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Getting Mad, Getting Even

Written by Annie Sanders

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getting mad, getting even

Annie Sanders



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Chapter One

'Right, I see. I understand completely, Mrs Cooper-Adams. It has to be perfect. Well, we'll need a sample to analyse for the closest possible match.' Pulling a pencil from the pot in front of her, Georgie tucked the phone under her chin and started to note down the details in the planner in front of her on the desk. The weak autumn sunshine was streaming through the windows, making the whole room glow like the inside of a jewellery box but the voice in her ear was unhappy and tense.

'… it's a matter of life and death, you do understand that?'

'Of course I do,' Georgie soothed. 'It's a delicate operation, naturally, but here at the agency we've dealt with this kind of … er, emergency before, many times. Our specialists are the best. Now obviously they do have a waiting list for this kind of procedure, but given how urgent this is, I think we can get André an appointment today.'

The sigh of relief from the other end of the phone was almost as much of a reward as the hefty fee would be. 'But can you send someone straightaway?' Mrs C-A pressed. 'I want to be here with him when you take him away. Will he have to stay in overnight?'

Georgie tried hard to keep a straight face. 'Why don't you pack an overnight bag for him, just in case. Now,

someone will be with you within …' a quick scan of Flick's schedule on the wall-planner showed she'd soon be finished with the appointment in Balham, so if Georgie diverted her to Chelsea and put the later clients on hold, it would just be possible, '… forty minutes. Has André eaten this morning? No? Probably just as well. Now, let me double-check the details.' Georgie looked back at the notes she'd just taken, then clicked on the relevant details on the computer screen.

'André is four and a half now, I see. How time flies. Is he his natural colour at the moment? Excellent. So – he's a pedigree Bichon Frisé, and the colour you're looking for is to match the accessories for your Armani outfit.' Georgie shook her head. Had all those years of education led her to this? She bit the inside of her cheek so it didn't sound as if she was about to snort with laughter. 'Well, if you could leave your shoes and handbag out, we'll do our best to get an exact match. Lovely. We'll keep you informed every step of the way. And we'll certainly have him ready for your party.'

Once she'd reassured Mrs C-A again, Georgie hung up with a sigh, rubbing her eyes. It was only eleven o'clock and already she'd dealt with a complaint about a babysitter who had used the family computer to access bebo and an emergency with a bath that had overflowed through a ceiling. She speed-dialled Flick's mobile. Seemingly from nowhere, a cup of coffee had appeared at her elbow, with a couple of those gorgeous German cinnamon biscuits balanced on the saucer. Somehow, once again, their trusty Girl Friday, Joanna, had discreetly anticipated just what was wanted. Georgie mouthed her thanks and took a grateful sip while she waited for Flick to answer.

Flick was on one of their regular appointments – Genevieve McKinnon, pampered wife of an unreconstructed but very wealthy City lawyer, who wanted to create the illusion (despite living in Balham) that she was an accomplished rural Châtelaine as a means of justifying her arduous schedule of shopping and girlie lunches now that their twins were away at school. She'd been one of Domestic Angels' first clients. For the last few years, since Flick and Georgie had set up the agency, and apart from when the McKinnons were on holiday in St Barts or skiing in Verbier, they'd swooped in twice a week, filled the freezer with home-cooking, done the flowers, and arranged artful baskets of lavender-scented ironing around the place, all to complete the artifice. So far, Genevieve's husband seemed quite happy in the belief that his wife spent her days toiling to make a perfect home for them all. He was happy. She was happy. And Flick and Georgie were more than happy with the retainer she paid.

'Yup?' Flick sounded her usual brisk self. Georgie could picture her, towering and efficient in her stonewashed jeans and T-shirt, in the McKinnon's pristine kitchen, packing neatly labelled caterers' dishes into the huge American fridge. Cleaning up the kitchen was never an issue, except on a Monday, because Mr City-Banker McKinnon would insist on a breakfast cooked by his loving wife on a Sunday morning and the place would be splattered with grease. Fortunately, frying sausages was within her capabilities. Apart from that, she only ever used the microwave.

'Hi, how's it going?' It sounded as if Flick was taking the basket of neatly folded white towels upstairs to the marble bathrooms – a job Georgie had done many times. Somehow they'd fallen into a routine of alternating office

days with action days so they both knew the routines for all of the clients.

'Fine, nearly done here. I've just got to muddy up her gardening boots and leave them by the back door. The landscapers have finished and the planters look tremendous. We must use them again. Put them in the master file, will you?'

'Will do.' Georgie stuck a fluorescent note in the diary to remind herself. 'Bit of a change of plan. I've just had Mrs Cooper-Adams on.'

She could hear a groan as Flick recalled the last dye job they'd had done on André. 'What is it this time? Vermilion and puce? Urgent as usual, I suppose?'

'But of course. She's leaving her outfit for you to match. Have you got the dye swatches?'

'No. They're in the desk drawer. Have I got time to call back at the office? I've got another job to squeeze in.'

'Not really. I said you could be there in …' Georgie checked her watch. 'About half an hour from now.'

'Oh God!' Flick tutted. 'She's so fussy too. What shall I do … ? Aha! I know. I've got the Kelly Hoppen paint samples for the Selbys' guest bedroom for this afternoon. I can match him up with those.'

'Fantastic! I've booked him into the usual place.'

'"Doggie Style"? Yuck. Vile name. What *would* Mrs C-A say if she knew?'

Georgie laughed. 'Well, that's just one of the many secrets of our success.'

'That and the fact that we've absolutely no shame. Hang on. I'm just putting the alarm on.'

Georgie could hear Flick rapidly tap the code in, and the awful beeping sound as she made her way to the door.

'Phew, that's better!' she sighed as she pulled the door closed. 'I'll call you if there are any problems, but I'll skip lunch so I should be able to get to the Selbys' on time.'

'Flick, you are a star!'

'You know it!'

'Listen, I meant to ask, do you fancy coming round for supper on Friday?' Georgie asked casually. She could hear Flick start the engine of the discreet and well-stocked 4 x 4, perfectly camouflaged for the mean streets of south-west London, but Flick's answer, before she pulled away, made it clear she'd rumbled her. 'If it's just supper, I'd love to. But if this is another attempt to set me up with a bloke, forget it. It almost took me a change of mobile number to shake off the last one!'

'OK OK, point taken,' Georgie reassured her. 'It'll just be us, once I've got Libby to bed.'

'In that case, I'd be delighted. Eight o'clock OK?'

Georgie peeled off another Post-it note and started to write. 'Perfect! It's a date. See you later.' Georgie stuck the note carefully in her diary. It read, 'Tell Ed to cancel Simon'.

Little André despatched for a respray, and paint samples delivered to Ellerton Road, Flick eased into the parking space right outside number thirty-four. This had to be the only good thing about Mrs Halliman: it was usually possible to park outside her house. But then, why *would* anyone want to park on this street, with its unremarkable row of terraced houses on one side, two a penny in this part of south London, interspersed occasionally with the odd flat-roofed block, filling gaps where wartime bombs had fallen and left holes like missing teeth. Opposite was

a scrappy piece of land, grandly called a park according to the graffitied council sign but, to all intents, a canine toilet. Remarkably, a few trees pushed their way through the dry and barren grass, strewn with litter and neglect.

Flick sighed and clambered out of the car, wrapping her coat about her against the wind and reaching back inside for her shoulder bag. Mrs Halliman had been one of the first clients to sign up to the all-service agency, responding to the ad they took out in the local paper four years ago, and they'd been too insecure to turn her away, even though the smell of her should have been a warning. Two of their cleaning teams had flatly refused to spring-clean her house and Flick and Georgie had had to don Marigolds and go in, pegs on noses, like a SWAT team. But only once. Now they did very little for her except supply plumbers and do the regular cat feed whenever Mrs Halliman went on her annual bus tour to Spain. It never ceased to amaze Flick how their client list covered such a motley crew. It spanned the full social spectrum, from the fat-bonus crowd with their personal trainers and personalised number plates, to the likes of Mrs H. who'd lived in this part of London for ever and who'd seen new money ramping up the property market.

Digging out the key – numbered, never named – from her pocket, Flick carefully pushed it into the lock, then nearly jumped out of her skin as Mrs Halliman's ginger cat wrapped itself round her leg, meowing flirtatiously.'You can bugger off,' Flick shook her leg vigorously. 'Scoot, flea-ridden mog!' The cat yelped, but slithered ahead of her through the front door as it opened.

Flick was a cat woman, but this was a feline too far. It was the smell that made Flick want to gag every time. It

was hard to describe as an olfactory experience. A mixture of cat urine, food and stale air. How could any human being tolerate it? Didn't the woman *notice*? 'So where's your buggery food, you skanky thing,' she purred at the ginger cat, who was meowing fervently now, and eased her way through the narrow hallway, stacked with newspapers and boxes. Tripping over the wheel of a bicycle hidden behind a long coat, Flick was propelled headlong into the kitchen, kicking the cat bowl with staggering accuracy under the sink. The sink itself was full of filthy plates, with more piled up on the drainer. It seemed more likely that Mrs Halliman had died than gone on holiday.

'Oh God! You bloody owe me one, Georgie.' Flick crouched down and retrieved the bowl. 'You, my girl, are doing this next time.'

Thankfully the cat food was the dry type – opening a can of rank-smelling meat in this revolting kitchen would have been just too much – and she shook some into the bowl, trying not to breathe. The cat darted forward and was eating it before she could pull the box away. 'Don't say thank you, will you? Now, where's the rodent?'

Flick gently pushed open the utility-room door off the kitchen, but 'utility' had nothing to do with it. Dump was nearer the mark. Unwashed laundry and sheets were shoved into a basket, carrier bags with things Flick dared not imagine hung from the ceiling, and there were jars with mouldy contents on shelves above a rusting freezer. Perched on top of this carnage was a small cage, a box of pegs balanced on top of that.

'Cooee.' Flick peered inside, trying to make out the shape of a hamster in amongst the shredded bedding. Nothing stirred.

Flick tried to see into the bedding box, but saw nothing except a pile of shredded paper. Checking the cat was still engrossed in its dinner behind her, she carefully opened the cage and tentatively shook the box. Nope, there was definitely nothing there.

Flick paused for a moment. Hamsters did not just disappear. The cat, replete now, came and wound itself around her ankle again. 'Where is it?' she asked, hearing the concern in her voice, and, feeling ridiculous, she peered behind the cage. To see the door of the cage open.

'Oh fuck, fuckity fuck,' she gasped and turned the cage around as if it would solve the problem. Frantic now, Flick started to push boxes out of the way, moving boots, wellies and bags full of more bags and coats – or were they rags? – that had been left on the floor so long they'd grown stiff and crusty and were covered in a layer of dirt. She pulled them aside with one hand, not sure what was worse, the muck or the prospect of having to pick up a furry rodent if she found it.

There was nothing there of course, dead or alive, and, after looking along a shelf filled to bowing with paint cans and flower pots, Flick made her way at speed back into the kitchen, peeping into the box of cornflakes she found on the sideboard and lifting the bucket she found upright in the corner.

The cat joined her, licking his lips. 'Oh God, you haven't, have you?' Flick desperately delved into her pocket for her phone and held down '1' on the speed-dial.

'Domestic Angels,' Joanna answered crisply.

Flick gulped. 'Houston, we have a problem.'

After half an hour and a sensible let's-not-panic call from Joanna, Flick gave up. There was clearly no hamster

in the house, dead or alive. Figuring that something with legs that short was unlikely to have been able to tackle the stairs, she had restricted her search to the ground floor, which was a good thing because the sight of depraved devastation that met her when she pushed open the living-room door, had persuaded her that Mrs Halliman was going to be removed from their books the second she set foot back on British soil.

'I think there were chairs under there somewhere, but there was so much junk it was hard to tell,' Flick ranted, back at the office, as she peeled off her jacket and shoved it into a carrier bag. 'That's got to go in the wash. I swear I'm never going to get the smell out of it.' She sniffed her hands. 'Can I rub Flash straight into them?'

Georgie smiled. 'Might not be a great idea.'

'But what about the hamster?' Joanna asked, deep concern in her voice.

'Well, I, for one, am not going back to have a look.' Flick picked up the pile of post on her desk. 'What the hell are we going to do?' She pulled off her boots and wiggled her toes to ease them, 'Mrs H. will go ape.'

The phone jangled again and Georgie reached for it. 'I think I know why—' she said as she picked it up. 'Domestic Angels?'

'Well, I'm glad you do,' Flick mumbled. She was fed up now. The ridiculous set-up with the dyed dog this morning had been bad enough, but she hadn't slept well, and the whole day had been destined to be a catastrophe before she started, capped off by John cancelling on her, again, via text.

She sighed and padded over to the kettle. The office, a

converted corner shop, had seemed so palatial when they'd moved here from their headquarters in Georgie's spare room, but it now seemed cramped with the three of them in it and she felt like the Big Friendly Giant. Perhaps she was the only one who felt it. Joanna, although stocky, was small, while Georgie was a shrimp. Looking across the office at her dark curls and slim figure, Flick asked herself how she made a habit of having friends who made her feel Amazonian. She glanced at her own reflection in the mirror above the sink. Was the red lipstick too much? She'd read somewhere that dark eye make-up and red lips suited blondes, but had she overdone it? She was never quite sure. Another downside of not having a regular bloke to hint you were verging on the tarty.

Braced now with a steaming cup of coffee, she knuckled down to her messages, including a reply to John that it didn't matter, she was busy anyway. Didn't texting make lying so much easier? Face saved. No desperate clinging tone she wouldn't be able to keep out of her voice if she'd had to call. The three of them plodded on with work as darkness fell outside, taking calls, sending out invoices and chasing up tradesmen who hadn't turned up to jobs when they said they would, until Joanna shrugged on her coat and declared it a day.

'See you tomorrow,' Georgie called distractedly, as she finished whatever she was doing on the computer, and glanced at her watch. 'I'd better shove off too. Libby's at a party and I've got to get to the shops before I pick her up.' She pushed back her chair and stood up, closing her desk drawer.

The idea of rushing here and there to collect children, and having her time tied up appalled Flick, but she wasn't

too chuffed with the prospect of an evening alone ahead of her either, and she shoved away a brief feeling of despondency. 'You coming?' Georgie asked, wrapping her coat around her. It did nothing for her.

'Nah. I'll have a butchers on eBay to see if there are any nice new shoes going cheap. Though there's not much competition with my shoe size, except from the odd transvestite.'

'Flick,' Georgie gave her the admonishing look Flick had seen her give her daughter when she ran her fingers over a plate to soak up the last bits of gravy. 'Stop talking yourself down.'

'What's to talk up?' Flick hoped her attempt to sound witty and up-beat would be a good cover-up.

'Mmmm.' Georgie came and rubbed her hand over Flick's shoulder. 'See ya in the morning, mate. I've got to stop off at the Bridges' first thing to see in that new painter.' She picked up her bag and was heading for the door when it burst open and in the doorway stood a tall man with dark, wet hair. Flick looked at the windows to see if it was raining. It wasn't. He was dressed in a dinner suit, his shirt white and stark against his tanned skin, and it was open at the neck. In his hand he was holding a bow tie.

'Sorry to bother you,' he said breathlessly. 'It says on the door "We'll take care of it". I assume you mean domestic-type things.' He scratched his head. 'But I wondered how you were with bow ties. I can't get the sodding thing done up and I'm due at a dinner in the City in …' He looked at his watch. 'Half an hour.'

Flick looked over at Georgie, who had already put her bag back down. 'I haven't got a clue. Your department, I think?'