

SciFi Mystery Thriller:

A Space World Novel

Dire Contact

No Brainer Trilogy - Book 1

JC SPARK

For my wife who made this dreame come true.

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DIRE CONTACT

No Brainer Trilogy - Book 1

SciFi Mystery Thriller

A Space World Novel

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Space.

The first memory I have.

The experience of space around me, space everywhere
outside and inside me - everything was space.

Wide. Open. Infinite.

But I didn't recognize it.

I only existed.

Until I realized that.

And then I fell, followed by a shadow.

Time.

I felt the first moment that passed.

Something was before it that is no more.

Dead, unreachable.

Everything passes.

I didn't understand what that meant, only that I wasn't passing.

Nor did something else, something that had torn me into this abyss,

into eternal death.

It fell and swept me away, tore infinity apart.

And all that remained was the death that surrounded me but could

never be mine.

But perhaps that of my enemy.

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2006, August 28th, Monday, Concord, 20:55

What do you do when a stranger disintegrates right in front of you? eleven-year-old Steve, to whom this had just happened, asked himself. And whether it made any difference that it had been a stranger. *It should—or shouldn't it?*

10 minutes earlier:

Steve ducked behind a half-withered hedge and listened to the sounds the other boys made in the evening silence as they sought a hiding place to smoke after handing out cigarettes. No one seemed to notice that he was missing. Perhaps not wise, as the new kid at school he should have stuck with them. But they were all two years or more older than him and talked about things he wasn't interested in.

Steve was about to stand up when the sound of footsteps on the dry dirt path made him pause. He peered through the sparse foliage and saw an older man coming up the path with slightly unsteady steps. He was wearing a rather old-fashioned suit and as he passed Steve, he smelled of pipe tobacco.

Steve wondered if this was a professor he didn't know yet and what he taught. And what was he doing at this time of night on the path that led between fields to a small wood at

at the edge of the school grounds?

There was something about the way the man was moving that made Steve curious. Although slow, the walk was very purposeful. But what could the destination be? As far as Steve knew, there were only more hedges and fields in that direction, certainly nothing that an older gentleman dressed like that would be interested in at this time of day. Steve imagined secret meetings or an unknown species to be observed.

He got up quietly and followed the man. When he had left the hedges behind him, he stopped abruptly and turned to face Steve. But before he could react, he noticed that the man wasn't looking at him at all, but up and over him. Not directly into the sky, more like he was trying to see something above Steve.

Steve put his head back and stared upwards - but there was nothing but the night sky. When he looked back up at the man, he opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Then he grimaced and grabbed his head as if he was in pain, dropping a bunch of keys in the process. Reflexively, Steve bent down, picked it up and when he stood up again the man had disappeared.

But there was something else, right before he stopped

seeing him, Steve had seen how ...

He blinked, his eyes felt like he'd been looking at the sun for too long, dry and burning. Whatever he had seen was gone and a sharp pain spread through his head. No matter how hard he tried despite the headache, he couldn't bring the image back to mind.

Carefully, he turned his head and looked around, but in the darkness of the late evening, he could see no more than before: the heat-dried sandy ground of the country lane beneath his feet, the surrounding fields, some hedgerows a little way off and, still further away, the outline of the walls that surrounded the grounds of St. Paul's School.

He knelt down on the still warm ground and took a closer look at the spot where the older man had just been standing. There was nothing there but a few withered blades of grass and small stones on the path. And the smell of tobacco still lingering in the air. Steve ran his hand over his eyes and felt that stabbing pain in his head again. Ever since he had seen ... His memory felt unusually hazy, seemed to be slipping away from him.

"Are you praying or are you going to puke?"

A rough push on the back of his neck made him jump up and wheel around to his classmates. Far too jerky, he felt

dizzy and slightly nauseous, their giggling made him clutch the bunch of keys even tighter. He tried to put what he had experienced into words.

"I saw a man and then he nuked himself."

The giggles turned to laughter and Steve felt his face grow hot. He knew it sounded stupid.

"Sure, you're an X-Men, you're so super smart and special anyway."

The boy was almost a head taller than Steve and smelled unpleasantly of cigarette smoke. And he was standing much closer to him than Steve would have liked. Steve took a step back and bumped into one of the others, who pushed him away.

"Find someone else to cuddle with."

"I don't want to cuddle with you." Steve backed further away.

"Oh right, guess I'm not good enough for you."

A fist hit Steve in the back and he cried out. Someone shoved him towards one of the others and that one towards the next. Steve heard footsteps coming closer and someone shouting to the newcomers, "Weed thinks he's an X-Men."

The next shove sent him to the ground, his glasses flew off his nose and he flung his arms over his head. But no more

shoves or punches followed, he heard a brief scuffle, then a new voice said, "Obviously he's not one" Again everyone laughed, but it sounded less threatening than before. Someone hissed, "Mr. Dean's coming," and Steve heard everyone scurry away. He carefully took his arms away from his head and looked up.

He vaguely saw a hand reaching out towards him and grabbed it. A boy pulled him up and grinned at him as he handed him his glasses. "What was that about?"

Steve looked at the other. Now he remembered, it was Cain. He had memorized the name, like his twin brother Abel. It was not easy to forget, even if the two were not very similar. "I just told them I saw a man who'd been nuked."

"Like the professor?"

"What kind of professor? It was like one moment he was there and the next he wasn't."

"You know that kind of thing only happens in movies, not in real life?"

"But it happened. I have his keys - he dropped them, and when I picked them up to give them back, he nuked himself."

"Did he nuke himself or was it someone else? It doesn't matter, it can't happen in real life."

"It can, but you won't understand."

"Hey, I'm not stupid."

"I didn't say that, just that you won't understand it, just like I don't understand sports."

"What is there to understand about sports?" Cain grinned.

"But whatever happened, you should tell a teacher."

Steve hesitated for a moment before nodding. "Okay."

Cain patted the sand off Steve's sweater, then they walked back towards the school grounds in silence. Steve looked furtively over at Cain.

Why is he being so nice to me? Does he think I'm crazy or does he care what I say?

Steve understood that he did care about the answer to that. It would be nice to have a friend, someone he could talk to, figure things out, solve puzzles, someone who - liked him.

Steve shivered despite the warm summer night, his steps slowing as he walked even closer to Cain. Something about Cain made him feel less alone, as if he could protect him from more than his classmates. Steve didn't believe in the supernatural or premonitions, but he couldn't shake the fear. Something had happened, something icy had touched him, and now he felt like a shadow was following him. There was something that felt lonely, cold - and very angry.

Don't go crazy, there are no ghosts or anything like that,

they're all just stories. There is a reasonable explanation for it, some force caused it. But what could it be that so easily atomizes a person?

What would have happened if I had walked a meter further, if I had been standing where the man disappeared? Would I be dead now? Or something else entirely?

Steve's head was pounding, and a cold sweat was beading on his forehead. And yet something else was bothering him. "Cain, what are X-men?"

2029, April 15th, Sunday, Boston

The smell of fresh almond macaroons drifted into the living room from the small but well-equipped kitchen, mixed with a slightly bitter undertone. This was rather unusual, but today a message on his Mac had distracted Dr. Steve Floros, the originator of both the delicious scent and its embarrassing undertone, too much.

Physics could be exciting - at least it had kept Steve energized for 23 years. In his search for an answer to the question that had haunted him since that day in the summer so many years ago, he had seen things that seemed impossible. And despite the devastating consequences for

his life, he could not give up. He believed in one thing like other people believed in God: in physics and a physical explanation for everything. And that the answer would finally give him the chance to lead a life beyond this search.

The alternative would be devastating. If he wasn't fired, his future would be filled with theories, conferences, calculations of things that, if he was honest, didn't interest him much. His only focus was to find an answer to the question: how someone could dissolve into his component parts and how could Steve prove that such a thing was possible. His entire life since he was twelve years old had been focused on this, every education, every journey, every expense, every free hour of his time.

And today was a day when he hoped to make one important step closer to solving the mystery. Mac, his ubiquitous laptop, and assistant replacement had found a lot of promising reports during a routine scan of the media in the Boston area. So many, in fact, that Steve received a message from Mac suggesting an on-site check.

One look at the map was enough to turn "promising" into "exciting" for Steve - all the reports during the last few days had come from Concord. And not only did he know Concord well, but his best friend also lived there. Steve couldn't

imagine anyone better, not just because he was his only friend and Steve could call him on a Sunday afternoon to send him on a hunt for something he didn't want to explain.

His stomach growled and Steve looked at his watch. The aroma from the kitchen was tantalizing despite the mishap, but it would only be light for another two hours or so. What if he went to Concord himself? Cain would certainly be happy about the macarons and about the visit - but he would persuade Steve to join him for a cozy Sunday evening, a temptation he could only avoid by staying at home. Steve sighed and reached for the phone. Once again, he postponed dinner today, and as much as he would have liked to go to Cain's, this could be a hot lead.

2029, April 15th, Sunday, Concord

Cain Raptis rolled his eyes as "Crazy" by Gnarl's Barkley interrupted a dramatic scene. He wiped his crumb-covered hands on his jeans and reached for his phone without taking his eyes off the screen. "Blow anything up today?"

"Discovered a scientific sensation today?"

He heard Steve laugh. "No, not quite yet but that's exactly why I'm calling - I need you for an experiment."

Cain pulled himself up on his comfy sofa and sat up straighter. That sounded a little worrying, but knowing Steve, it could mean a lot of things, so why assume the worst? "Hm, today is Sunday and you're calling from home. Let me guess: What's in the kitchen? Either broken or you need a guinea pig for a new specialty a la Steve? *Please let it be something like that* - but today was not his lucky day.

"Up until an hour ago, you would have guessed correctly, and the answer would have been the macaroons you like so much, with an add-on, but then a message came from Mac and the macaroons burned. It's something exciting - and it's in Concord."

"What's exciting in Concord - apart from me?"

"Magnetic field interference! Both interference from magnetic fields and interference caused by magnetic fields."

Steve was so in nerd mode that he didn't even acknowledge Cain's comment. And then to mention the macaroons - nasty, now he had the smell in his nose. It would be nice if it was about something normal for a change, something they could joke about and forget about over a good movie. But with Steve ... Cain tried to concentrate. "I see, and why do you need me? You know I can fix almost anything, or at least make it work temporarily. But these

genius skills aren't what you want from me, are they?"

"Very true, although I do appreciate them - but today I need you to take me on something like a joyride through Concord."

Cain blinked in irritation. "Where to?"

"Can't tell you, just go for it, what else do you mean by a joyride? Come on, tear yourself away from your Crowley and take a few laps with me."

Blimey, the show was still on. "Don't blaspheme or I'll have to mention that you can recognize Good Omens over the phone by the music." Cain switched off the player.

"I know you well. Call me when you're out and about ... and take your CB radio with you."

"My CB radios? What kind of weird experiment is this?" Cain waited a moment, but Steve had hung up. Driving around town for Steve with his radio? Cain didn't have a good feeling about this. Steve sounded excited in exactly the way he did when he was about to chase after one of his obsessions. And getting nowhere.

What if I just stay here comfortably? He didn't even wait for me to say yes. As usual. Not that I don't want to help him, but it's so frustrating to watch. Every time he gets so excited and thinks he's finally going to find his answer.

Sighing, Cain stood up, looked down at his crumpled clothes, said goodbye to the rest of his pizza with a sad look and brushed his hair back. He didn't have to drive far and would be on hand if it turned out to be a flop. Why couldn't Steve just let it go?

Steve was just sitting back down at his desk with a fresh mug of mate tea when Cain called.

"Okay, I've taken the truck, I've got the radio. What should I do now - and more importantly, why should I do it?"

"The What is easily explained." Steve opened various maps of Concord on a screen to supplement the reports and evaluations on the Mac. "I want you to drive around, having the GPS, the radio and the cell phone all turned on the whole time. Drive north from your place towards St. Pauls, but don't take the interstate, just use the back roads."

"Alright so far." Steve heard Cain start the engine, and shortly afterwards the GPS announcing 'route being calculated'.

"All right, I'm on my way - now tell me why I'm doing this nonsense?"

"Because you're my best friend and you're willing to do science a service?" Hearing Cain's familiar gasp, Steve hastily

continued.

"Seriously, I've come across something interesting. Mac's been recording magnetic field disturbances in a large area on the east coast for some time, much more frequently than statistically normal."

"Ha."

"I know that sound, and I can reassure you: I deliberately made the grid wide so Mac wouldn't sound the alarm every time an irregularity occurred. The accumulation in the last two weeks was so huge that it still triggered the alarm and not, or not only, because of the number, but because they were concentrated in Concord and the frequency increased. Do you understand?"

"Not really."

Steve could almost see Cain's skeptical face in front of him. He waited.

"When you talk about incidents, a word you use inflationary on the side, - what do you mean in this case?"

Steve was about to answer when he heard a short whistle from Cain's car, then a crackle, followed by the words >route being recalculated<.

"That! That's exactly what I mean! Pull over now - where are you now?"

"On the corner of Silk Farm Road and Clinton Street. There's a training center, the animal shelter, and some charitable institution - what's supposed to be exciting there?"

"Nothing you could see." Steve entered the data into the Mac. "Your radio and sat nav had brief interference - could be caused by an unusual magnetic field. But without measurements from other devices, I can't tell."

He heard Cain mutter "of course you can't", before restarting the engine. "Where to now?"

"Drive to St. Pauls, take the 202 into the center, over the 9 and right down Airport Road. That way we cover a lot of ground - and I don't have to tell you where the hotspots are beforehand, otherwise you'll say I influenced you later."

"Ah, am I Schoedinger's cat now?"

Steve stifled a correction to the comparison; he knew Cain hated that. When he got near the St. Pauls, Cain's mood seemed to lift. "Heard two guys from the school made the national team?"

Steve only needed a quick glance at his chat with Mac. "Ah yeah right, Godwin and Hartley."

He imagined Cain staring in amazement at the speakerphone and giggled. He heard Cain's indignant snort.

"Oh man, how many times have I told you not to let Mac

listen in? It makes me uncomfortable."

"Sorry, must be, Mac checks the data all the time. But in confidence" ... Steve's voice took on a conspiratorial tone, "I think Mac's a field hockey fan like you."

He waited to hear Cain laugh, but he said nothing for a moment and then, "Mac's a what?"

Steve paused. "Hockey fan - didn't you hear that?"

"Nah, you said "Mac's a" - and then nothing."

"Stop, okay, where are you now?"

Cain was silent for a moment and Steve thought the connection had broken again. "Just past the hospital."

"Oh." There were no good memories of the place.

After a while, Cain asked "Do you want me to keep driving?"

"You do that. The hospital is on the hotspots list, there could be lots of reasons."

They drove on in amicable silence for a while, dwelling on their memories, but then Cain's curiosity got the better of him.

"Why are magnetic field disturbances so important? I mean, stuff like this happens."

Steve sighed. With that, his hope died that Cain had been busy long enough driving around. That question would be

easier to answer when they found what Steve was hoping for. But if he didn't explain it to Cain, he wouldn't understand why it was important and would dismiss it again as a crazy idea - or worse.

"You know what electromagnetic interaction is, don't you?"

"It's one of the basic forces of physics, the thing that holds atoms together, Maxwell's laws and stuff, right?"

"You can put it like that." A noise caught Steve's attention - Cain had abruptly slowed down.

"Now don't tell me you're looking for the world formula."

Steve laughed with relief. "You may think I'm clever, but my brain is light years away from anything like that. No, it's not about that. Just keep driving, I'll explain - where are you now?"

Cain started the engine again. "I just drove onto Airport Road and I'm about to pass the airport. Come on, now spit it out, what are you trying to find?"

Steve took a deep breath. "If there's a force that holds atoms together - and someone could manipulate the force ... then you could use it to 'atomize' things, dissolve the atoms."

He waited for the freak-out from Cain that always came when Steve used the word "atomize". Not today. There was

absolute silence on the other end of the phone.

"Cain? Are you mad?" No answer. "Cain?" Nothing.

Steve's gaze wandered from the Mac's screen to the map of Concord - and the cluster of markers on Airport Road just past the airport. Cain must have found it - only he couldn't tell Steve, the communication was suddenly interrupted.

Cain almost crashed the car when he heard a rattle instead of Steve's voice and then a crack that he couldn't describe as anything other than eerie. It was coming from his CB radio, or so he assumed, his phone and sat nav staring at him from blank screens. Slowly, he pulled over, turned on the hazard lights, and got out, wobbling slightly on his feet. Strange creaking noises came from his car and Cain felt so uncomfortable that he moved a little further away.

The last thing he had heard from Steve was "If there is a force that holds atoms together - and someone could manipulate the force ... then ..."

"Then what you lunatic!"

Even though it seemed illogical to him, the shouting was reassuring. He continued with it and let out everything he didn't want to say to Steve's face.

"Why are you doing this to me? Why are you doing this to yourself? Stop chasing after this madness, at some point, it's going to land you in the loony bin for good. Can't we just have a good time together for once? Like we used to?"

Cain paused. Yes, they had good times and terrible times, but Steve's hunt for this answer had always been a part of it. He took a deep breath and sat down on the ground. Still cold, but much better, now he could think more clearly.

He leaned back, looked up at the slowly darkening sky, and breathed deep in and out a few times. The idea of Steve without this obsessive hunt for "the truth", the answer ... didn't work. And Cain had learned to live with it but had never believed that Steve could find what he was looking for. And today?

Something seemed to be interfering with signals in the area, that much was clear. Although he didn't need it for his job, Cain knew a lot about electrical engineering, as he had always had a soft spot for machines and had been tinkering with everything since he was a child. After a minor incident, his parents sent him on a course so that he wouldn't set fire to their house. Instead, Cain caught fire and learned so much that it would have been enough for a second job. For Cain, it was a hobby and if he was honest, something he had hoped to

use to understand Steve's madness.

Sighing, Cain got up. He shivered. Sitting here did not help. He needed to get at least far enough away that his devices would work. When he got into the car, there was no more creaking, but his cell phone and GPS were still useless. It was strange to experience this alone, usually Steve was always there when Cain felt like he did now. He drove on slowly until he heard the longed-for >Route being recalculated< just before the highway. He reached for his cell phone.

Steve got up from his desk once again, this time to wash his hands unnecessarily. Not being able to reach Cain made him anxious. He was sure there was nothing to worry about. It was just ...

He went into the kitchen, picked up a macaroon and, after sitting down again, placed it with the other two that were already lying unattended next to Mac. Steve tried to fill the time with more calculations, but nothing seemed to make sense, especially not the locations of the hotspots.

The hospital might play a role, but there were only weak readings. The most likely place would be the airport if someone wanted to make a difference with the interference

- but everything was okay there, the interference was well away from it. One could be thankful for that, such a disturbance at the airport could end in disaster. It was random, or at least it looked that way, Steve refused to believe it could be a coincidence. But it made no sense.

When the phone finally rang, he quickly picked it up. "Hey, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay at all. Do you have any idea how I felt when that creepy sound came out of my radio and the cell phone went dead? Couldn't you have warned me? Was the stupid effect so important to you that you had to let me drive into it?"

Steve fell silent, shocked. That was unexpected. He hadn't seen Cain that angry for ages, he must have truly been scared. But Cain didn't just sound angry. *He could not think I did that on purpose, right?*

"I'm sorry, I didn't think about it. Sorry, I didn't realize that .. sorry."

He heard Cain take a deep breath. "All right, was your experiment successful, can I go home now?"

Cain's tone made Steve wince. He decided not to call his bluff at that moment.

"Sure, go home, and thank you very much, you've helped

me a lot. I'll be up for a while doing calculations if you want to talk later..." He let the sentence hang in the air and Cain was silent for a while.

"Okay, see you later, I'll be in touch."

Steve leaned back in his chair and ran his hand over his eyes.

I've messed that up. Why don't I ever give more thought to something like this? Cain didn't deserve that I let him rush in there unprepared.

Nevertheless, it was exactly where it was expected to be after Mac's evaluations. Steve started calculating, talked to Mac about everything, and, as usual, felt a little crazy when he realized that he was talking to Mac like he was talking to .. perhaps most likely someone he lived with. It happened to him a lot and there was nothing wrong with it - unless it struck him. When the chat with Cain opened again an hour later, Steve had only produced results for the garbage can, all of them completely implausible.

>Got home and had a beer. That was a real scare<.

>Sorry<.

>What did you find out that was exciting? <

Steve hesitated. >That I'm an idiot - or can't do math. Everything the results tell me makes no sense in my

in my calculations<

>Shit, then I nearly wet my pants for nothing? <

This elicited a smile from Steve despite his disappointment. He wrote: >Yep, that was free :-)<

>You must be disappointed. <

Typical for Cain, however annoyed he is with me, he almost always knows exactly how I feel.

>Yeah, sure, I thought I had it this time. But that would be crazy to be able to manipulate a power like that ... do you think I'm insane? <

The cursor blinked for a ridiculously long time before the answer came.

>Insane - as in crazy?

Ah, that's a yes.>I don't know how you put up with me, so I'll release you from me for today and go to bed.<

>Okay, but if you still want to talk, that's fine<

>Thanks, it's okay, have a nice evening with your demon<

Just as he was about to click shutdown, another message came in.

>Are you okay? <

Steve swallowed hard. No, he wasn't, but he closed Mac and went to bed.

2028, November 10th, Friday, Boston

Rena hurried through the over-lit corridor of the superior floors in the FBI building on her way to her supervisor's office. A secretary rushed past her as it was home time, heels clacking and casting a reproachful glance at Rena's shoes. Rena walked on more slowly. Unfortunately, that didn't stop the unpleasant squeaking sound her field work shoes made on the polished stone floor. *What the hell?* She accelerated again to end the uneventful day.

Rena was surprised to be called to see the director so soon after an unspectacular interview, right before the weekend. Was it about the efficiency study she had submitted?

When she entered, Director Gray was on the phone and gestured for her to sit. Rena was pondering whether and how she should include her colleague's incompetence in her report when she realized Gray was talking to her.

"What do you mean by 'never again', Director Gray? I know you didn't request an employee efficiency study, but it fit in with the training I'm doing, and I worked it out on my own time."

Director Anthony Gray drew his too-thin eyebrows

together and looked at her piercingly. "Never again, Agent Lynch. You promised it would never happen again. And here I have four complaints about you. Four! You weren't even on the case that many days. What's your excuse?"

"Who complained and about what?"

Rena didn't ask out of genuine interest, more to buy time. *So, it's not about my study - probably no one has even read it. No wonder, everyone is too busy with useless talk.*

"You don't know that do you Lynch? Let's take your last interview today, that's as far back as we need to go. What do you think someone might be complaining about?"

Rena pondered - not who could have complained about what, she knew she hadn't made a mistake. She wondered where Gray had gotten a complaint from a mission less than two hours ago. She looked straight at him. "I didn't do anything wrong. You won't find anything I didn't do by the book."

"And that's the only reason you still have the job, Agent Lynch. People complain about how you treat them. For example, the woman you interviewed at the clinic. She said you treated her like" - he looked at the file that lay a little tattered on the imposing desk in front of him - "like a piece of furniture that was in your way."

Gray looked at her frowning. Rena fell silent and looked at the file with irritation. "You didn't break any rules Lynch, you never do. But couldn't you have let the woman get dressed before you questioned her? She'd just had an ... unpleasant experience, to say the least, and an unhelpful examination. And you sat there and worked through the questionnaire."

It sounded like he'd been there. "That's why I was sent there. Agent Drake was there for the same reason and questioned the witness after me, too." And then she was suddenly quite sure where Gray had gotten the complaint from. *So much for he'd forgotten something. As if. That's why Drake questioned my witness again.*

"Exactly, but no one complained about him. That's the point. And you obviously don't understand that." Gray ran a fierce motion with his fingers through his immaculately coiffed, if sparse, hair - no improvement.

Rena clenched her fists. *No one complained about Ken the suck-up, he'd done nothing but exude put-on niceties.*

Gray snapped the file shut. "No one wants to work with you, Lynch. Agent Drake was last on my list, and he told me he'd rather work with another partner in the future. Agent Lynch, what do you want me to do with you?"

Rena sensed her chance; she had been waiting for this for

a long time. "I can work alone on the next case."

"No, you can't, you of all people should know that the regulations don't allow it."

"Except in the cases where it's allowed. You can assign me one of those." Crap! There, her mouth had been quicker than her mind. She didn't want one of those cases.

"You always said those cases were boring rookie stuff."

Yes, they are - but if I only have the choice between boredom and Drake ...

Gray gave her a sharp look, seeming to weigh the odds, before leaning back in his chair and smiling without showing his teeth. "Fine, you asked for it, I'm going to give you one of these cases because I don't see any other chance of keeping you in the department. You understand Agent Lynch: this is your last chance. If I get complaints about you again, you will leave the team."

"There will be no complaints this time, Director Gray." Rena put as much conviction into the words as she could muster.

"I hope you're right. You're a good agent in many areas, so finally learn how to deal with people. Our work is about people. All these facts, analyses and data are useful, but ultimately, it's about people. If you don't learn that, you'll

never have what it takes to be a special agent, Lynch. You're giving your first solo on Monday. Be prepared." With these words, he turned his gaze away and picked up the phone again - Rena was dismissed.

As she walked down the pale corridor to her open-plan office, slower than usual so that it didn't seem like an escape, she tried to calm herself down. I must see this as an opportunity. Maybe I'll get a boring case, but without a partner on my back who irritates me and only thinks along preconceived lines, maybe I can make something of it myself.

She just had to get her bag for the weekend, but stopped outside the office door when she heard Agent Drake's voice.

"You guys told me, but I didn't think she could be this annoying. Have any of you ever had the pleasure of driving with her?"

"Oh yes, once, but that was enough. Did Rena drive, or did you?"

Sebastian, of course, always in the front row to tattle.

"Me of course, at least on the way to the clinic."

Yeah, right, "me of course" Rena almost stuck her tongue out at the door at his arrogant tone. Drake continued to lament.

"Is there any way of doing right in her eyes? I was going too fast, didn't keep enough distance, braked too abruptly, and didn't pay attention to the traffic. It took us twenty minutes to get there, and it felt like hours."

"And I bet you let her drive on the way back just so you wouldn't have to be lectured the whole time? And thought that was a smart idea?"

Rena groaned inwardly and leaned against the wall. Francesca's voice sounded sweet even when she said something mean.

"Ah, you had the same brilliant idea? Yes, I had that too. And as you can imagine, she was now ranting about the other drivers. It would have been better than her constantly lecturing me, but she even stopped once so she could go and tell someone what traffic rules they had just broken. Being with that woman ... whatever, is just embarrassing."

"She's intelligent. That makes it worse." Rena heard Francesca giggle. "But maybe we should be grateful that she can't behave like a normal person? It could easily happen that she'd get the promotion to Special otherwise. Now it looks more likely that she'll be fired by the end of the month."

Rena took a deep breath, ready for a bluff, and opened the door to the office where her colleagues were gathered

around Drake's desk.

"No, she won't. She'll have her first solo on Monday. So, if you'll excuse her, she needs to get ready for that."

With that, she snatched her old leather bag off the desk, stormed past Drake with a gloating, "Thanks for the recommendation to Director Gray, that got me my solo," and was gone before anyone could respond.

Rena didn't look back or stop until she'd reached her car and driven a few miles. Then she parked the car at the curb, pounded the cold steering wheel hard for a while, and cursed thoroughly before starting the car again.

What's so wrong with obeying the rules? Surely that's what they're there for? And how can they say I'm embarrassing? What's wrong with their behavior? If I complained every time their stupidity embarrassed me, they'd have been fired long ago! At least Francesca recognizes that I'm intelligent - whatever she knows about that.

Rena had to control herself very well not to hit the innocent steering wheel again while driving. *People are just vicious and stupid!*

She flinched in horror. *I am already thinking like my father.* They had brought her this far. But she would show them.

And if that meant learning how to pretend enough so that no one would complain, then she would. She hadn't fought her way this far to give up now because of something like this - and after all, there were no rules she couldn't memorize.

When Rena parked outside her apartment block and looked at her watch, she had to laugh at the irony. She had gotten so carried away with her anger that she had disregarded a few speed limits.

She spent the evening on the computer, eating pepperoni pizza and researching some helpful books on "how to deal with people." After getting some eBooks, she made a study plan for the weekend.

It couldn't be that difficult - she just found it boring, and it would annoy her because most people were so illogical. But if there was any guidance on how to deal with it, Rena would find it, it was her specialty after all. She wouldn't get fired; she would be the one who got the promotion next year.

Rena kept repeating this sentence to herself like a mantra throughout the weekend - she didn't believe in its usefulness any more than she believed in the books she was reading. "How you learn to deal with people (and stay yourself)" Bah, when she read something like that, Rena's alarm bells went off.

But at least there were plenty of "checklists"

- Show genuine interest ... *how could you show genuine interest, if you weren't interested in something?*
- Attentively listen ... *I already do that, anyway, including taking notes.*
- Give a smile ... *I can make something out of that.*
- Show genuine appreciation ... *phew, the authors obviously don't know many people, otherwise they would know that they were asking for something paradoxical.*
- Show vulnerability ... *as a tactic or what? Sounds bad.*

By Sunday evening, Rena was so fed up with humanity in general and the authors of self-help books in particular that she would have given up if it hadn't been for the memory of her father.

It was one thing to have problems with other people's behavior - but she wasn't going to crawl into a delusion about it. She was going to fight for her place in the world, even if she needed a cheat sheet to do it.

The book is written, just needs line editing and final layout for print.

You can find out more about the author and other upcoming projects even this year here: <https://www.jc-spark.net/>

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