

Help Wanted: A Kyle Shannon Mystery
Sample Chapter

We move through the events in our lives and rarely give them much thought until something happens that alters our routine and changes us, perhaps forever. I will not drive in the snow again without thinking about Tiffany.

It was winter and all was right with the world as I twirled under the night sky, my arms outstretched and my tongue extended to catch a falling snowflake. The air smelled like store-bought bagged ice and twanged the inside of my nose.

"It's a movie set night," I said as I stopped to face my friend. "Don't you just love it?"

Tiffany gave me one of her indulgent smiles. "You probably still believe in Santa Claus."

"Don't you?" I said, feigning shock. "Come on, Tiff. Life's too short to pass up the chance to act like a kid." I sniffed. "Ah, roasting chestnuts."

"You don't like chestnuts."

"But I love the smell. It reminds me of *A Christmas Carol*."

"You're hopeless; absolutely hopeless. What you smell is hazelnut coffee. We're near Seattle's Best. I'll grab a table. You get us a couple of hot chocolates."

I followed Tiffany into the shop, pausing just inside the door to inhale the moist air. Yup, hazelnut. With just a touch of chocolate and ... mint?

While I ordered, Tiffany claimed a recently-vacated table and gently placed her bags under it near the wall where they wouldn't get stepped on. It didn't take long before I had two steaming mugs of hot chocolate. And two Santa-shaped iced sugar cookies.

We were barely settled when a woman pushed toward us, her progress slowed by a large Crate and Barrel box banging against her legs.

"Tiffany, is that you?"

"Oh my word. Aki. It's been ages."

Tiffany rose and the women embraced as tightly as heavy winter attire allows.

Aki Tanaka, almond eyes bright from the cold, had a sweet disposition and a petite frame, both of which belied her ability to control an unruly Sierra Club meeting with the skill of the most polished diplomat. Wrapped in a black puffy coat with only her pale face showing beneath a dark knit cap, she looked like a jolly penguin.

"And Kyle Shannon," she said, focusing on me. "How long has it been since we've seen each other?"

I thought back. "Since the Penzler Market reopening?"

"I think you're right. That was, what, a year ago? How do we let so much time pass without getting together? We've missed you at the meetings. Did something steal you away from The Sierra Club or are you not interested in the environment anymore?"

"Oh, it wasn't some *thing*," said Tiffany, smirking.

"Must be a man," Aki laughed.

"You guessed it."

"It's hard to compete with that." Aki turned to me. "I'm sorry I missed you when I stopped by

the office.”

I didn’t answer right away. What office? I had never been to the local chapter office. Then it connected.

“I am so sorry,” I said, after a moment. “I associate you with Woods and Wetlands, not Office Right Staffing. It took me a minute to shift gears.”

“Please don’t apologize. It’s hard when you see someone out of context. I’m glad you’ve recovered from your cold. Did you miss out entirely or did Margaret manage to save a cookie for you?”

“Yes, Margaret saved me a couple of cookies.”

Tiffany frowned. “What are you two talking about?”

“Aki is the new area manager at Office Right Staffing. She’s my boss’ boss,” I said. “The branch I work in just won a sales award and Aki delivered it.”

“Cookies? That’s a reward?”

Aki shrugged. “I do what I can.”

“Your visit meant a lot to my coworkers,” I said. “That’s all they talked about. Well, that and how good the cookies were. I gather the Libertyville team doesn’t get many sales rewards?”

“They have the talent to be the top branch in the company. They just need more support and that’s where I come in.” She smiled broadly. “I hope I see you the next time I visit.”

“I do, too. We can catch up over a cup of coffee.”

“I’d like that. Maybe I can get you to come to club meetings again. We planned some great stuff for the next couple of months.” Aki rose and took a step away. “Judging by the look of this, the forecasters will be right about a couple of inches tonight. It was great running into you two. Kyle, I’ll expect to see you next Wednesday night. Seven, at the library, same as always. Tiffany, have a wonderful holiday. I’ll call you in January.”

“She looks great, doesn’t she?” said Tiffany, watching Aki wind her way through the tables and out the door. She frowned suddenly. “We’d better get going too. The weather isn’t getting any better.”

Outside, quarter-sized flakes floated to the ground, coating everything with a thin veil of shimmering white. *Silver Bells* boomed from speakers through the icy air of the outdoor mall. Passing perfectly-shaped artificial trees adorned in bright plastic balls of gold, teal, and fuchsia, we hurried toward the three-story parking garage on the west side of Old Orchard Shopping Center. Looking up at the snow drifting past giant green wreaths suspended over the Macy’s store logo, it was impossible not to absorb some of the festive energy.

Think that sounds like an overdose of holiday cheer? Not to me. I love this time of year, every silly Hallmark moment of it. Sometimes when I drive, singing along with certain holiday songs, tears of joy run down my cheeks. Throw in a few December flurries, some iced cutout cookies plus a little hot chocolate, and the child in me is unleashed. Every shopping trip, every party, and every gift is special to me at this time of year.

That’s how this evening had been. Special. I hadn’t heard from Tiffany in several months so her call suggesting an evening get-together had been a welcome surprise.

She and I had known each other for a number of years, meeting originally through a mutual

friend and subsequently developing our unique relationship based on charity fundraisers and shopping. The two seemingly unconnected activities came together in Tiffany because she was one of the most sought-after event organizers in metropolitan Chicago. Get Tiffany to plan your fundraiser and you were guaranteed an extra twenty thousand in net proceeds.

One of the reasons for her success was her ability to add a touch of humor or whimsy to any event. She might slip a pair of sequined flip-flops from the dollar bin at Target into a goodie bag or hide a folding umbrella from Costco in a table centerpiece. Tiffany did all the shopping for these items herself thus ensuring the element of surprise. And, because she used the charity's money, she never spent much on them. The bargain was her best friend.

I am not able to write large checks to charity but I do contribute my time by setting up events or selling raffle tickets or running errands; whatever odd job Tiffany needs me to do. It's not a tax deduction but I am well rewarded for my efforts. Thanks to her, I've shared Brie on toast with Mayor Daley and champagne with Elton John.

Tonight was different. For the first time in many years, Tiffany and I had shopped together for something other than goodie bag treats or centerpiece decorations. As I recalled, we hadn't had more than a couple of outings for just us since the Cows on Parade exhibition shortly after we met. My moving from the north side of Chicago to Lake County hadn't helped. Adding more than physical distance, being in Lincolnshire put me in a different lifestyle sphere, well away from Chicago's social scene.

After a quick meal, we hit the stores. The post-Thanksgiving sales were in full swing, luring consumers with discounts deepened by coupons or gifts-with-purchase. While I flitted from one display to the next, playing with the toys or sliding my feet into Hello Kitty slippers, careful-shopper Tiffany scored some incredible bargains.

Now we stood in the parking garage saying our goodbyes. After pushing her bags into the back of her SUV, Tiffany hugged me tightly.

"It was great to see you. It's been too long," she said, hugging me again. "We didn't really have time to talk much, did we? At least we got our shopping done." She frowned at my empty hands. "Well, I got mine done."

"I'm headed for Carson's. I have my eye on a serving dish I saw in their ad. It will be perfect for Mrs. Sims, my next-door neighbor, and I even have a twenty-percent off coupon to use."

"Great. I'll come with you."

"You'd better get going. You hate driving in bad weather and this snow will be four inches deep before you know it. Traffic in the city will be awful."

Tiffany hesitated and then got into her car. I stepped aside as she pulled out and waved as she drove toward the exit. Then I found my Altima and drove north to Edens Plaza.

Old friends' night. I'm all for new experiences and meeting new people but seeing Tiffany and Aki was like an emotional energy drink. I didn't realize how much I had missed Tiffany until I spent time with her again. Same for Aki who had been so supportive when I was a newcomer to Lake County. Seeing them made me realize how we are inclined to move on with our lives, leaving old acquaintances and activities behind while we engross ourselves in new ones. I attended Woods and Wetlands club meetings for several months, then it became sporadic, and then not at all. I still care

about intelligent use of natural resources and I remain a nut about recycling, but quiet evenings at home replaced a search for new friends. Yes, I suppose Jake Prince had a lot to do with that. I vowed to do more to maintain the relationships.

The crowds, the music, and the weather soaked me in holiday spirit like bayberry permeates a room so, after I finished at Carson's, taking the flat, fast expressway home was about as appealing as a drive down to Springfield on I-55. Instead I went north on Hibbard Road for a leisurely, scenic tour through Wilmette and Winnetka to enjoy the lights decorating the residences.

There is a certain appeal to the look of the older suburbs, a kind of turn-of-the-century quaintness that is represented in wrought iron fences and bulb-style street lamps. Neither is practical by today's standards but they sure are pretty.

In the unofficial poll taken as I cruised north, white lights seemed the most popular although LED colored bulb usage had gained significantly. As much as I fancy the large, old-fashioned, multi-colored lights, particularly on stately evergreen trees, the "green" in me knows LED is preferable. If the manufacturers could just tone down the colors. I can spot LEDs a hundred yards away because the blue is so brassy it overpowers the other colors instead of complementing them.

Boy, was that a Tiffany kind of thought. Just a few hours with her and I critique like a designer.

Hibbard dead-ends at Tower Road so I turned west to catch the Edens Expressway home instead of continued meandering on surface streets. A hot cup of tea while nestled under Grandma's log cabin quilt seemed more inviting than further sightseeing. There would be plenty of time for additional night drives to look at the decorations. The forecast for clear and warmer weather on the weekend would get the procrastinators off the couch and outside to string lights on their bushes and place white willow reindeer on their lawns.

I knew taking the Edens was a bad decision as soon as I started sliding down the entrance ramp. My Altima does pretty well in snow but no vehicle has traction on ice. The frosty patch was fairly small so by the time I realized what was happening, the tires regained traction and the car accelerated. I merged into the northbound lanes, shaken but now totally focused on my driving, the *Evening in December* CD relegated to background noise.

Out in the open, where vapor lights illuminated every flake, the falling snow seemed heavier. Although visibility was poor, snow did not stick to the roadway. Yet. Ahead I made out the pulsing yellow lights of a plow spreading salt. A good reminder. I eased off the gas pedal.

Slowing down on a Chicago highway can be a dangerous proposition no matter when you do it. The posted speed limit is fifty-five, which translates to an actual speed of seventy. Backing off to a mere fifty elicited several horn blasts from nearby cars as they zipped around me. A vehicle approached rapidly from behind; its headlight beams reflecting off the side mirror and directly into my eyes. I slowed a bit more, hoping to force the driver to go by. The car stayed put. Was this SUV using me as a vehicular guide dog? Not a good idea since I was blinded because of its headlights.

Approaching the Dundee Road overpass, I had to decide: catch The Spur west to the Tri-State tollway or continue up Route 41. I opted for Route 41.

North of Lake Cook Road, the three-lane, controlled-access Edens Expressway morphs into two-lane Illinois Route 41, a limited access highway. It is bordered on both sides by residential or commercial buildings and lots of trees. Somewhat sheltered, Route 41 stays clear of snow longer

than the Tri, which cuts through open terrain and gets slipperier faster.

Before I could make a choice, bright lights filled my rearview mirror, the Altima suddenly shuddered, and the car's rear end slid to the left.

Instantly I heard my father's voice. "*Steer into a skid. Do not slam on the brake.*"

Facing south, then north, then south again, the car spun like a teacup at Disney World. Headlights came directly at me.

I froze.

The Altima didn't.

Continuing to rotate, the car turned around once more before the tires bumped against the concrete lane dividers. Forward momentum slowed. The driver's-side wheels came up. The car leaned.

Oh god!

Horns blared. Two cars rushed by on my right. The Altima wobbled...and settled to the pavement with a ka-lump. Long seconds passed before I realized the car had stopped moving.

I steered it onto the left-hand shoulder, stepped on the brake, shifted into park, and clicked on the hazard lights. Slumping against the steering wheel, I let out a long breath.

Holy shit!

My nerves were on fire; my legs were rubber.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Was I all right? Yes.

But my poor car. Damaged?

Only one way to find out.

I took another deep breath. After a truck went by, and with no more vehicles visible behind me, I put the window down and shifted the Altima into gear. With my head halfway out the window and listening intently, I drove slowly along the shoulder for several feet. No sounds of rubbing or scraping. Apparently no parts were loose or dragging. After letting out a sigh of relief, I accelerated carefully, waited for another car to pass, and then pulled onto the roadway.

The exit ramp at Lake Cook Road took me off the expressway. Nice, safe surface streets would do just fine for getting home. Now I didn't care how long it took; I just wanted to get there in one piece. The cup of tea and the warm quilt could wait.

When the car was safely parked in the garage, I got out on quaking legs. I had never been in an auto accident before and I never wanted to do it again. Spinning around, watching cars speed right at me, their headlights blinding me. Now *that* was lack of control.

There had been no time to take action. Not for one second of those terrifying minutes had I been capable of reacting. A mere passenger in the driver's seat, I could not think fast enough to respond to what was happening. Crashing or not, surviving or not. It was all out of my hands.

One thing was certain; I had a new appreciation for racecar drivers and their reflexes. And the next time I complained about not having control over my life, I would remember spinning around on a three-lane expressway and perhaps I would not be so hard on myself if things didn't go exactly as I intended. Who said that life is what happens when you're busy making other plans?

My self-analysis session took place with me leaning against the Altima's rear quarter panel. I reconnected with the present when my lungs demanded oxygen. I had held my breath the entire time I relived the accident. After rubbing my face hard, I turned on the overhead light, retrieved the flashlight from the workbench, and walked slowly around the car, checking the undercarriage and then the car body. With the exception of a smudge of silver paint near a nasty crack in the right rear plastic bumper, the car looked undamaged, as far as I could tell. I couldn't be certain until I saw it in better light.

Body damage was one thing. Going up on two wheels was another. In the morning, I'd drop the car at the auto shop and have a mechanic check it out. I didn't want to have a wheel fall off while rolling along at seventy, or even thirty-five, miles per hour.

* * * *

My hands shook as I poured hot water over the tea bag in a snowman mug. Keeping busy with routine had kept my mind off the accident for a while but the closer I got to relaxing, the more my nerves jangled. It was ten o'clock. Time for the news. More routine. That would be good.

Curled up on the sofa and wrapped in the quilt, I clicked the remote and turned on the television. Teases ran for the upcoming top new stories: a shooting in a southwest suburb, another explosion in Afghanistan, an animal hoarder arrested. Not in the mood for death and destruction having come so close to it myself, I waffled between waiting to see the weather and switching to something less stressful. I nearly changed the channel to HGTV when the lead story stopped me. I leaned forward, concentrating.

"There have been two more reports of bumper tap spin-outs since these attacks began last week on the Kennedy, all occurring during snowfalls when the roads are slick. Illinois State Police tell us that they believe these accidents are probably the result of a recent television program showing police cars using this maneuver to stop offenders during chases."

The report cut away from the snowy Kennedy Expressway to show a brief clip of a squad car bumping another vehicle, sending it into a spin.

"While what appears in the video was the result of a police chase and stop, local law enforcement believes a person or group has adopted this as a form of bizarre entertainment. Police hope to get license plate numbers from the traffic cams. If anyone has any information, they are asked to contact the Chicago Police Department or Illinois State Police."

I leaned back. Well, well. The "entertainment" had moved from the city to the north suburbs. Or was what happened to me a copycat of the copycat?