

Doubt gnawed at Jane as she regarded the pseudo-Mediterranean façade of *Bellezza*. *Mark might not like it – is Mayfair too rich for his law abiding soul?* She smiled fractionally as she pulled a cellphone from her pocket. *He can cope*, she decided. *After all, I'm the one paying for it.*

Jane dialed a number on the phone and stepped out of the way of foot traffic, thankful for the long coat over her short dress. Winters in London were less severe than those in Seattle, but the clear air was cold enough to make Jane shiver slightly as she made her call. *At least it's not raining*, she thought with some relief.

Jane paid attention to her phone, not the climate. "Hey there. The platypus has landed," she chuckled. "Yeah, it's me. I got here fine. Thanks for the assist."

"I'm happy to help," The wonders of satellite technology made a joke of the intervening six thousand miles. Jeremy could have been a block away. "I keep telling you that you need to get out more. Give me a ring when you're ready for pickup."

"Will do. I'm not sure when it'll be, though. It depends how happy my friend is to see me." Jane's voice betrayed a hint of her anxiety.

Jane's teammate chuckled. "Good luck with it. Wear a pretty face."

"I already am." Jane glanced at her reflection in a nearby window. She saw a tall woman, built in just the right fashion, with dark blue eyes and brown hair falling in thick waves past her shoulders. Jane considered it her 'vacation body' and it had served her well for several years. "I'll talk to you soon."

Shoving the portable phone into her clutch purse – it was a tight fit – Jane made her way into the bistro's slate and terra-cotta lobby. She cheerfully breezed past the maitre d' as she dropped her coat in his arms. She knew that a pretty face would win forgiveness for most sins in this sort of environment, but made a mental note to over-tip the staff this evening as she headed towards a familiar face at the bar.

To Jane's eyes, Mark Gillen was uncomfortable, but he hid it well. *Cops are the same the world over - born poker players*. He had lost weight since she last saw him, a year ago and time was taking less of a toll on his Irish features than she had anticipated. Furthermore, it seemed that Scotland Yard was paying better than she would have expected, as Mark's ensemble of leather jacket and charcoal slacks had a distinctly designer cut to them. *That or he's wearing his one trendy outfit for me*, Jane suppressed a smile. Either way, it was a good sign. So was the smile on Mark's face.

"Can I buy you a drink, or is that contributing to the corruption of the police force?" Jane said as she sat down at an adjacent stool and waved a bartender over.

"I would say that dress is more reprehensible than a glass of whiskey," Mark laughed in greeting. Jane suppressed a worried frown. She thought the burgundy velvet dress was only *slightly risqué* - a little short, the color perhaps a little *too* red. *This is England; I suppose the standards are different*.

She quashed her nerves and smiled instead. Possible fashion gaffes aside, it was an auspicious start. She and Mark had parted on a warily positive note, but a year could be a long time. She knew she had changed, but she had no idea about Mark. *No time like the present*. "Did you want another drink? Or do you want to go straight to dinner...?"

Jane had to admit that the wreckage was impressive. Her nova metabolism required a lot of calories to fuel it, but even she was a little shocked when she stopped to consider what had

preceded her second helping of *tiramisu*. Mark had tried his best to refrain from comment, but he couldn't help smiling at their waiter's slightly shell-shocked expression.

"Fighting evil is hard work," Jane said in an attempt to justify her appetite. "Last week, I stopped a bunch of lunatics from unleashing hell – literally - on earth. I think that merits extra dessert."

"And veal scallopine *and* chicken picatta and a bottle and half of wine?" He smiled to take the sting out his observation. "I'm glad it seems to be coming together for you." He admitted, "You seem happier."

Jane tried to dodge the subject. "My friends are a bad – um, I mean *good* - influence on me. You're looking better, too. I'm glad you quit smoking."

"I had to. The chief superintendent was giving me hell." Mark grumbled.

"The burden of being a moral paragon." Jane teased.

"You're one to talk. Didn't I see your face – well, one of them – pasted all over some fundraiser for starving children last week?"

Jane grimaced. "Ah, the redhead. That wasn't my idea. Honestly, I would rather I be left out of The Foundation's spin campaign. The charity gigs are genuine, but I really didn't want to be mentioned at all. Low profile, that's me. But Byrne managed to convince me otherwise."

"Byrne?"

"Media guy. He acts like a used-car salesman, but there's a functioning brain behind the noise. He's bet his career on convincing the world that The Foundation are misunderstood good guys, so I think I can count on him to do his best by us."

"And are you?" Mark asked artlessly, pouring the last of the wine into his glass.

"What, misunderstood? Or good guys?"

"Either."

"Misunderstood? Definitely. Particularly after the group's last attempt to related to the media. Blink's a good guy, but he should never be allowed to talk to the press."

"I think I read something about that."

"Half the bloody world did. It's why Byrne's got his work cut out for him. Blink *wants* to be a professional – the leader-of-men type - he really does, but he just doesn't know enough, yet. But," she admitted, "The potential is there, which is more than I can say for a couple of the dedicated individualists in the group."

Mark chuckled. "Some things are the same everywhere."

"Amen to that." Jane rolled her eyes. "There might not be an I in *team*, but there is *meat* and I swear that's what I'm going to turn Arsenal into if he doesn't shape up."

"Young or stupid?"

"A bit of both. He keeps thinking field missions can be decided by committee – and in the field, no less."

"Dreadful," Mark murmured with a hint of a smile.

"You're making fun of me!" Jane protested.

"Of course I am," her companion countered. "Ms. *Shades of Gray*, Ms. *I Look After Myself* is bitching to me about poor team dynamics."

"Hm, good point." Jane conceded.

"So, are you going to whip them into shape? It sounds like you want to."

Jane grimaced. "I don't know if I should be the one to try. I'm too used to being on my own," she held up a hand to fend off any sarcastic remarks. "I've got the time as an Elite, yes, but I don't think I should be the one to try pulling a team together. I don't have enough experience,"

she admitted. "Then again, I don't know if any of them have that experience, either - and something's got to be done before they get slaughtered." She shrugged off her worry, hoping Mark hadn't taken too much notice.

"How long until you quit?"

"Excuse me?" *What's this?*

"You're starting to think about what you're doing, but you've got doubts, too. Isn't that your cue to have an anxiety attack and decide on a change of scene?"

"Didn't I already warn you about this nasty habit of pop-psychology?" Jane's eyes narrowed.

Mark was made of sterner stuff and refused to be intimidated. "Yes, you did, but it got a little bit lost in that murder accusation that cropped up the next day."

"Which I cleared up for you," Jane replied quickly, her tone softening at the tangent.

"True." Mark smiled wryly. "Stupid of me to not realize that we had two shape-shifters wandering around London that weekend."

Jane made a show of campy insouciance - anything to stay off the previous topic. "I can't believe you even thought I was involved, I mean, *really*. The Janissaries might have been a bit indiscriminate in taking clients, but a cabinet minister?" She shook her head. "Too volatile, even for them." *Not really, but it can't hurt to give that impression. Although, why I should feel any need to defend them escapes me.* She filed the thought away for future consideration.

"Would you have done it?" Mark asked with artful idleness, "If the job had been offered?"

Jane put her coffee cup down with a thud. "I just wanted to have dinner and catch up. Not play confession games." She snapped.

"So, you *would* have done it?" he persisted.

Jane glared at him for a moment. "At the time? Yes." *Who am I angry at? Me or him?*

His tone was still light, as if this was just casual gossip, rather than a potentially explosive conversation. "But not now." It wasn't a question.

"No, I wouldn't." she insisted. "I'm with a group which wants to be the good guys. I don't think they're sure what that means," *I'm not sure I do, either.* "But cold-blooded murder is definitely off the list." *And for that, I'm relieved. When I remember to think about it.*

Mark's curiosity was apparent. "So, you're going to tough it out? Try to be a good guy again?"

"Why the interest?" Jane demanded.

"If you're..." he smiled, "a reformed character, maybe we can see more of each other."

*That* made Jane pause for a moment. "And you hear reform stories all the time, right? Stories that don't pan out"

"Unfortunately, yes."

Jane winced. She couldn't fault his honesty. "Is that why I've been getting the third degree over dessert?" she asked, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

"If learning about you wasn't like grilling a hard-case, it wouldn't be so difficult." Again, that sincere smile appeared, taking the sting out of his words. "You haven't even said you would *like* to see me again. Am I wrong in thinking you might?" His smile faded and his gaze dropped towards the tablecloth. Now he was awkward, all earlier ease gone. "Because, I would like to see more of you...if it's possible."

"Meaning if I don't go off on a fit of conflicted conscience every time we meet?" Jane's voice shook just a bit at the memory of one of their first conversations.

Mark laughed quietly and Jane felt her own mood lift. “Essentially.”

“And providing I don't end up on Interpol's ten-most-wanted list and causing a conflict of your own?” *Thank god the Janissaries were able to cover most of my tracks. I'm at number forty, tops.*

“That too,” he admitted. He paused for a moment. “I know you've done some bad – terrible - things in the past. Sometimes it amazes me that we can even talk to each other.” Jane stifled a sarcastic response - her knee-jerk reaction to hearing an unpleasant truth. “But I *have* heard a lot of reform stories in my time, enough to be able to spot a lie from a mile off.”

“And actions speak louder than words?” Jane added, remembering Mark's reference to the Foundation's much-publicized philanthropy.

Mark nodded. Jane sat back in her chair, unable to hide her own surprise at the implications of this exchange.

The pause had moved beyond pregnant and was veering towards ominous. “Now what?” Jane asked. *Good one, Jane. Very smooth.*

“Well, I'm still waiting to hear your answer.”

“What?” Jane was flustered for a moment. “Of course I want to see you again,” she blurted. *Talk fast enough, and you won't have time to worry about sounding like an idiot – or think about long-term consequences.* “I meant more like, right now. What now, right now, I mean...” She paused. “After I cut my tongue out of my head, that is,” she concluded. Mark laughed out loud at that. Jane swallowed a sigh. *I am the world's biggest idiot. Who knew?*

“I think they're about to throw us out of this place, so we should decide soon.” Mark warned.

True enough, the restaurant was empty of customers, some of the wait-staff was relaxing at the bar, eating dinner. The smile of the maitre d' had probably remained affixed only by the hope of a vast tip, Jane realized with a hint of guilty feeling. Mentally, she doubled the already-generous amount she planned to leave tucked into the discreet leather folder on the edge of the table.

“I think you're right.” Jane agreed. She glanced at her watch. “I don't have to leave at any particular time.” *It's only 3PM in Seattle right now, she thought. And if I stay out late, so what? Jeremy's woken me up more than once.* “Why don't we get a cab and wing it?”

“That's American for making it up as we go along, right?”

“You got it.”

“I think that's a fine idea. I haven't winged it in a while.” Mark grinned. “About a year, or so, I think...”