



HARLEQUIN®

ROMANTIC suspense

**SECRET  
AGENT  
SECRETARY**

ICE: BLACK OPS DEFENDERS

---

**Melissa Cutler**

## **Chapter One**

The ICE Agency office was decidedly free of gadgets. Avery had known that in advance of accepting the secretarial position six years ago, but in her enthusiasm over the job offer, she'd overlooked the details that didn't sync up with her lifelong dream to work in national security. Besides, no covert ops agency displayed their gadgets in plain sight. Everyone knew gadgets belonged in the basement.

She still adored her job even though she had yet to stumble upon a secret basement, but she could've seriously used a gadget tonight, some sort of mechanical arm or miniature grappling hook or the like. The problem was that she wasn't flexible enough, nor were her fingers long enough, to grasp the zipper of her party dress.

In the office restroom, she spun in a circle, her body torqued at an odd angle, reaching for the zipper that was stuck in the middle of her back. Then it hit her that she was acting more like a dog chasing its tail than a single girl ready to dance her way into the New Year.

After giving up, she marched to her desk and flounced into her chair, chewing the lip gloss off her bottom lip in irritation. She should've taken Kristen up on her offer to primp at her house. Granted, that would've been awkward now that Kristen and Charlie were newlyweds, but at least

she would've saved herself from engaging in a wrestling match with the slinky pink dress she'd spent half her paycheck on.

Rendezvousing at Kristen's house also would've saved her from indulging her overactive work ethic. Here it was nearly ten o'clock on New Year's Eve and she'd put in another thirteen-hour day at the office, leaving herself only twenty measly minutes to change clothes and walk four blocks to the downtown San Diego club where she was meeting her six friends.

"Oh well. I bet Money Penny works New Year's Eve, too."

Actually, the true reason she'd worked longer than any sane, healthy person would on a holiday night had nothing to do with her work ethic. The project she'd been helping several of the office's agents with was bringing her the closest she'd ever come to assisting in the capture of an international criminal mastermind, which happened to sit at the top of her bucket list.

It didn't hurt that the man in charge was none other than the office's newest tall, dark and drool-worthy agent, Ryan Reitano.

With a little smile, she glanced at his desk across the room. He'd transferred from a different branch of the department six months ago, and while the two female agents on staff hadn't shown much interest in him, Avery sure had. Even if the man barely seemed to notice her presence, much less that she was female—and recently available.

She'd stayed late tonight composing a memo for Agent Lucey while stealing furtive glances at Agent Reitano as he got organized for his surveillance detail at the Mira Hotel in preparation for the big sting operation later that week. She'd

just about worked up the courage to give him a genial “Happy New Year’s” hug on his way out when she heard his hasty exit as she was in the back hall making copies, off to do his super secret spy thing while Avery couldn’t manage to zip up a stinkin’ dress.

She smoothed the creased fabric over her thighs with a frown. Six hundred bucks and the dress wasn’t even wrinkle resistant. Between the wrinkles and the obnoxious zipper, the dress was way too high-maintenance for her taste.

When she’d seen it hanging in the window of an uptown boutique, she’d thought it a perfect symbol of her New Year’s resolution to move on with her life after her disastrous breakup with Zach in October. Plus it was exactly the sort of curve-hugging dress Pepper Potts might wear to a Tony Stark cocktail reception, which made it a must-have in Avery’s book.

Well, Pepper Potts would never let a high-maintenance dress get the best of her. She spun the chair toward her desk and grabbed a box of paper clips. She might not be Pepper Potts or have access to secret agent gadgets, but Avery was nothing if not resourceful.

In two minutes flat she’d fashioned a paper clip chain and shimmied out of the dress. Though the office had been crawling with agents all day, Agent Reitano had been the last to leave, so she didn’t have to worry about someone catching a glimpse of her Spanx or beige ultra-support bra.

With only a few minutes to spare until she was supposed to meet her friends, she didn’t have time to wallow in the irony of lingerie that made a woman look sexy in clothing but did exactly the opposite once her clothes came off. But given how clingy and revealing this particular dress was, a

teensy lace thong wasn't going to cut it. Avery's figure required high-performance undergarments.

Once she'd secured the end paper clip to the zipper, she donned the dress once more and raised the chain over her shoulder, pulling up. The zipper began to close.

"Ha! Take that, sucker."

When the dress was half-zipped, her desk phone rang. The shrill, unexpected sound made her jump. Heart thudding madly, she leaned her elbows on the desk to check the caller ID and yanked the dress's zipper the rest of the way closed.

*Odd.* Agents never called the office landline from their personal cell phones after hours, especially when on surveillance missions. They had partners and ops contacts and all sorts of important people to touch base with—anyone but the office secretary.

Then again, it was after ten. He should've been done with the surveillance detail already and off celebrating the last night of the year. Brows raised in disbelief, she lifted the receiver. "ICE Agency. This is Avery Meadows." Even her usual telephone greeting came out sounding skeptical.

"You're there. Good." Agent Reitano had the kind of deep velvet voice that resonated in Avery's body all the way to her toes, even though coaxing more than a few clipped words from him at a time was no easy feat. The man gave new meaning to the word *laconic*.

"Agent Reitano, is everything okay?"

He chuffed. "That's debatable. Listen, I need you to get on my computer and email me a document labeled LM1204. Would you do that for me?"

LM1204 was a classified piece of evidence from the Chiara case. Why would he need that tonight?

“Our computers are password coded and we’re not allowed—”

“I know it’s against department policy, but I can change my password tomorrow. This is too important.”

A little voice inside her told her to decline. It went against her better judgment not to alert her bosses that one of the ICE agents might be in distress and had asked her to go against the rules regarding the handling of classified intel.

But a bigger voice inside her, the proverbial devil on her shoulder, said, *This is what you’ve been waiting for, Meadows. They don’t call it covert ops for nothing.*

Her gaze caught on the Department of Homeland Security emblem on the wall opposite her desk. An eagle, its wings outstretched and its body guarded by a shield. ICE, the department’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement division, was a critical component of that shield guarding her country’s freedom.

“Yes, of course I will.” She jotted down the password he gave, then decided to indulge her curiosity by asking, “Are you still at the Mira?”

The line went silent, as though he were thinking deeply about her question. “Yes.”

She bit her lip against asking for more details. Clearly he wasn’t in a talkative mood. As if he ever was. She rolled her eyes and her attention caught on that afternoon’s mail. “Oh! One more thing. I forgot. A letter came in for you a few minutes after you left from an express courier service. It’s international and it’s got *urgent* stamped all over the front and back. From a Mr. Paolo Hawk.”

She paused as a crazy idea took shape in her mind. Her only New Year’s resolution was to finally start crossing

items off her bucket list, and one of those items was to be more daring—at work and in her social life. It might be less than two hours until the stroke of midnight, but this was her first chance to get started.

“Wait, what did you say?”

“A letter from Honduras. And it looks urgent.” He started to speak again, but she cut him off, knowing if she didn’t get this out now, she might never. “What if...How would you like...” She drew a bracing inhale. *Come on, Meadows. You can do this.* “Would you like to meet for coffee tomorrow? I could bring you the letter then.”

He sighed. Not a good sign. She waited in silence, her mortification growing. Just when she thought she couldn’t take it anymore, he answered, “Yes. Okay. Take it home with you. That would be best. I’ll get it tomorrow.”

“Over coffee?” She cringed. She’d sounded a bit too desperate with that question.

“I have to go. Don’t forget to email me the file. Oh, and don’t tell anyone we talked. Got it?”

“Oh.” What the heck was going on?

“Avery, will you do that for me?”

Any other time, she would have thrilled at the sound of her name from his lips, but an uncomfortable tingling had begun in the back of her throat. This wasn’t normal, not the request for secrecy or the strain that had leaked into Agent Reitano’s usually unemotional voice. “What’s happening? Is there someone I need to call? Agent Mickle or—”

“No,” he barked before continuing more softly. “Please. Don’t tell anyone, especially Mickle. If you want to help me, email me the file, then go home and take that letter with you.”

Despite her misgivings, she trusted all the agents in her office. If Agent Reitano needed her to keep a secret as a matter of national security that might aid in Vincenzo Chiara's capture, then she would.

Vincenzo Chiara was one of the world's most wanted men. An Italian black-market mercenary, his crimes included forcing children into slavery and prostitution, the murder of innocent people and orchestrating the sale of drugs, weapons and anything else on demand in the black market.

She glanced again at the department's emblem. It was time to step up and do what she was born to.

Pumped and feeling good about her decision, she sat up straighter and looked at her watch. *Drat.* She was already late. Kristen was going to kill her. Oh well. National security never took the night off. "I'm on it, Agent Reitano."

"Thank you. And Avery? Call me Ryan."

*Oh.* What she needed now was a witty comeback, something flirty and fearless. She screwed her mouth up, thinking hard, but before her brain had a chance to kick into gear, the line clicked dead.

She held the receiver away from her face and stared at it for a beat before dropping it into the cradle. So much for witty banter.

Waiting for Agent Reitano's computer to boot up, she fingered a stack of Post-it notes and tested his name aloud. "Ryan. Good morning, Ryan. Have a good weekend, Ryan. Would you like to take me home and have your way with me, Ryan?"

*Hmm.* Felt weird on her lips. Apparently, a first-name intimacy with Agent Reitano was going to take some getting used to. She turned her attention back to the computer.

“Uh-oh.”

The monitor was black save for an error message.

“No, no, no,” she muttered as she pressed every function key to no avail. She tried again, this time pushing the function keys and the control button simultaneously. Nothing. Avery knew her way around a computer. She typed a hundred words a minute and could locate *anything* on the internet. Spreadsheets and data fields were her comfort zone. But when it came to the actual technological components that made her beloved machine work, she was as clueless as a monkey.

In desperation, she resorted to the only key combination she knew—Control, Alt, Delete. She depressed all three keys with a silent prayer, but the dang thing had the audacity to beep at her like the survey machine on *Family Feud*.

With an offended scowl, she pushed the power key until it shut down and began to reboot.

The office was loaded with computers, Avery didn't have access through her own computer to the virtual storage cloud the agents used and she couldn't jump onto another agent's computer because each was privately passworded. If she couldn't get Agent Reitano's computer to work, her best bet was to scan the hard copy—if there was a hard copy.

Still barefoot and with the paper clip chain attached to the zipper slapping at her back with every step, she walked to the rows of file cabinets and went straight to the drawer where she'd put the Chiara case file that afternoon. She flipped through the files but found nothing on Vincenzo Chiara.

Baffled, she searched again. It should've been right in the front, but it was gone. She laid her palms flat over the tops

of the files and considered her options. Before she got ahead of herself coming up with a plan C, she checked back at Agent Reitano's—*Ryan's*—computer. It had finished rebooting and the same error message from before still glowed on the screen.

She poked the monitor, muttering a mild curse, then jogged into Director Tau's office. A quick scan of his desk for the file's hard copy yielded nothing.

His file cabinets were locked, as she knew his desk would be, so instead of wasting more time, she pivoted and went straight for Agent Mickle's desk, the other agent working the Chiara case.

It was locked.

With another, more stringent curse, she walked back to Agent Reitano's desk. Maybe the hard copy of the case file had been right under her nose and she'd been too focused on the computer error to notice. The desktop was bare except for the bald eagle bobblehead figurine Director Tau had given him when he'd transferred to the department, as was the office tradition. And, as was the office's tradition, Mickle and the other agents had promptly dressed the eagle in a pink Barbie bikini top and coordinating hat.

With her hand on the top drawer handle, she warned the desk, "Don't be locked," then gave a tug.

It opened, sending Bald Eagle Barbie's head bobbling and pens in the drawer rolling. She eyeballed each drawer in turn but didn't see the file. Or anything interesting or personal in nature. Nothing to give her a clue into the life or personality of her stoic office crush.

She had her head in the bottom drawer, rifling through form letters and expense reports, when the "Bootylicious"

ringtone on her phone started. That would be Kristen, wondering why Avery wasn't in front of Club Brazil like they'd planned. She hustled to her desk and fished her purse from the floor.

"Hey, Krissy."

"Where are you? We've been standing here for twenty minutes."

That late already? She chewed her lip and glanced at her computer screen to check the time—but all she saw was the same error message as on Agent Reitano's computer. Stifling the curse that was on the tip of her tongue, she smacked the side of the monitor, then sunk into her desk chair. "Sorry I didn't call. Something came up."

"Aw, sweetie, are you still at the office? You've got to snap out of this work rut you've been in lately. You need to get a life."

Avery was about to protest that she had a great life, and was, in fact, on the verge of crossing off the first item on her bucket list. And maybe a second one if Agent Reitano followed through on her coffee offer. But she didn't have time to get into it with Kristen over the merits of working late on a case, not when Agent Reitano was expecting that transcript.

"Yes. I'm still at work. National security never sleeps, ya know."

"You already used the work excuse to weasel out of joining us for dinner tonight, and now this? I know what's really going on."

"You do?" Avery asked.

“You mentioned the other day how lame you felt being the only single person in our group. You don’t still feel that way, do you? `Cause you’d be the only one.”

True, it bugged her that she’d be partying with three couples. No one liked being the odd man out, but she’d never use that as an excuse not to go dancing with her friends. Just this once, though, she was going to let Kristen run with the idea.

“It’s so awkward, Krissy. Who am I going to kiss at midnight while you, Gina and Megan suck face with your men?”

Kristen groaned. “Oh, come on. Midnight’s not for two more hours. Plenty of time for us to find you a hot guy to ring in the New Year with. Have a little faith.”

Avery stuffed the letter from Honduras into her tote bag along with her work clothes. “All right, you win. You guys head into the club and scope out the scene. I’m going to have to meet up with you in an hour or so, after I take care of something here at work. If you see a cute guy who’s my type, do whatever you have to do to keep the other girls away from him until I get there.”

“I hope you’ve picked a new type because Zach was the last pretentious, tofu-obsessed jerk I ever want to see you with.”

Zach was the son of her parents’ best friends, and Avery had only stayed with him as long as she did because it’d made her parents happy to see her with someone they approved of, someone with their same lofty ideals and political leanings—or so they’d all thought.

Avery glanced at Agent Reitano's desk. "I think from now on I'm going to go for the strong, silent type. Tall, dark hair and eyes. And lots and lots of muscles."

"I like the way you think, but every girl goes for the strong, silent type. If I find an unattached one, I'll try to save him for you, but you're going to have to do your part and get here fast."

Avery slapped the side of the computer monitor, but the blasted error message shone firm. "I'll do my best."

Once she got Kristen off the phone, Avery took one more look around the room. If there was any place she forgot to check for the Chiara file, it certainly wasn't announcing itself with a neon blinking sign. There was nothing left to do but call Agent Reitano and find out how he wanted to proceed.

She called his number, but it flipped straight to voice mail. She left a message, then wrote him a text message.

Now what did she do? She had no idea why he needed that transcript of a wiretap tonight while he cased the hotel, but, frankly, it was none of her business. She wasn't even supposed to know the LM1204 file was a transcript of a wiretap. Besides, if he said he needed it, then that should be good enough for her.

She had one more option left, but it wasn't a particularly great one. Agent Reitano wouldn't know this because Avery tried not to spread it around, what with all the national secrets she was privy to at the office, but she'd been cursed with a near-perfect photographic memory. She knew the contents of the LM1204 file by heart and could re-create it for him word for word, because the week before, when she'd waited at his desk while he signed off on a stack of evidence

transfer paperwork, she'd seen the file open on his computer monitor. All she needed now was a functioning computer to type it out on and she could recreate it in minutes flat.

Her apartment was a half hour away through New Year's Eve traffic. It would be much faster to walk the six blocks to the Mira Hotel and lay out his options for him in person. She could even recite the transcript if he wanted to go that route.

Far from being concerned about blowing his cover, she was confident she'd fit in great with the downtown party crowd, dressed to kill as she was in her slinky pink gown. She couldn't imagine a solid reason why she shouldn't go for it.

She slipped her feet into the pair of four-inch strappy black heels she'd spent two weeks breaking in by wearing every waking minute she spent in her apartment. Though she'd probably walk with a limp for days afterward, she was determined to start the New Year off in the shoes she'd maxed out her Macy's card for.

A dab of gloss to her lips, a toss of her hair to give it some oomph and she was ready to go.

She set the office alarm, turned off the lights and locked the door, tote bag and purse in hand. After a quick stop at her car in the underground parking garage to drop off the tote bag in the trunk, she strode to the street-level exit and into the cool night air. Halfway down the first block, she recalled the paper clip chain swinging behind her. Mortified, she pulled her hair out of the way and tried to remove it. When her efforts failed, she stuffed the chain down the back of her dress and kept moving.

Computers or no, this secretary was seeing her job through to the bitter end tonight. After all, Moneypenny would never

*SECRET AGENT SECRETARY* ~ MELISSA CUTLER

allow such trifling matters to stand in the way of her work,  
and neither, by God, would Avery.

\* \* \*

*For more information on SECRET AGENT SECRETARY  
check out Melissa's website:*

[www.melissacutler.net](http://www.melissacutler.net)

*pre-order SECRET AGENT SECRETARY today*

[Amazon](#)

[Barnes & Noble](#)

[Walmart](#)

