brunswick. What’s wrong?”

“Shit, you’re days away...”

I hadn’t meant to speak that thought aloud, and a crackle from Dave’s end sounded as though he’d clenched the phone in his fist.

“What the hel... heck’s going on?” he demanded, tension vibrating in his voice.

“Sorry, Dave, I didn’t mean to scare you. It might be nothing to worry about, but James Helmand has been released on parole and even though he’s not supposed to contact Nichele I wanted to make sure she was being careful. I was hoping you were in town with her.”

“Shit!” I knew how upset he was when he didn’t censor his language. His voice rose. “I’m hauling in the Maritimes this week and even if I start home right now it’ll still take me four days! You gotta protect her! Promise me you’ll...”

He bit off the words and the sound of his deep breath hissed on the line.

“Sorry,” he said tightly. “I know your duty’s gotta come first, but...”

“No, this time it doesn’t,” I interrupted. “I’m going to call her as soon as I get off the phone with you, and then I’m going to drive down to Calgary right away. I’ll make sure she’s okay.”

“But... you’re still in Silverside?”

At my ‘uh-huh’, he muttered, “Two hours away...” He hesitated. When he spoke again, I understood why he had wrestled with the decision. “Can you get Hellhound to go over and stay with her ‘til you get there? I still think he’s a jerk, but... you trust him, don’t you? And he knows how to handle himself...”

“I’ll call him right away. Don’t worry. Arnie won’t let anyone get to Nichele. He hates James as much as we do, probably more. And James’s parole conditions prevent him from contacting either of them, so he won’t risk getting sent back to jail.”

“Yeah, right.”

On that dubious note, I offered one last feeble attempt at reassurance before disconnecting to dial Hellhound’s cell phone.

He picked up on the first ring with a brusque, “Helmand.”

“Hi, Arnie, it’s Aydan,” I said cautiously.

His tone changed to a warm and cheerful greeting. “Hey, darlin’! How ya doin’?”

“Hey, yourself,” I said, smiling in spite of my worry. “Why are you all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? It’s only nine-thirty. Usually I get nothing but a groan if I call you before noon.”

“Had an early job.”

He didn’t elaborate as to whether the job involved killing people, and I didn’t ask. Instead, I got to the point. “Can I hire you?”

His gravelly chuckle tickled my eardrum. “Hell, darlin’, ya know how easy I am. Gimme a kiss an’ I’m yours.” He added hurriedly, “I mean, s’long’s ya ain’t askin’ for a commitment.”

“Bite your tongue,” I chided, grinning at our long-standing joke. My smile slipped away as anxiety overcame me again. “No; I just found out that James is out on parole, and I’m worried about Nichele. She’ll be at work by now, so could you please go over to her office and stay with her until I get there in a couple of hours?”

“Fuck, I can’t.” His chagrin came through loud and clear. “I’m outta town an’ I ain’t gonna be back ‘til late today even if everythin’ goes slicker’n shit through a tin horn. If anythin’ fucks up, well...”

He trailed off and I shivered. He hadn’t specified location or details, so I knew exactly what kind of ‘job’ he was doing. If anything fucked up, he might not come back at all.

Dammit, now I was worried about him, too.

“But I thought you’d know Jim was gettin’ out,” Hellhound added. “Didn’t ya get your call from the Parole Board?”

“No...” Memory dawned and I smacked my forehead. “Shit! I remember you telling me to register with them for notifications, but I got tied up on a mission right then and didn’t get a chance. And by the time the mission was over I’d forgotten. So, no, I didn’t find out until this morning. And Nichele doesn’t know either, or she would have called me.”

“Well, try not to worry about it,” he comforted. “Jim’s smart, an’ he ain’t gonna take a chance on goin’ back to jail. Nichele ain’t got anythin’ he wants. I’m more worried about you. If Jim thinks there’s still a price on your head...”

I let out an unladylike grunt in an attempt to clear the large hairy lump of fear clogging my throat. “That’s the least of my worries. Intel says James thinks I got him sent to prison. Never mind profit; he’ll be out for revenge.”

“Fuck.” Before Hellhound could speak again, I heard a crackle that sounded like a radio command at his end of the line. “We’re buggin’ out; gotta go,” he said rapidly. “Watch your six. I’ll call ya soon’s I can. Be safe. Love ya. ‘Bye.” The connection went dead.

“Shit,” I muttered into the silent receiver before slapping it back onto the cradle.

My nerves twitched with the need to run to my car and drive as fast as possible to Calgary, but I forced myself to draw a deep breath.

Kane was living in Calgary. If anybody could protect Nichele, he could. But was it fair to ask him to put himself in danger after he’d quit the Department?

I drew another deep breath. Let him decide for himself.

I dialed.

The phone rang a couple of times at the other end before the connection clicked open and a deep but wary voice said, “Kane.”

“Hi, it’s Aydan,” I said, attempting a light tone.

“Oh... Hi. How are you? It’s been a while.” He still sounded cautious. “I didn’t expect you to be calling from the office.”

“Um. Yeah, sorry about that...”

Guilt squirmed in my belly. This was just sleazy, asking him to risk his safety when I hadn’t even had the grace to call and say hi for weeks.

I couldn’t do it. Resolve squared my shoulders and I kept my tone warm and casual. “I just realized I hadn’t talked to you for ages, and I had a few minutes so I thought I’d call. How’s everything down there?”

“Oh.” His voice warmed and deepened, smoothing into his usual velvet baritone. “It’s nice to hear from you. Everything’s... fine.”

His tiny hesitation set off my alarm bells. “That’s not the word I expected you to use,” I probed gently.

“Well, no, I meant... it’s good. Really good. Great.”

“What’s wrong?”

The sound of his exhalation carried clearly over the line. “Nothing. I’m still adjusting. So are Daniel and Alicia. It’ll just take time.” His voice firmed. “Now, are you going to tell me what’s wrong at your end?”

“Nothi-”

“What’s wrong, Aydan?” he demanded.

I blew out a breath of my own. “You’re ‘way too good at reading me. Sorry, it’s just that... I just found out James Helmand is out on parole and I’m worried about Nichele even though he’s not supposed to contact her. I’m leaving in a few minutes to drive down but-”

“I’ll stay with her until you get here. Will she be at work today?”

Gratitude swamped me, putting a catch in my voice. “Th- Thank you. But... I don’t want you to put yourself at risk. You promised Daniel you’d always be there for him, and it’s not fair to-”

“It’s all right, Aydan, I want to,” he interrupted. “And it’s not going to be dangerous. If James shows up, I’ll just call the police like any other citizen. Tell Nichele I’m coming, and then call me back with her location.”

I drew a breath of relief. “Thanks. I’ll call you right back.”

When Nichele answered the phone a few moments later with a crisp, “Nichele Brown, how may I help you?” I slumped with relief. She was still okay. Thank God.

“Hi, Nichele.”

“Aydan!” Her business voice vanished, replaced by her usual squeal of delight. “How are you, girl? Long time, no talk!”

“Um, yeah, sorry about that...” I mumbled. “Look, Nichele...”

Her voice went flat except for a faint vibration like an electrical current. “What’s wrong? Is it... ohmigod, *Dave*...?”

“No, no, Dave’s fine, I just talked to him,” I reassured her with slightly too much heartiness.

“What is it, then? I can tell it’s bad by the sound of your voice. Spill it.”

“Um...” I couldn’t think of any good way to say it. “James Helmand is out on parole.”

If not for the tiny squeak at the other end of the line, I would have thought we’d been disconnected.

“But he’s not allowed to come near you,” I added hurriedly. “If he even thinks about it, they’ll throw him right back in jail. I’m coming down to stay with you, I’m leaving right now, and John will stay with you until I get there...”

“Aydan...” Her voice was breathy with terror. “Ohmigod... what... what... how could he be out? So soon?”

“I’ll explain when I get there,” I said firmly. “I’m leaving now. Tell your secretary to cancel your meetings for the day. Tell her you’re working on an important investment plan. Close your door and don’t open it until you hear the secret knock.”

A puff of air that might have been a sob or a giggle floated over the line. “Girl, we made up the secret knock when we were five years old. Everybody knows shave-and-a-haircut. And you can’t do anything to stop him if he comes for me.” Her voice firmed into the determined Nichele that I knew. “Don’t come. You’ll be safer if you stay away from me. There’s no point in giving him two targets for the price of one.”

“I’m coming,” I snapped. “I’m not going to leave you to face him alone. John will be there as soon as he can, and I’ll be there in two hours. Wait for the secret knock.” I hung up on her protests, wishing I could tell her about Kane’s deadly martial arts skills and the Glock strapped to my ankle. But I couldn’t blow my cover, not even for my best friend since childhood.

I sighed and called Kane before jogging out to the parking lot.

Fifteen minutes later I was scurrying around my bedroom, stuffing overnight essentials into my small backpack while fearsome images of James’s grinning face flashed in my mind’s eye. His fists balled and dripping with Arnie’s blood. Nichele’s small body blackened with bruises from those same brutal fists.

What if he was stalking her right now? What if he was armed and I’d just sent Kane into the path of his bullets? Dammit, I shouldn’t have involved Kane...

Muttering worried obscenities, I locked my front door, raking my usual glance over the farmyard and fields beyond in case of snipers or spies. Hurrying into my garage, I almost skipped checking the car for tracking devices. After all, I’d checked it before I left Sirius only half an hour ago...

I hissed out a breath between my teeth and did it anyway.

Check everything, every time. My new mantra. I would get good at this spy stuff, dammit.

The reassuring green light glowed on my detection device, and I slid into my car and headed for the highway.

CHAPTER 3

Despite the knowledge that Nichele and Kane were probably perfectly safe, my heart thudded faster than it should have while I fidgeted in the elevator up to Nichele's highrise floor. When I charged into the reception area, the heavy glass entrance door rebounded on its hinges with a crack of protest.

The receptionist twitched behind her polished granite desk, snatching her wide-eyed gaze off Kane to face me.

"Hi," I said anticlimactically. "I'm Aydan Kelly, here to see Nichele Brown."

"Oh..." She patted her chest with trembling fingers. "My, you startled me. Please have a seat. She's with a client now, but she'll be with you in a few minutes."

With a client? Dammit, I'd told her to cancel. And what the hell was Kane doing sitting in the reception area instead of guarding her?

"Thanks," I muttered, and strode across to confront Kane.

He rose from one of the sumptuous leather chairs as I approached, and my feet stumbled involuntarily to a halt while I fought to keep my jaw from sagging.

Holy... shit!

He had always been delicious eye-candy; but where he had been magnificently muscled before, now he was spectacularly ripped. His black T-shirt strained across his chest and mountainous shoulders, sleeves stretched to their limits around biceps carved from stone. Before I could prevent it, my gaze travelled greedily down his body, taking in the ripples of his abs and the iron thighs filling his jeans to perfection.

And speaking of filling jeans to perfection...

I jerked my gaze up from his crotch.

"Hi," I croaked. "Wow, you look..." I swallowed and tried again, but my brain hadn't re-engaged yet. "Wow," I repeated stupidly. "Have you been working out extra-hard lately?"

My voice trembled on 'extra-hard' and I was pretty sure my eyes had glazed over with X-rated memories.

Dammit, get it together...

He grinned, a wicked spark kindling in his grey eyes. "Nice to see you, too."

He held out his arms and I stepped into them, managing with a supreme effort to keep the hug short and G-rated instead of sinking my teeth into that luscious ridge of shoulder muscle and humping his leg.

Pulling away, I dropped into the nearest chair to put some distance between us and kept my gaze firmly fastened on his face. Changes were visible there, too, his square jaw even more defined and...

"You dyed your hair," I blurted.

He flushed and ran his fingers self-consciously through the short dark hair at his temples where the silver used to be. "Yes..." His gaze

wavered before meeting my eyes again. "I've been volunteering at Daniel's school, and the other parents of six-year-olds are so... young. I'm old enough to be *their* father, for God's sake."

"Well, you look amazing either way," I said. "And you could run circles around all of them. You don't have anything to prove."

His face softened into a smile. "Thank you." His smile faded and he sank into the chair beside me. Dropping his voice, he murmured, "Nichele has cancelled the rest of her appointments for the day but she said she needed to keep this one since it's a new client. I have a direct sightline to her door, and she has my number on speed-dial so she only has to press one button on her cell phone to alert me if there's anything wrong."

I sagged back in my chair, following his gaze down the hallway to Nichele's door. "That's great. Thanks. And thank you for dropping everything to come here. I didn't want to involve you but..."

"I really don't mind," he insisted. A rueful smile twisted his lips. "I'm finding civilian life a little... tame."

"I can imagine. I hope..." I began, only to break off when Nichele's door opened. A shock of adrenaline blazed into my veins at the sight of the pleasant-faced ponytailed-and-business-suited man with her.

I lunged forward, seizing Kane by the back of the neck and dragging him into a kiss.

He reacted instantly, pulling me into his lap to devour my mouth.

I heard Nichele bidding her client good day, and when the door hinges gave their distinctive crack I pulled away from Kane far enough to peek over his shoulder.

Shit!

The ponytailed man was standing in the lobby waiting for the elevator, watching us with interest through the glass door.

Shit, shit, shit!

I dove back into Kane's enthusiastic embrace.

A few seconds later Nichele's amused voice came from beside us. "I like my clients to get excited about their investments, but you two are carrying it a bit too far."

"Is your client gone?" I mumbled against Kane's lips.

"Yes." Her voice sharpened with worry. "Why?"

I pulled away from Kane and rose, smoothing my hair and trying to look nonchalant under the receptionist's scandalized and distinctly envious gaze. "Um, I know him, that's all. Blind date a while ago. It sucked, so I didn't want him to notice me."

Nichele laughed. "Girl, you were making out like a teenager, in the middle of a brokerage office. Trust me, he noticed. But you must've mistaken him for somebody else. He's from Montreal and he's only been here a couple of days."

Shit, of course he would have had to give her his home address if he was pretending to hire her as his stockbroker. I should have thought of a better lie, but now I was committed, dammit...

Willing the heat out of my face, I tried again. "I know, but I dated him last year when he was here visiting. I thought he'd go back to Montreal and I'd never see him again." I attempted a chuckle. "Stupid small world, right? Anyhow, I didn't want him to recognize me."

Nichele plopped down in my vacated chair, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "You're such a goofball. How many women have

long red hair like yours? If you dated him, of course he recognized you. But..." Her salacious grin widened as she waggled her eyebrows at us. "...if you wanted to make him jealous, you probably nailed it."

"Great," I muttered.

"Well..." Nichele bounced to her feet. "I need a new dress for my business retreat tonight, and I'm starving! Let's go to the mall for lunch and some retail therapy!" Her act was almost convincing, but her gaiety rang false and her hands were trembling.

"Um, I don't know..." I objected, but Kane caught my eye and rose to herd us toward the door.

"That's a good idea," he said firmly. "It's a public place with video surveillance, and James wouldn't expect you to be there on a workday. Take Aydan's car and leave yours in the underground parking."

An afternoon at the mall was approximately as attractive as a colonoscopy, but Kane's logic was sound. And the sooner I got Nichele out of here, the better. My nerves still sizzled with adrenaline and my fingers itched to draw my Glock.

"Text me when you get there," Kane added with a significant look at me as he pressed the call button for the elevator. "I'm due at the school in half an hour to volunteer during lunch period, but I'm free after one o'clock if you need me."

"You could come shopping with us." Nichele batted her eyes up at him mischievously. "We could use a big strong guy to carry all our shopping bags."

Kane had obviously caught my tiny nod. He swept her a gallant bow as the elevator doors opened. "As milady commands."

She flushed and giggled, eyeing him appreciatively as I said, “We’ll be at Chinook Centre. We’ll meet you by the Dairy Queen in the food court. Would one-thirty work?”

He nodded, and we watched the illuminated numbers counting down in silence while I tried to get my heart rate under control.

When the elevator doors opened in the underground parkade, I kept my tone casual as I halted in the lobby. “Sorry, I just need to make a quick call before we go.”

Kane responded with a nod and engaged Nichele in a conversation about stocks while I drifted a few paces away and dialled Frederick Labelle, my heart in my mouth.

When his unctuous tones rolled out of my phone, I said, “This is Arlene. Have you heard anything from our client yet?”

“No, he hasn’t arrived. I’ll be sure to contact you as soon as he does.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I disconnected, turning away so Nichele couldn’t see me extracting a secured phone from my waist pouch. At the sound of Stemp’s crisp greeting, I muttered, “I just saw Riel in Nichele Brown’s office. Labelle says he hasn’t arrived yet, but I’m positive it was him. Is our wiretap working?”

“Not yet. I’ll inform you as soon as it’s active.”

I disconnected and rejoined the other two. Kane walked us to my car, where he stood watching until we had navigated the exit ramp.

Nichele giggled again from the passenger’s seat. “So... you and Hot John! You’ve been holding out on me!” She poked a teasing

knuckle into my ribs. “Girl, he’s got it *bad* for you! Why didn’t you tell me you two were together?”

“We’re not.” I signalled and made the turn to take us out of downtown, watching to be sure we weren’t followed.

Nichele snorted. “Yeah, I can tell you can’t stand each other by the way you were polishing each other’s tonsils. Seriously, girl, you’re crazy if you don’t hit that! And don’t give me any excuses. You know you want to, or he wouldn’t have been the first person you called for help.”

“He wasn’t.” I concentrated on driving and watching my mirrors. “I called Arnie first, but he was out of town.”

“You...” Words apparently failed her for a moment before she sighed and spoke with resignation. “Seriously, girl, I don’t know what to do with you. That’s like eating broccoli when you could have chocolate-dipped strawberries. I know you keep saying Arnie’s great in bed, but sooner or later you need to find the right guy and settle down...”

My bark of laughter interrupted her. “Says the woman with every eligible male over thirty in her booty-call speed dial.”

She tossed her head. “Not anymore. When you find the right guy...”

“Yeah, yeah,” I grouched. “You settle down after all these years and then right away you try to convert everybody else. And anyway, Arnie isn’t broccoli. Far from it. He’s more like...”

I checked the vehicles around us yet again. Damn that white SUV. Was it following us?

“...lobster,” I finished absently, eyeing the rearview mirror.

“Yeah, the cockroach of the sea,” Nichele gibed with a theatrical shudder. “So hideous you don’t even want to touch it. Brrr!”

“Be nice, you jerk. I’m not talking about appearance.” The SUV in question turned off down a side street and I relaxed and returned my attention to Nichele. “I’m just saying there’s great stuff inside the shell.”

“Nuh-uh.” She shook her head. “Too much effort to get past all that ugly. Especially when you’ve got Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Delicious waiting in the wings.”

Even though I knew she liked Hellhound and was only teasing, I had to fight down irritation. Pasting on a smile, I closed the discussion with our time-worn but affectionate taunt. “You’re so shallow.”

She grinned and settled back in her seat with her stock reply. “You have no standards, girl.”

I changed the subject. “So tell me about your business retreat.”

“Oh, it’ll be...” She considered for a moment. “Either a blast or a total snorefest; I don’t know which. But all the high-rollers are going to be there, so it’s a great opportunity to schmooze. I was just lucky I got the last ticket! It’s at a swanky resort spa and there’s a champagne reception tonight at eight for ticket-holders. The public panels and seminars run all day tomorrow, and then there’s a private windup dinner. And we can stay at the spa for the weekend, too, if we want. How decadent is that? So...” She grinned. “I need a new dress. Or two. And shoes, and a matching handbag. And maybe a bit of new bling to go with it. And a new swimsuit, and...”

“Shopaholic.” I shook my head in mock reproof before adding, “But better you than me, ‘cause my idea of hell would be a never-

ending business networking event. And at least James won't be able to find you in your posh hideaway."

We were halfway through lunch when Nichele's phone belted out the chorus of "I'm a Road Hammer". My heart warmed at the sight of her eager flush as she hastened to accept the call.

"Hi, honey," she purred. After a short pause, she added, "Yes, I'm fine. Aydan and I are at the mall where there are lots of people... No; no sign of James... Yes, we're being careful..."

She fell silent, listening while her expression faded from pleasure to a dubious frown.

"Okay..." she said slowly at last. Then she nodded and adopted a smile and a cheery tone. "Of course I am, it'll be fun! Just like an early honeymoon... Okay, I'll be packed and ready. See you soon, honey... I love you, too. 'Bye."

She hit the disconnect button and her hand drifted down to her lap, still clutching the phone as if she'd forgotten she was holding it.

I eyed her troubled face with rising worry. "What's wrong?"

"N... Nothing..."

"Bullshit."

She sighed. "Nothing. Really. It's just..." She sighed again and stirred her coffee, watching the stick swirl through the liquid as if it required her full attention.

I waited.

"That was Dave," she said.

“I figured. Unless you’ve got another honey I don’t know about,” I teased.

“No,” she mumbled as though my words hadn’t registered. After a moment she added, “He changed his schedule. He was supposed to be in the Maritimes until the middle of next week, but he’s coming straight home now. He’ll be here by Monday, and then he has a quick turnaround out to Ontario where he’s got a bunch of short hauls lined up. And he wants me to come with him. We could be on the road for two or three weeks, depending on how his loads work out.”

“Perfect,” I said with relief. “You’ll be safe when you’re out of town. James doesn’t know Dave so you’ll be impossible to find.”

“Well... that’s true...” She frowned and stirred her coffee harder.

“But...” I prompted.

She blew out a breath. “But I feel like such a coward running away. And it won’t solve anything. James will still be around when I get back and I can’t hide forever. And...”

From the way her fingertips whitened on the stir stick, I knew she was about to divulge the true reason for her reluctance.

“And...” She gave me an imploring look. “This means Dave and I will be together 24/7. For *weeks*.”

I failed to suppress a smile. “Well, yeah. Is this a bad time to point out that you’re marrying him in less than two months and you’ll be together ‘til death do you part?”

“I know... Together... but not *together-together*.” She fiddled nervously with the stirrer, bending it back and forth. “I mean... we get along great as long as he’s on the road most of the time. But what if...” The stick snapped between her fingers, splattering coffee over the

tabletop, and she grabbed a handful of napkins and scrubbed up the droplets with far more vigour than necessary.

“What if we can’t stand each other when we’re together all the time?” she burst out. “What if this is all a big terrible mistake and we hate each other after three weeks and he just dumps me and drives away forever?”

My heart squeezed at her tragic expression. “He won’t, Nichele. Trust me, Dave’s crazy about you. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to him, and you’re going to love being together.” I hesitated, reluctant to dilute my pep-talk with inconvenient facts. “Um... what about your work?”

“No big deal.” She waved a dismissing hand. “I’ve got my laptop and phone. I can easily work in the truck. But... but what if...”

Her voice faded from my attention as I glimpsed a ponytailed man leaving the food court. My blood chilled.

He was wearing jeans instead of a business suit, and I couldn’t see his face. Was it Riel?

A moment later he vanished around the corner.

I turned back to Nichele, who was eyeing me with a supplicating expression. Damn. I hadn’t heard a word she’d said.

I blew out a breath. “Look, you know I’m the queen of fucked-up relationships so I’m not qualified to give anybody advice, but I will tell you this for absolutely certain. Dave loves you, and you love him. Together you can figure out anything.” Desperate, I invoked the only magic spell at my disposal. “Come on, you need your stuff for this weekend as well as a whole new wardrobe for your road trip with Dave. We need to start shopping.”

CHAPTER 4

By the time Kane joined us at the mall, Nichele was fully engaged in retail therapy and I hadn't seen the ponytailed man again despite my nervous vigilance. The afternoon dragged interminably while Nichele foraged through store after store, loading Kane's arms with a burden of shopping bags that would have bowed a lesser man.

At last the ordeal was over and we grabbed an early dinner in one of the restaurants attached to the mall. When the bill was paid, Nichele rose to her feet without her usual energy. "Well, I guess I'd better go home and get my game face on. I have to leave by seven and we still need to pick up my car from the office."

"You should rent a car," I urged. "You're too easy to spot in that red Miata."

"It won't matter." Nichele's voice trembled just a bit. "I have to go home to get my suitcase and James knows where I live. All he has to do is wait there." She tossed her head, putting on a confident act. "He won't anyway. Why would he? Last time he only wanted me as a way to get money transferred to his offshore account. He's too smart to try the same thing again, and he probably wouldn't violate his parole anyway. I'll be fine."

“I’ll take you home,” I argued. “You can get your stuff and then I’ll drive you to the car rental place. You can leave in a different car from there and fly under the radar.”

“But then my car will still be at the office...”

“No problem,” Kane said. “Aydan will drive you home to get your things and then bring you to the car rental place. I’ll park my vehicle at your office and drive your car to the rental office, and then Aydan can drive me back to pick up my vehicle from your parkade.”

“But that’s ‘way too much trouble!” Nichele gave an uncertain laugh. “Aren’t we getting a little paranoid here? We’re not spies on some secret mission!”

Somehow I managed not to glance at Kane. “I know, but wouldn’t you like to have a hot new ride?” I coaxed. “Wouldn’t it be fun to show up in a Ferrari or Lamborghini or something? And then you could just relax and enjoy your retreat without worrying about looking over your shoulder all the time.”

“Oooh...” Nichele’s eyes lit up. “Well, when you put it that way... but it’s pretty short notice to rent an exotic car...” She rummaged in her purse and pulled out her phone. “Maybe they’ll still have something available. After all, it’s November and it’s the middle of the week. It should be past their peak time...”

We waited in silence while she dialed, and moments later she was the proud lessee of a Lamborghini.

“Perfect,” I said with relief. “Let’s get going.”

With Nichele safely on her way an hour and a half later, I pulled into the office parkade and turned off my car with a long breath. “Thank goodness. She should be safe for the next couple of days, anyway.”

“Yes.” Kane turned a piercing gaze on me. “So now are you going to tell me what’s really happening?”

My worry over Riel’s presence returned full force, and I swallowed to hold my voice steady. “Um...”

How much should I tell him? A glance at my wristwatch showed it was nearly seven-thirty, and I opted for procrastination.

“Do you have time?” I asked. “You’ve spent the whole day with us and I don’t want to take you away from Daniel.”

“I appreciate that.” Kane consulted his watch, too. “His bedtime is eight o’clock. There’s just enough time to go and get him tucked in, so let’s talk afterward.”

“Okay, should we meet at your condo? What time?”

Kane shrugged, a twitch of his shoulders that looked uneasy. “You might as well come with me to Alicia’s. I shouldn’t be long.”

“Okay...” I said slowly, but he didn’t seem inclined to elaborate.

“I’ll see you there,” he said instead and got out of my car.

Just as he backed his Expedition out of its parking stall, my phone vibrated. Stomach clenching at the sight of ‘Private’ on the call display, I accepted it. This likely wasn’t good...

“Hey, darlin’.” Hellhound’s weary rasp answered my cautious ‘hello’.

“Arnie!” My initial gush of relief was rapidly staunches by worry over the obscured phone number. “Where... um, how are you?”

"I'm okay. Still outta town. Didn't get a chance to do the job today, but we're gonna try again tomorrow. How 'bout you? Did ya get to Nichele okay?"

"Yes, she's fine and leaving town for a business retreat right now. She'll be out of danger for a couple of days at least. And John came to help us out."

"Good." Relief warmed Hellhound's voice, and he added, "Can't talk long, darlin', but I just wanted to make sure you're okay. Maybe we can catch up if you're still in town tomorrow."

"That'd be good. I might stay at your place tonight even if you're not there." I stifled a cavernous yawn. "I'm bagged and I don't feel like driving home."

"Go ahead an' crash at my place," he urged. His voice deepened to a sexy tease. "I'm gonna have hot dreams of ya naked in my bed tonight."

"Not as hot as if you were there," I teased in return. "Stay safe. I love you. With zero commitment," I added hastily.

He chuckled. "Love ya, too, darlin'. G'night."

Warmed, I put the car in gear and headed for Kane's ex-wife's house. When I pulled to a stop at the curb, Kane sprang out of his SUV and hurried over.

"Sorry." I forestalled his anxious look with an explanation as I got out of the car. "Arnie called, and I didn't realize you'd be waiting outside for me."

"It's all right." He turned and strode up the walk. Rapping lightly on the door, he turned his key in the lock and let us in without waiting for a response.

Bloodcurdling screams made me snatch my Glock from my ankle holster, my heart jackhammering my ribs.

Kane gripped my wrist. “No, it’s all right,” he muttered. “Put that away.” After I had obeyed, he called out jovially, “Hello, there! Who’s making all that racket?”

The shrieks stopped as if switched off, and a moment later Daniel pelted around the corner in pajamas, his blotchy crimson face dripping tears and snot. “*Daddy-Daddy-Daddy-Daddy!*” he wailed.

A harried-looking Alicia trailed him, and she jerked to a halt at the sight of me. Her hostile glare bounced from Kane to me and back to Kane again. “Nice of you to show up,” she snapped.

“I’m sorry,” Kane said as Daniel thumped into him and flung his arms around his father’s legs. “I got here as soon as I could.” He stooped to swing the child effortlessly up into his arms.

Daniel clung and buried his flushed face in Kane’s shoulder, leaving a glistening trail on the black T-shirt.

“Hey, Daniel,” Kane murmured in a soothing singsong. “We talked about this. Remember I said I might be a little late today? Remember you promised you’d let Mommy tuck you in?”

Daniel’s only response was a juicy snuffle as he tightened his grip, his chubby fists bunching in Kane’s T-shirt.

“Come on, then, let’s get you settled,” Kane added in the same reassuring tones. “Which bedtime story would you like tonight?”

Daniel mumbled unintelligibly into Kane’s shoulder as they headed down the hallway with Alicia behind them, leaving me standing there like the fool I was.

After a few minutes of awkward hovering, I quietly let myself out.

When my phone vibrated twenty-five minutes later, I picked up at the sight of Kane's number.

"I'm sorry about that," he said to my 'hello'. "Are you on your way back to Silverside?"

"No, I'm at the Tim Horton's down the street. It's been a long day and I wanted a few minutes of downtime and a quiet cup of tea."

His sigh was clearly audible on the other end of the line. "That sounds wonderful. Do you still have time? I can be there in five minutes."

"I'll be here."

Precisely five minutes later he strode in, garnering appreciative glances from the female patrons and dark looks from the males. Shortly afterward he joined me at my table, carrying a cup of coffee for himself and placing a small box of doughnut holes in front of me.

"Yum! Thank you!" I popped open the box and surveyed the tempting assortment of sugar-coated spheres. "I shouldn't, but I'm going to." I selected a glazed chocolate morsel and popped it into my mouth. "I'll regret this later," I added, my words slightly muffled by sweet greasy goodness.

Kane smiled. "You work out hard enough to make up for it. And you won't regret it much."

"You know me too well." I grinned and chomped down an apple fritter and a strawberry-filled Timbit before pushing the box toward him. "Take these away before I eat them all."

He peeked into the box. "Aha. You left the old-fashioned sugar-coated ones for me."

"Of course. For you, no sacrifice is too great." Hand over heart, I sketched a bow before adding, "Also, old-fashionedes are my least-favorite."

"I'm touched by your selflessness."

"I know; right? And, hey, here's another happy thought," I added. "Now that you're a civvie, nobody's going to crack any lame jokes about cops and doughnuts."

"For which I am truly thankful. This will be the first time I've been able to eat a doughnut without feeling like a cliché." He popped a doughnut hole into his mouth and I tried not to have a hot flash while he licked off the sugar clinging to his fingers.

Dammit, I could still feel the touch of that tongue and those fingers in places that were aching to feel them again...

I jerked my hormones to an unceremonious halt as Kane plied a napkin and leaned back with a sigh, cradling his coffee cup. "I'm sorry about that scene at Alicia's," he said. "Apparently we haven't made as much progress as I'd thought."

"No problem." I sipped my tea, firmly transferring my attention to the conversation at hand. "All kids get cranky around bedtime, don't they? But he settled down the instant you got there. You're a great dad."

Kane grunted, hunching his shoulders. "Don't be fooled. It was nothing to do with my parenting skills. If I'd been the one trying to put him to bed, he would have screamed just as frantically for Alicia. That scene plays out every night."

“Oh.” I surveyed him over my cup. “Well, it hasn’t been that long since he was kidnapped. He’ll gradually realize he’s safe and you’ll both always be there for him; it’ll just take time.”

“I certainly hope so.” Kane sucked in some coffee as though the mug contained life-giving elixir. “This has been a nerve-wracking time. It’s gotten a little better since I started volunteering at the school, but still, every morning it’s an emotional bloodbath when we leave him in his classroom. Every night he has a meltdown if both of us aren’t there to tuck him in. He has night terrors and wakes up screaming. After being toilet-trained for years, he’s now wetting the bed regularly...”

He made a gesture of resignation, his hand dropping to the table. “The pediatric psychologist says it’s all part of the process and it should improve soon, but...” He sighed. “I don’t know, Aydan; I just... I didn’t expect it to be easy, but... having a child is nothing like I thought it would be.”

I reached over to squeeze his hand. “Said every parent since the dawn of time. You’re doing fine. He goes to you for comfort and he trusts you. Any parent would struggle with the kind of issues Daniel’s having, and you’ve been dropped into it cold without any chance to get to know him as a happy stress-free kid, and without a supportive partner.”

“That’s the other thing.” Kane’s hand tightened on mine. “Alicia is pressuring me to move in with them. Saying that if I truly cared for Daniel I’d make a stable home for him. That’s why I wanted you with me tonight, to disrupt her usual attempts. And I just...” Muscles rippled in his jaw, his lips pressing into a thin line. “I...”

He hissed out a breath. “Aydan, I’m so furious with her, I can barely contain it! She willfully cheated me out of six years of my son’s life! I never got to hold him as a baby. I wasn’t there for his first laugh or his first step or his first tooth. I don’t know what his first word was. I didn’t get to teach him to ride a bicycle. I wasn’t there for his first soccer game. I didn’t get to walk him to school on his first day...” He broke off, his hand clenching mine, his breath coming hard. “I’ve missed so much,” he gritted. “Precious memories that I’ll never have. Because of *her!*”

I clutched his hand in both of mine, my heart breaking. “Oh, John, I’m so sorry! I can’t imagine how awful that must be.”

“And do you know what the hell of it is?” He stared across the table, the storm raging in his eyes. “I want to hate her; but if not for her, I wouldn’t even *have* a son. This wonderful, frustrating, frighteningly complex little person who is both of us and neither of us... he wouldn’t exist. How the hell do I deal with that?”

“I don’t know.” I swallowed against the tightness in my throat. “I wish I could do or say something that would help.”

The tension went out of him on a long breath and he released my hand with a gentle squeeze. “You’ve helped just by hearing me out. And I’m sorry for dumping on you. I usually work out those feelings at the gym.”

I gave him a wry smile and gestured at his rippling muscles. “I can see how upset you’ve been.”

He twitched his shoulders in a self-deprecating shrug. “It seemed like a better solution than murdering my ex.”

“Yeah... I guess. Although to be honest, I feel like murdering her myself.”

Kane gave me a twisted smile. “I’ve got a couple of free gym passes if you like.”

“I might take you up on that.”

“So...” He leaned his elbows on the table, closing the distance between us and lowering his voice to a soft rumble that sent tendrils of warmth tickling through my belly. “Much as I enjoyed kissing you this afternoon, I’m not flattering myself that it was because you suddenly found me irresistible. What’s going on?”

CHAPTER 5

Extricating myself from the pull of Kane's sexy grey eyes with an effort, I declined to mention how close I had come to ripping his clothes off in the middle of Nichele's office.

"I'm working on a case," I said. "And Nichele's client is it."

Kane waited.

The silence lengthened and I suppressed the urge to squirm.

Shit, I should never have involved him. He was a civilian now. He'd be safer if he didn't know.

"I just didn't want him to recognize me," I added lamely.

Kane maintained his expectant silence.

"For shit's sake," I burst out as though he'd actually been arguing with me. "You're a civilian now. Go home to your son and be safe!"

Hurt flashed in his eyes, quickly vanishing into the impenetrable expression I called his 'cop face'. "It's a little late for that," he said evenly. "Your mark spotted you, and what's more, he spotted you making out with me. You've already involved me, and I'll be safer if I know what might be coming my way."

“Oh, shit.” I let my forehead fall against the table with a thud. A little too much of a thud. “Ow,” I added, sitting up and rubbing the sore spot. “Dammit! I’m sorry, I’m an idiot. I wasn’t thinking; I was just...”

Just getting so caught up in ogling a hot hunk of man that my already woefully inadequate spy skills deserted me altogether. ‘Idiot’ didn’t even begin to describe the depth of my incompetence.

I clenched both fists in my hair. “Shit, what a moron I am! All I had to do was get up and wander away with my back to him, and he’d never have given me a second glance! I’m so sorry!”

“It’s all right.” The wicked glint was back in Kane’s eyes. “So you’re saying you were just looking for an excuse to kiss me.” A tantalizing whiff of his spicy aftershave made all the moisture in my mouth migrate to more southerly regions of my body as he leaned closer. “Maybe you should kiss me some more. Just to keep up appearances.”

Sucking in an inadequate breath, I leaned away from his gravitational pull. “I thought we weren’t doing that anymore.”

“You started it.” Half teasing, half challenging, he gave me a slow grin that raised my body temperature several degrees.

“And I’m finishing it,” I said, my words far more decisive than the husky voice that came from my lips. “You’re a dad now and your responsibility is to Daniel. I’m a bullet magnet, and you can’t afford to be close to me.”

“Which would have been a valid argument before you dragged me into this.” Kane gave me the commanding stare that reminded me all over again what a good agent he had been. Hell, still was. “I need a

full briefing, Aydan. If you've potentially endangered me, that threat might extend to Daniel by proxy, and *nobody* threatens my son."

Defeated, I blew out a breath of frustration before leaning forward and keeping my voice low. "Okay, fine. The man in Nichele's office was Benoit Riel. He's one of the higher-ups from a gang in Montreal and I'm supposed to meet him in my Arlene Widdenback cover, but he's not supposed to be here yet. I recognize him from the dossier, and I have to assume he recognized me if he's anywhere near as smart as we think. And it was definitely no coincidence that he was in Nichele's office, because he's also friends with James Helmand, who knew Fuzzy Bunny's minions in prison."

"Oh." Kane's voice went flat. His gaze flicked around the coffee shop before he leaned in and matched my quiet tone. "So let me be sure I understand this. James and Riel are potentially connected to Fuzzy Bunny's original arms empire; they both know you by sight; and they both think you're Arlene Widdenback the arms dealer. And they both know that Nichele is your friend, and Riel just proved how easily they can get to her. And now they both know that I'm a little more than your friend, too. So if they're looking for leverage on you, they've found it."

"Yes," I mumbled, staring at the table and damning my own stupidity. "I'm sorry. The smartest thing you could do is shoot me right now. If I'm dead, Riel will leave you alone."

"I turned in my weapon when I resigned. But I could throttle you slowly with lots of screaming."

I gulped. "Um... You 'could'? Or you 'want to'?"

"I'm deciding."

Edging back in my seat, I managed a sickly smile. “Well, I guess I’ll be the first to know when you make up your mind.”

He chuckled. “I’m kidding. Of course I’m concerned; but I’m actually glad things worked out this way. At least now I know what’s coming. If Riel has connections to Fuzzy Bunny, he’ll already know that you and I acquired their secret weapon last winter. And even if by some miracle he doesn’t know that, I’m a target anyway because James knows we were together last fall.”

“But he only glimpsed you at that bar, and I never told him your name...” I began.

“Aydan.” Kane gave me a ‘you-aren’t-thinking’ look. “James has known me since I was six years old.”

“Oh...” The enormity of my mistake rose like choking bile in my throat. “Oh, *shit!* I forgot you’d grown up together.”

“Not really,” Kane corrected. “He’s eight years older, and although my parents did make an effort to get to know Arnie’s family, they quickly figured out that even as a young teen James was nothing but trouble. Neither Hellhound nor I made any effort to stay in touch with James as adults so he won’t know anything about my law enforcement career. But he definitely knows who I am. In fact...”

He stared into space for a few moments. “Yes...” he muttered. “That adds up...”

“What? What adds up?” I jittered on the edge of my seat, the domino-fall of connections still echoing in my brain.

Arnie, John, Nichele...

“Oh, Jesus, no!” I groaned and thudded the heels of my hands against my temples. “John...” I had to stop and swallow to steady my voice. “Does... does James have a photographic memory like Arnie’s?”

Kane’s eyes narrowed in thought. “I don’t know. But when Mom and Dad were still trying to help Arnie’s family, they arranged for all the kids to have IQ tests. Arnie and James scored highest, in the genius range. So it’s certainly possible.”

“Shit, shit, *shit!*”

“What is it?” Kane demanded.

“Dante.” I thumped my aching forehead. “When we were in the bar last fall I told James you were my ex. So if Riel tells him we were kissing today, he’ll think we’re back together. That’s bad enough; but last fall James also saw me going home with Dante. If he thinks Dante and I are still close, too...”

Kane sighed. “One more tool for leverage. And if James has the same phenomenal memory as Arnie, he’ll remember Dante’s last name, where he works, and any other tiny detail Dante might have mentioned. And even if he didn’t know those things, he’d remember that Dante is an underwear model. That’s impossible to forget.” There was a slight edge to Kane’s voice that might have been jealousy, but I didn’t have time to analyze it before he went on, “If he wanted to track Dante down, it would be as simple as calling the local modelling agencies.”

“Oh, God.” I wallowed in despair for a few more seconds before pulling myself together. “Okay. You need to take Alicia and Daniel and move to a safe house. I’m sure Stemp will agree to that, at least for the short term. Arnie’s out of town so he’ll be safe until he gets back. I’ll warn him as soon as I can. I’ll get Holt to watch Dante-”

I broke off at the sight of Kane's negative headshake.

"What do you mean, 'no'?" I demanded, tension winding up in my shoulders.

"I'll be safe, and I'll make sure Alicia and Daniel are, too," he said calmly.

"Safe? How do you figure you're *safe*?" My voice rose on the last word, and I reined myself in with a glance around the nearly-empty restaurant. Nobody seemed to be paying attention, and I returned my attention to Kane with a glare. "Didn't we just agree that you're a prime target?"

"No, we agreed that I would be a prime target if anybody actually knew how to find me."

I flung out a hand in frustration, gesturing at his mountainous six-foot-four frame. "You're not exactly hard to spot!"

Kane gave me a thin smile and I glimpsed the steely resolve that had made him the best agent in the Service. "Not hard to spot, but very hard to follow. That's what I meant earlier when I said 'it adds up'. I dropped over to Hellhound's place yesterday for a little while. When I left, a white Ford Explorer tailed me. A single male driver wearing dark glasses. I evaded him and then turned the tables. I got behind him in traffic and confronted him when he stopped. It was James."

My throat went dry. "And...?"

Kane's lips turned up in a predatory grin. "I told him to get lost, and if he ever followed me again I'd make sure he got lost permanently."

I gulped. “Oh, shit. John...” I leaned in and lowered my voice again. “You’re a civilian now. You can’t just go around killing people who piss you off. Even if they really, really deserve it.”

Kane gave me an affronted look. “You know perfectly well that even as an agent I could never kill for my own convenience. Or are you forgetting the mountains of paperwork and performance evaluations and psych assessments after a serious incident? We...” He hesitated as if suddenly remembering he’d quit the Department, then tried again. “Agents have to hold themselves to a higher standard of behaviour than any civilian.”

“I know; I didn’t mean that,” I muttered. “I’m just saying you shouldn’t have threatened him. It’ll only piss him off. What if he decides to kill you before you can kill him?”

Kane shrugged, a dangerous light in his eyes. “Let him try. Then I can claim self-defense. When the police investigate they’ll find out James was a dangerous criminal with gangland ties who was just released from prison, and I’m an innocent civilian. I’d be shocked if it even went to trial, and even if it did no jury would convict me.”

I clapped my hands over my ears and hummed. “La, la, la, la... I can’t hear you... Not going to be an accessory before the fact...”

He grinned and pried my hand away. “Don’t worry, it won’t happen. James is a coward and a bully, and he won’t take a chance on crossing me. And anyway, nobody has followed me since.”

I started to ask ‘are you sure’, but stifled myself before the words came out. If he said nobody had tailed him, I was damn sure nobody had. Even as a civilian he was a better agent than I’d ever be.

“My condo isn’t registered in my own name,” he went on. “Thanks to Alicia’s pettiness, nobody knows I have a son; so nobody would expect me to be going to or from an elementary school. Unless they pick up my trail via you or Hellhound, there’s no way to find me.”

“But what if...” I began.

“At this point I have only three options,” Kane interrupted. “One, take Alicia and Daniel and hide in a safe house. For how long? Until you stop being Arlene Widdenback the arms dealer? How many years will that be? Stemp won’t go for it, and in any case Daniel doesn’t need any more disruption in his routine. We’ve finally gotten him to the point where we can leave him in his classroom after the obligatory morning meltdown and he settles down and participates in class.”

“It’ll be a fucking big disruption to his routine if you end up dead,” I snapped.

“I won’t. And that brings me to option two, which would be to go underground by myself until this is resolved, leaving Daniel to deal with my abandonment and my broken promise. I told him I’ll always be there for him, and I won’t break that promise. Not for anything.”

“You’re missing the point,” I argued, worry making my tone harsher than I’d intended. “You won’t be *there* for him if you’re *fucking dead!*”

“Even if they captured me, which they won’t, they wouldn’t kill me. Leverage only works if the hostage is still alive. I’m no good to them dead.”

“Until they decide they don’t need you anymore,” I insisted. “And then they pretty much have to kill you. That still adds up to *fucking dead.*”

“Or there’s option three,” Kane went on imperturbably. “Which solves all the problems at once. I can be there for Daniel twenty-four-seven, I’ll be absent from my condo even if somebody does figure out where I live, and I’ll be able to protect my family in the unlikely event that I’m traced back to them.” He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll move in with Alicia and Daniel.”

Shock struck me speechless, my jaw flapping uselessly on strangled protests. “You wha...? What? That’s... that’s...”

“The best possible solution,” Kane finished, and rose. “Keep me in the loop. Have you got a burner phone I can borrow?”

“But... but... you just finished saying how much you hated Alicia!”

“And I love Daniel more than anything. He’s my top priority. If this is what it takes to keep him safe, I’ll do it.”

“But...” My useless syllable hovered in the air, unsupported by any viable rebuttal.

Shit.

I pulled out the spare phones I carried in my waist pouch and we wrote down each other’s numbers in silence. Then he pocketed his phone, leaned down to kiss me hard, and vanished out the door.

After a few stunned minutes I trailed out in his wake, finally returning to full mental capacity when the cold night air slapped me in the face.

“Well, that’s just fucking *fine*,” I snarled, aiming a vicious kick at a lone paper cup that lay on the sidewalk, rolling gently in the chilly breeze.

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