

Burn Notice Fan-Fic

A TYPICAL DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FORMER SPY

by Elle Coe

Story takes place during Season One,
between episode #6 *Unpaid Debts* and episode #7 *Broken Rules*.

1:41 am Michael's place

When you're a spy it's pretty much a given that every fiber of your being has been trained to listen. Yesterday Nate, my brother, asked 'what was the most valuable skill I'd learned from all my covert training?' I told him, 'listening'. Of course, he thought I was trying to give the "older brother" lecture. I wasn't. Although it's advice that would have done him some good as he was the one currently in the dog house with mom. But I meant it. Listening is one of the primary ways I gather intel, make assessments, and, in this case, know in an instant if something's wrong.

I lay in my bed, frozen. Out of habit I'd instantly forced my shallow breathing into deeper breaths, drawing slowly from the diaphragm. One of the first things you learn as a spy is that you are your own worst enemy. Our own bodies can often sabotage us from really being able to listen, or aim a gun for that matter. So mastering my breathing is spy 101. Now I could really listen.

Like a blind person who has to memorize the steps and layout of their home, I have every noise in my place memorized. Every second, of every moment in the day I know what the "usual" noises should be, and with my place being over top of a very active dance club that's not always easy. So what was it that put me on the alert? I still wasn't sure. I carefully grabbed a gun. I say a gun because in my world, I don't sleep with just one.

I slipped off of my bed and onto the cold floor. For Miami, it had been a rainy coupla' days, and the cold floor was a bit of a shock. I didn't let it distract me. There it was again. A very soft, subtle scraping sound, coming from the front door. Someone was definitely doing something to my door.

Any number of possibilities flashed in my mind as I crawled along. When I made it beside the door, I stopped to listen again. The scratching noise paused for a moment then a soft drumming began. Explosives. I should have figured. It was only a matter of time before any one of my former enemies, and even current enemies I'd made since I'd come to Miami, found me. I could well imagine the intruder attaching the C-4 or maybe something a bit less military, more homemade, to my door. I silently moved back toward my bed. With the loud noise from the club, and the state of inebriation most of its participants would be in, it was a pretty good guess that any explosion wouldn't even faze them.

I grabbed my cell phone and pushed speed dial 1. The name "Sam" flashed on the screen. I knew I didn't want to tip my hand to the intruder just yet. I needed Sam, my longtime friend and a former military buddy, to do some fast

surveillance of my building's exterior. The soft drumming at the door had increased in pace. I saw the phone connecting and heard it start to ring. The ringing seemed to blast into the quiet! Did I have it on speaker? I jammed it under my arm pit trying to absorb the ring, when I heard the drumming on the door stop. Then Sam's voice said loudly, too loudly, "Yeah Mikey?"

What? It couldn't be. He wouldn't be that stupid. I sprung up. In a flash I had the door unbolted, open, and gun aimed at the figure. Sam's bulky figure.

"Whoa! Mike take it easy." He held up his hand, the one clutching his cell phone, since the other carried a six pack of his favorite brew. "I've been tryin' to wake you up."

"Really? Never heard of a cell phone?" I waved him in with my gun.

He turned to grab the rest of his stuff. After all of that, I wanted him inside quickly, so I grabbed the overnight bag and pillow for him.

"I'm sorry. I should have called. But I didn't want to startle you." He moved to put the beer in the fridge.

"Right. And attempting to meddle with my door wouldn't?"

"You're right. I'm off my game. If you'd had to listen to as much women talk as I just did, I think you'd be the same. As you can see I need to crash for a few nights."

I moved aside as he plunked down on a chair with a bottle in his hand. "Veronica toss you out?"

"Nah. Her daughter, Sherry, showed up for a visit tonight. Traveled here all the way from Maine. She had dinner with us. Actually made dinner and she can cook too. I learned some new pointers on how to make a great Beef Stroganoff. Really, you'd be surprised how just a can a Cream of Mushroom Soup adds so much fla-

"Sam. The point?"

"Oh right. Gotcha. The rest of the night went downhill. Turns out her husband left her. That's when the tears came and, well, Veronica could tell I wasn't gonna be much help, so we agreed I needed to relocate for just a few days until Sherry gets back on her feet." He took a long swig.

I listened to him elaborate on the rest of his evening. I didn't mind really. For all his quirks, Sam really was a funny story teller. It was when he started to detail the stroganoff recipe that I glanced at the clock. 5:35 am. I wearily motioned toward the loft. "You know where everything is."

Sam eventually made his way upstairs. By the time I finally dozed off, it was probably more like seven.

7:25 am

Even as a former spy, I still never do get the full REM sleep that the average person does. Mostly since part of your training, and every moment of your life since then, involves learning how to live on little to no sleep. And the sleep you do get is only ever a light sleep, seeing as how you always need to be on the alert. It doesn't mean you're not tired. Oh not at all. You pretty much go through life exhausted. But your body adjusts. It learns to live on adrenaline. And when

the cell phone rings, as mine was doing now, you can wake up in a flash, sharp and fully awake.

The phone's screen read *Fi*. Short for Fiona, a former IRA gunrunner and my ex-girlfriend, but still my friend - well maybe more than just ex-girlfriend. She may have left the IRA but that didn't stop her from using her talents here in Miami to help earn a living. Fiona really does have a good heart. She just has a habit of taking on more than she can chew. I had a feeling this call wasn't a good sign since she usually didn't call this early unless it was important. She's more of a night owl.

"Yeah Fi" I pulled on my clothes.

"I need a bailout." Her breathing was labored and I could tell she was running.

"Tell me where." I jogged up the stairs and began pounding Sam awake.

"Bailey Park. Waterfront. Hurry." The phone went dead.

"Sam, Fi's in trouble we gotta go." Like any good operative, and in spite of the alcohol he'd consumed, Sam jumped up, dressed, and checked his gun for ammo. We were out the door in under a minute.

8:31 am

Bailey Park was part nature preserve and part beach. This early in the morning it was mostly empty save for a few solitary joggers. The beach didn't open to the public until after lunch, but the preserve was open from dawn to dusk. I knew Fi wouldn't be at the beach. Too open. Too little cover. She'd said waterfront though and I had a good idea where to start looking. I turned onto the preserve road. Watching us drive by, a pink flamingo stood on the edge of a marsh filled with the activity of several species of birds and animals. As we neared the toll booth, a large billboard with a picture of a smiling chubby owl next to the words "Please Drive Slowly to protect your wildlife friends." caused Sam to laugh.

"See we still have friends," he said.

I paid the toll and drove on. "Right. Comforting to know they'll have our back if things get hot. What do you think is their weapon of choice?"

The road we were on split into three and I took the one I knew headed toward the water. Eventually the trees and vegetation grew dense and then we passed a very muddy jeep pulled off to the side. No one was inside as we drove past it. I pulled the car over once we went around the next bend and got out. Sam took the wheel.

"Along here there are about 4 boardwalks that lead out to overlooks before the road turns back toward the main one. I'm going to go in here. Stay out of site and meet us at the fourth one."

"Gotcha. Be careful. This is pretty easy cover for an ambush." I nodded and Sam pulled away.

At the second boardwalk I hid and observed some joggers doing more than enjoying nature. Two men dressed in jeans and sweat jackets with the hoods up, were walking back from the overlook very obviously searching. They also kept

one hand in their jacket pocket, also very obviously keeping their finger on the trigger.

You learn to assess a situation quickly by almost doing what I call the spy version of speed reading. Give a quick scan of the perimeter for easy exits, catalogue weapons you have against what they have, and assess their weaknesses. The shorter of the two favored his gun hand; as if afraid it might go off. Ok, amateur. The older one carried himself well and seemed to be more in control.

I had a pretty good idea where Fi would be, so I waited until they were just beside me before launching in. Since I knew I would be on a nature preserve, I'd grabbed an extra weapon that would be a bit more eco friendly. Hey, I might be a spy highly trained on a vast array of powerful weapons, but I try to do my part. The trick would be using my "natural" weapon before they decided to use their very deadly ones.

Timing it within a second of their passing my hiding spot, I fractured junior's ankles with some well aimed kicks, while grabbing his gun. He fell like a load of potatoes. I saw the older one spin but I was there locking his gun hand, while throwing a large handful of white into his eyes. The burn and small granules instantly blinded him. He fell doubled over, trying to clear his eyes. I punched him and junior, effectively knocking them out. Grabbing their guns, I drug the bodies off the boardwalk and sprinted to the overlook. I stomped my foot on the wood.

"Fi? You can come out. They're gone."

A very wet but otherwise healthy Fiona pulled her lithe body out from under the overlook. "Thanks. There's four more out there."

"Sam's waiting, let's go." Slowly working to keep cover, we made it all the way to the fourth overlook and waited. Fiona took the time to wring out her long hair and clip it up.

Finally Sam meandered into view. He gazed out onto the marshy waters nonchalantly putting his hands behind his back. To the casual observer he was just pondering the beauty of nature. To the trained eye his fingers gave me the signals I needed. *Two men* he signaled. *On the way. Wait five minutes and head for the car.* He walked back down the path and turned to the left to observe some frogs. Fi and I knew now where they were hiding, right behind him. Sam finished his walk and disappeared from view.

A few minutes later, two more men, not even bothering to hide their guns, appeared. They moved off on another path opposite from where Sam went. With an eye for cover, we eventually made it to the car. Fi ducked down on the back seat and Sam got us out of there.

I glanced at my watch. 11:28 I sighed and suddenly realized I was starving. I hadn't even had breakfast.

Fi sat up and reached to wipe at my shirt. "Salt?"

"I care about our wildlife friends." I said, grinning.

Sam howled. "Salt can really burn. But I'm glad you took care of our friends Mikey."

"I'm sorry about all this. I had a bit of trouble when-"

I held up my hand. "Fi, I don't even want to know."

1:15 pm

Sam and I sat enjoying drinks on the outdoor deck of Fisherman's Cove, a trendy restaurant known, according to the front of the menu, 'for its unique food and stunning ocean view'.

We'd dropped off Fiona at her place to change, and then got cleaned up ourselves. We rushed here so we could grab a table on the deck, as Fiona had insisted, since we'd agreed to meet her here for lunch.

Sam and I aren't really the Fisherman's Cove type. We're not into the whole new fancy food experience, no matter how trendy. But I must say the ocean view was every bit as stunning as their slogan promised.

"I'll tell you one thing. I sure am hungry." Sam said as he studied the menu.

"Same here." I know it's lunch, but as I looked over the menu I decided that I was going to order the dinner size of whatever I got. Although Sam had let himself gain some weight, I worked extra hard to keep my edge. I often tried to eat my larger meals in the middle of the day if I could. And in my life, you often have to grab a chance for real food when you can. "I think I'm going to order some type of pasta. If I can tell where they are."

"Oh they're on page five under Land-lover's Corner." Sam smiled and pointed. I turned to see Fiona, looking beautiful in a blue dress and heels, followed by someone else. Although we were under an umbrella, it was still pretty bright out here. I slipped on my sunglasses again and held a groan - behind her stood my mom.

"Hello Michael. Hello Sam." Madeline Westen cheerily greeted us.

"Hi Madeline. Nice to see you." Sam helped her sit down. I glared at Fiona.

"Isn't this nice?" Fiona asked. "Madeline called me and I thought she would love to join us and enjoy the great food and sea air."

Fiona has made it her special mission to find as many opportunities for me to spend time with my mother as possible. She feels I've neglected her. My mother, ever happy for a sympathetic ear, has made Fiona her new best friend.

"Sure." I said. "As if she doesn't get enough chances in Miami for food and sea air."

"Now Michael." Mom chided. "You know I don't often get out and I have been wanting to try their food for a while now. Plus I get to spend time with my son and his friends."

Just then Sam stood. I watched an attractive and well dressed fifty-something woman hug Sam. "Hey everyone this is Veronica." He introduced us and she sat down in the chair next to Sam.

I leaned over and said quietly, "How lucky that we just happened to have room for her."

"Well, you know when she heard we were coming here. . . it was just getting awkward if I didn't invite her." Sam explained.

Through a tight lipped smile, I now glared at both him and Fiona. So much for a relaxing lunch.

Veronica smiled at us. "Thanks so much for letting me join you. My daughter and granddaughter are down near here for a salon and spa visit and when Sam said he would be here I couldn't resist. I just love their food."

"Oh I can't wait to taste it. It's my first time." Madeline agreed.

"What salon are they at? I've been thinking about getting some highlights." Fiona asked.

"Vincent's. If you're going to go it's best to make a day of it. The spa is fantastic." Veronica briefly glanced at her menu and set it aside. "And they cater to men too."

"There you go Sam. Next time you and Veronica can schedule a day together." I happily added.

Veronica grabbed Sam's hand and focused her eager eyes on him. "That's a great idea!" She turned back to all of us. "I've been telling him that a day at the spa is such a great way to relax."

Now Sam was glaring at me through his own tight lipped smile. I smiled back. "Relaxing, and for a whole day?" I flashed him a thumbs up. "You can't beat that."

Sam ducked behind his menu, but not before giving me a subtle but firm kick.

"You made it!" My mom called out.

That's when I saw my brother, Nate, approaching our table. Sam and Veronica moved over to make room for him to sit next to Mom.

"Nate called after Fiona did and I thought it would be a nice chance for Nate to join us." She patted his hand. "Now it's perfect. Lunch with both my boys and their friends!"

And as I thought about it, while everyone discussed the menu, this would be the perfect way for Nate to get out of the dog house with mom. Have lunch with her at one of *her* type of restaurants, with the added bonus of it being lunch with me. Togetherness. Perfect. The road to redemption in mom's book.

When you're a spy and you get burned there are many places you could get dumped in. Places that would be the ultimate torture. Siberia for example. But I'd often wondered why they threw me in Miami. Good food, beaches, sea air and my family - or my mother to be exact. I get it.

Fiona elbowed me and I saw the waiter poised to write. I ordered what the menu described as a 'hearty Italian sauce with fresh pasta, basil and mozzarella wrapped around tender parmesan crusted chicken.' If I wasn't hungry before, I sure was ravenous now.

"I don't know honey. Mike and I have other plans." Sam kicked me again.

I knew I was starving as it tends to distract my focus. I gave myself a mental shake. "Sorry, did I miss something?"

"You must be hungry." Mom chimed in. "He always would zone out when he was hungry." She added for the benefit of all those at the table.

Veronica leaned forward. "My daughter is going through a rather delicate time right now with her marriage and we just need some mother and daughter time. I asked Sam if it would be possible for him to watch my granddaughter, Andrea, for today."

"And I said I didn't know if I could as I knew we'd had some things planned for later," Sam added sending me a desperate glance.

I got his signal. We did have plans but they certainly didn't involve babysitting. "I'm not sure that your granddaughter would enjoy hanging out with us. We do have some things we need to take care of."

"Anything I can help you and Sam with?" Nate offered. Despite all the crap from our past, I could tell Nate really did want to help. And it didn't hurt that I was a spy either. He seemed to think that anywhere I went people were always offering me jobs with large cash payouts. Although that sometimes was true, more often they were offering me a taste of their knuckles.

"Maybe we could use you. Anyway why not you, Fi? I'm sure she would love to go shoe shopping with you." I added to Veronica, "It's fun times, I can tell you that."

"I would love to help. And although Michael has never fully relished the whole shoe experience, Madeline and I have plans," Fiona said with a chummy best pals grin at mom.

I exchanged stunned glances with Nate and Sam.

Mom blushed in pleasure. "Fiona found out the Hilton is having a famous Vegas card master teach poker tips this evening. She bought the tickets last week."

"Well it's really more for my benefit. Ever since I started playing poker with Madeline and her friends I found out I need to brush up," Fiona said.

Should I be concerned that my ex-girlfriend is getting so friendly with my mom? I watched mom as the waiter began to serve our food. All of us had never had a happy life. But today, I could see that her eyes were truly happy. Maybe Fi was on to something I grudgingly admitted. Mom really was excited to be included.

"Here you are sir." The waiter placed my plate in front of me. It consisted of a small medallion of crusted chicken topped with a dollop of sauce and a tiny touch of cheese. Green confetti, which I figured must be the basil they mentioned, was sprinkled like confetti all over the large white plate. The sauce was also drizzled in curly cues fanning out from the chicken. I clenched my hand and held it over the chicken. The entrée barely even took up half of my fist. I knew my fist would give me the measurement for four ounces of cooked meat. I'd be lucky if this was one and half ounces.

"Madeline what do you think? Isn't it wonderful?" Veronica asked, her fork poised over a plate that held a single lettuce leaf topped with bits of tomatoes, white cheese crumbles and what looked like walnuts. She had drizzles of a dark dressing swirling all over her plate. Still her "salad", if that's what you could call it, looked larger than my dinner sized entree.

"This was a great suggestion." Mom said as she relished her own lettuce leaf. "I love that Balsamic dressing with the Feta."

"M-m-m- it's fantastic," Fiona chimed in as she too chewed on her own dainty bit of lettuce. I shook my head. They all seemed to have ordered the same thing. I can't remember the last time Sam and I, or even Nate for that matter, cared to ask what the other was ordering. What was fantastic was her eyes, and they were gazing at me now. "So how 'bout you Michael? Like it?"

I made a grand show of cutting my toddler sized entrée and taking a bite. "Oh it's good. Very hearty."

She wasn't fooled. But Mom and Veronica were pleased. Sam and Nate seemed to be having the same let down as me - judging by their struggle to see how many bites they could wrangle out of their entrees. Actually the food really did taste good - all two bites of it.

When Veronica suggested the Double Chocolate Fudge Swirled Cheesecake, I was about to decline and make a quick exit. I figured that was the perfect time to do so, as I'd gotten away with not having to deal with the whole babysitting thing, and I'd also spent some family time. Oh, if only I had left then.

Instead, I was interrupted when two more people arrived at our table, a stylish well coiffed woman in her thirties with a pretty little girl, I'm guessing around nine, dressed in a pink top and frilly skirt. She had grey eyes and long perfectly combed brown hair. One piece of her hair was pulled back in a ribbon, which she occasionally patted or readjusted.

"Oh Sherry, I'm so glad you could come after all. Don't you and Andrea look lovely?" Veronica gushed and looked to us. We all nodded our heads.

"Join us for dessert won't you?" Fiona invited.

The waiter brought more chairs and Veronica introduced everyone. At the rate we're going, we might have all of Miami by the time we're done with the after dinner coffee - strike that I meant espresso, that's probably what they served here instead - definitely small enough.

"Andrea dear, how would you like to go have some fun with Uncle Sammy this afternoon?" Veronica asked, blissfully ignoring Sam's sudden coughing fit.

Andrea quietly eyed Sam and then me.

"Oh can you do that Sam? Thanks so much. With everything that's happened there's a lot of decisions and things that will have to be made and I could really use Mom's ear," Sherry said sadly.

"Uh Mike?" He hesitated.

What could I say? I could tell Sherry really did need that chat. And I was sure there were no more tickets open for the poker lecture, not that I think that's necessarily kid material. I caught Nate's eye. I knew the recon we had planned, but it might work. "If Nate's willing to help us, I think we may be able to work it out."

"Sure. What ever you need me to do." Nate assured.

"Thank you all so much," Sherry said, clearly relieved.

Mom smiled proudly.

3:15 pm

We were finally out at my Charger, parked on a side street next to the restaurant's parking lot. The ladies were still in the restaurant using the restroom. I knew I would only have a few minutes to brief Nate and Sam, so I motioned them a bit further away from the lot.

"I have a lead that may help find who burned me. Thanks to Fiona's pick pocketing skills I can tell you that this is Jason Bly." I let them look at the black

and white copy of his driver's license, "He's the CSS agent who is trying to stop me from finding out who burned me."

"CSS?" Nate asked.

"It's a branch of the NSA." I said. "With Sam's help we found out that there is another former agent in Miami that Bly's convinced to settle down. Howard Wright is a security guard at the Cross Creek Mall. According to Sam's information he used to be covert intelligence and recently chose to take a security job."

"Was he the one who came over and trashed Mom's place?" Nate asked.

I nodded.

Nate stared at me. "Look bro, I understand that you want to clear your name and all, but if we check into this guy and Bly finds out he could go after Mom again."

"Possibly. That's why I'm showing you his picture and making sure we stay under his radar." I said.

"From what I could find out Jason offered this Howard a security job on the condition that he keep silent about his past. Looks like Howard got burned too," Sam explained for Nate's benefit.

I picked up, "And if he is, maybe there's a connection. Maybe we were in the same place and accidentally stumbled onto something that made someone nervous."

"Nervous enough to wipe you out," Sam said.

"I want to go to the mall, do a little recon and find out more about this guy. If we can, I'd like to get him alone and see what I find out," I said.

"I'm thinking he's not gonna be happy you're looking him up. So what's the plan?" Nate asked.

"Sam and I are going to flush Howard out while you're helping Andrea have lots of fun at the mall."

Nate's whole body tensed. "Is that what you think of me? That all I can do is baby-sit some kid at a mall?"

"No that's not what I think. But it's what I need right now." I honestly don't know where he gets this stuff.

"So I just walk a kid around the mall?"

"If we run into any trouble, which I don't think we will, but in case we do then you'll be there, I reasoned.

"How could I even come help you? There's no daycare," Nate said.

"Hey," Sam interceded, trying to bring back some calm. "Do we even know if she'll go to a mall? Does she like it?"

I shrugged. "What girl doesn't?"

"I'll go. But not because I'm a girl." A soft voice surprised us from behind.

We spun around to find Andrea standing a few feet away, arms crossed. I could see mom getting into Fiona's car. Sherry and Veronica were just coming out. Andrea turned and ran back to them. How much had she heard?

We agreed on a place to meet and Nate left. I drove up next to Veronica's Mercedes. Andrea climbed out of the car carrying a large black backpack. We all said goodbye, and Andrea got in the back.

As soon as we were on our way, Andrea leaned forward and propped herself up on the seat so she could see us. She answered any question we asked. But to be honest we couldn't think of much. I wanted to ask 'How much did you hear? Fess up!', but I'm not into threatening kids. She wasn't your typical chatty girl. Instead she spent her time examining the car, us, and the contents of her enormous backpack.

4:51 pm

Cross Creek Mall's food court fans out into a circle, with the seating in the center and the various food stores encompassing the circle. Today people packed it out. The mall usually attracted a large crowd, but it seemed especially so today. Cross Creek is a four story mall with the parking garage underground. The food court is located on the top floor, allowing bright sunshine to filter through several skylights into the space.

Five wide arches opened out into the mall, and beside one of these sat the main security office. I discreetly pointed it out to Sam as we scanned the court. There were small hubs on each floor and in the garage, but this would be where the guards would have to punch the clock.

"Nate should be here any moment," I said to Sam.

Andrea still hadn't said much, except to adamantly refuse our offers to help her carry her pack, which she insisted on bringing with her. She must have some pretty strong arms because that pack looked heavy. She came closer and ducked her head down close, causing us to lean in to hear.

"Before we do anything, I gotta go to the restroom. I'll be right back," She whispered and started to go. She called over her shoulder, "Oh and by the way, I *don't* need daycare."

"I knew it! This whole thing is compromised!" I said as Sam and I tried to grab her. "I need to talk to her, find out what she knows." But she easily sprinted around people and didn't stop until she slipped into the bathroom door.

While we waited, we watched the comings and goings of the guards. Nate joined us and we filled him in.

"The tall balding guy. I'm pretty sure that's him. I only saw an old photo from years ago but it tracks." Sam said.

We watched him answer his cell phone. He waved another guard over to the office and then headed out into the mall.

"We can't lose him," Nate said, brilliantly pointing out the obvious.

"What's taking her so long? Sam, follow him. I'll join you as soon as I have a chat with our little girl." Sam hurried off.

Nate and I re-positioned ourselves as close to the women's door as we could without raising suspicion. About five minutes later an elderly woman tapped me on the shoulder.

"Young man? What's your name?"

With some reservation I said, "Michael."

"Good then I have you right. She said I would find you here. Your daughter gave me this to give you." She pressed a tightly folded note into my hand. "She told me it would explain everything. But I want you to know that she's such a dear

girl to think of a way to save you all those steps after you have been so ill. I made sure that she had a security guard escort her down to that store you wanted so badly to take her to. But now you can just rest here and she'll be right back. I do hope that this time the cancer doesn't return." She took my hand, briefly prayed, then gave me a tearful hug and left.

Laughing hysterically, Nate motioned toward a bench. "Wow! Bro I had no idea. You do look sick. Let me help you sit down."

Ignoring him, I ripped open the note: *I'm safe and yes you can trust me. Meet me at the service hallway beside Punk n' Roses @ 15:00. I'll have Howard there for you. Trust me, I'll get him there and he won't suspect a thing. Just be there and DON'T be late!*

-Andi

Not much shocks me in my line of work. Gotta say this did.

An untrained civilian is a massive headache in any line of military work. But an untrained civilian, who isn't even tall enough to stand next to Mickey to get on a big people ride at Disney, presents a whole different situation - a much more terrifying situation. It's like adding meat to the tiger den. You can only hope the tigers have been recently fed.

My hope was that Andrea was just playing a prank, and that we would find her innocently shopping. I really didn't want to think about the possibilities of a young girl alone in a large mall, let alone trying to contact a former agent whose loyalties could be considered shaky at best. I knew there were cameras everywhere so Nate and I went as fast as we could without trying to arouse any suspicion.

According to the directory, Punk n' Roses was two floors down located along the far end, right next to the service hallway and fire exit. My cell was having reception trouble and we were almost there when I finally got through to Sam.

"Yeah Mike."

"We have a serious problem. I'm scrapping the mission. Where are you?"

"Second Floor. Near a store called Punk-"

"I see you."

I hung up and motioned Nate ahead as I veered to where Sam was watching from a bench. I eagerly reached for his hand.

"Chuck? Chuck Finley?" He stood as I slapped him on the back.

"Miles?" Sam accepted our impromptu meeting with an even more enthusiastic slap on my back. "Man it's been a long time."

We sat down pretending to catch up. "So, how are you Chuck?" I scanned the area. This end of the mall seemed much less populated. There were several vacant storefronts scattered amongst a few of the less popular stores. Two teenagers, decked out in black, including hair and make-up, sauntered into Punk n' Roses five doors down. Its large windows were completely blacked out, and a black light showcased a variety of t-shirts that featured glowing skulls and thorny roses in various designs.

"Doing good. Hey have you seen our buddy Howard recently?" Sam casually asked.

"Not for a while. But I heard he has a kid now. I may even have a picture." I said and pulled out my wallet, discreetly holding the note from Andrea so he could read it.

"Right. Last I heard he just went into the service but he didn't forget his kid. Good man." Sam nodded his head.

We stood and walked toward the service hallway all the while chatting it up. Sam's hand was poised, ready to reach for the gun he had concealed under his jacket. He knew that with the addition of Andrea in the mix things could get ugly.

Sam lowered his voice. "Wait till you see Andrea. I didn't recognize her. She's something else."

We entered a long hallway that turned a corner and went out of sight of the main mall. As soon as we cleared the corner, I felt my heart constrict. Ahead of us on the floor in front of the door leading to the stairwell, was a large black bag.

"He's got her!" I said.

We came into the stairwell just in time to hear Andrea scream from below. Both guns out, we flew down two flights of stairs. I caught sight of Wright's back and jumped the rail just as Nate bounded into the stairwell from below. Wright stopped dead waving his gun at Andrea, as he held her neck tight in his other arm.

No wonder Sam had said he didn't recognize her. This was not the pretty and pink girl of the restaurant. Andrea was dressed in black jeans, t-shirt, hiking boots, and her hair was stuffed under a ball cap. She had to be roasting underneath the oversized, long black coat she wore.

"Let me leave. Now! Or I'll kill her," Wright demanded, emphasizing his meaning by putting the pistol next to her temple. Andrea's eyes grew large. His movements were erratic and jerky. I noticed the pupils in his eyes, the sag of his skin. He was definitely on something.

"Howard, just let us have the girl and you can go," I reasoned.

"No. Only once I get to the garage." He started to edge down the steps toward Nate.

"Look we don't want to hurt you. This is a misunderstanding. I just wanted to ask you some questions. But now let's just forget the whole thing. Ok?" I felt Sam shift a step down closer to me; saw Nate tense. I stuck my hand in my pocket.

"That's why you were following me?" He motioned his gun toward Sam. "And the whole thing with this girl was just an accident too right? You're trying to kill me." The gun shakily came back to rest on her face.

I slowly pulled out the picture from my pocket. "I think we could help each other. We may be in the same situation. Jason Bly ring a bell?" I showed him the picture. It did exactly what I'd hoped for. He turned surprised, pointing the gun straight at me. Suddenly, Andrea sagged against him causing his grip to loosen.

In a flash, I had his gun hand locked under my arm as Sam bounded around me. The gun went off into the wall. He tried to turn but I wrestled it from him.

Now that she was loose, Andrea fell down and instantly pulled something from a strap on her thigh. A sharp blade flashed as she jammed a knife into his foot. It drew blood and Wright gasped.

Nate grabbed her and got out of the way. I added an appropriately placed kick to the groin. But Howard, true to his training, pushed the pain aside. With lightening speed, he side-armed Sam, jumped around Nate, and sprinted down and out into the garage, leaving only a small bit of blood behind on the step.

Sam made to follow, and believe me I wanted to, but I held him back. "Let him go. We've got the kid and we need to get out of here now."

"But we can get him! You didn't get a chance to explain. He probably thinks you work for Bly!" Nate exclaimed.

Andrea, breathing heavily, rubbed her neck. I looked at her and picked up the knife – Swiss army – this girl was prepared. I noticed Andrea begin to shake.

"Nate, get her out of here. Take her in your car and meet back at my place."

"Wait! I need my bag." Her voice was surprisingly strong after such an ordeal.

"No. You've caused enough trouble. Get her out of here and make sure to take your time getting there in case you're followed."

"I wasn't born yesterday," Nate said.

Andrea's face fell when she realized how angry I really was at her. "Please just let me get my bag." Her eyes begged. I could see the wheels turning in her head. "You don't want to leave any evidence of what went on here," She pleaded. Smart kid.

"I'll get the bag," Sam said and sprinted back up the stairs. I motioned to Nate and they left.

9:22 pm

"She's got quite the set up in here." Sam said, pulling out a GPS from Andrea's bag.

After Sam had called Veronica letting her know he'd bring Andrea back later, I had doubled and tripled our route until I was sure we were safe. Now we were almost back to my place. "What's in there?"

"You name it. Batteries, flashlight-" He held each one up as he dug around. "First aid kit, matches, power bars, tin foil?" Sam shook his head. "A decoder book, Lara Croft video games. That must be where she gets her ideas from, spends all her time trying to be her."

"Figures she's a video game junkie," I said. I pulled in and parked the car next to Nate's. I started to get out when Sam pulled me back. I could tell he had something on his mind.

"Look, from what I can gather this kid has been ignored all her life. Maybe video games are all she has. She was just trying to help."

"She compromised the whole mission and almost got herself killed. Not much help."

Sam let go and we got out. He paused at the stairs. "All I'm saying is to go easy on her."

"Life isn't easy Sam. You know that." Of all people, I could attest to that. After all the hell I'd endured from my Dad, surely some little rich kid could figure that out too.

Nate and Andrea were sitting on the floor with some empty yogurt containers between them. Andrea jumped up when we entered.

I crossed my arms and stared her down like I was interrogating a terrorist. "Why didn't you just talk to us? If you'd heard the plan, you should have told me."

Nate stood and put a protective hand on her shoulder. He glared back at me.

"She thought she could help and she-" Nate started to answer.

"You wouldn't have listened. I'm just a stupid kid to you," Andrea interrupted.

I could see the tears behind her eyes, how she was trying to hold them back. They stirred a memory inside me.

"Don't worry Andrea. You're not the only one. He thinks I'm stupid and never listens to me either."

Nate's words surprised me. They stung. Dad had been notorious for never listening and he treated all of us, including Mom, like we were stupid.

I relaxed my stance. "I'm trying to get her to understand that what she did was dangerous and she could have been killed."

"I know and I'm sorry." She seemed to deflate.

"In all fairness her drop move was very impressive," Sam interjected. He'd helped himself to a yogurt too.

I shook my head.

"And she did do some great intel," Nate proudly added. "She snatched this from Howard." He handed a folded piece of newspaper to me.

I took it. Inside it contained a crossword puzzle with the answers already filled in. I recognized the technique - puzzles were one of the hidden ways agents got their instructions.

"Impressive," I said, and I meant it. This was a valuable clue.

Andrea relaxed and smiled.

"But that's not all," Nate continued. "While we were driving around she solved it." He pointed to the writing on the bottom. It read, *Thursday, 8 pm Seaside*. I walked over to the counter and grabbed a pen, quickly checking her work. She was right.

"Very impressive." I handed the puzzle to Sam. "Looks like we'll be checking into this tomorrow."

"There's three Seasides I can think of," Sam said.

"Actually four," Andrea added. She'd grabbed her GPS from her backpack and was diligently searching.

"How old are you?" Sam asked.

"I'm twelve. But I'm a junior if you must know." She grinned.

"Genius," Nate chimed in. "She told me how to make my car run better."

Figures. "Well try to remember that you're still twelve and don't need to deal with this kind of stuff." I leveled a look at her. What I wouldn't give to be young and carefree. "Try to remember that?" She nodded and gave me a hug. I seriously hoped she understood. I handed Sam her bag and she reluctantly followed him down to the car.

Nate grabbed his keys and headed for the door.

"Wait," I called. I went to a shelf and grabbed a cell phone from the stash I kept there. "I never thought you were stupid. To be honest I just tried to keep Dad away from you." I handed him the phone. "Call when you need me. I promise I'll listen."

Shocked, Nate took the phone.
"Thanks." He turned and left.

11:02 pm

After grabbing a yogurt from my now completely empty fridge, I positioned my guns and fell into an exhausted sleep.

1:30 am

My cell phone brought me awake.

"Mikey I'm outside. Could ya let me in?" Sam asked.

I stretched my weary body and let him in. Sam held two large Italian Garden bags. The smell of breadsticks and fresh pasta filled the room. My stomach growled.

"Grabbed some stuff to go since I knew we hadn't eaten any real food." Sam plunked the bags down on the counter in the kitchen and started to unload. I had to admit being woken up for food that smelled this good was worth the sacrifice.

He served up the rigatoni, and I'd just taken a bite of a breadstick when my cell rang.

"Yeah Mom." I swallowed quickly.

"Michael, Fiona and I just got back and my place has been wrecked and everything's a mess." Mom started to cry.

"Ok I'm on my way. Put Fi on." I heard the phone switch hands.

"Get her out of there. Sam and I will call once we've secured it." I hung up and pulled on my clothes, all the while explaining to Sam. He longingly gazed at the food but quickly threw it all in the fridge.

1:41 am

As we jumped in my car, it occurred to me that if Nate had asked me, 'what was the one thing I missed when I left behind my civilian life?' I'd have said, without a single moment's hesitation, sleep. Safe, peaceful sleep. I started the car and headed out into just another typical day.