

# **A Spy For A Spy**

Book 6 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

By Diane Henders

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The town of Silverside and all secret technologies are products of my imagination. If I'm abducted by grim-faced men wearing dark glasses, or if I die in an unexplained fiery car crash, you'll know I accidentally came a little too close to the truth.

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- Book 3: Reach For The Spy
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- Book 5: How Spy I Am
- Book 6: A Spy For A Spy
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## CHAPTER 1

Damn, nothing rearranges your priorities like narrowly escaping a fiery explosion. Priority number one: A hot shower.

Oh God, yes.

I limped into my house and made for the bathroom with the kind of ardent longing I usually reserve for cold beer.

The pain of squirming out of my too-tight biking leathers made me catch my breath, too exhausted to even swear. Some pebbles and dirt sifted to the floor when I dropped the scuffed garments in the corner, and I leaned over to brush the last of the debris out of my hair as well. The stench of smoke clung to me like acrid cologne, overlaid by the faint antiseptic smell of a night spent in the hospital.

Straightening and twisting cautiously, I examined the dark bruises on my back and side in the mirror.

Could've been worse. At least I hadn't been blown into strawberry jam. Now if I could just make it through tomorrow unscathed...

I sighed and crept into the steamy rapture of my shower.

Some painkillers, food, and a few hours of pleasantly routine bookkeeping soothed my physical discomfort but did nothing for my apprehension. Despite my best attempts to find a positive spin, I just couldn't foresee any good outcome from my summons to tomorrow's meeting.

A Saturday meeting with the director of clandestine operations was ominous at the best of times, and my guilty conscience magnified my worry even more. If it was something benign, Stemp would have waited until Monday...

Don't think about it. Just don't think about it.

After supper, I picked up a long-neglected book and tried to prevent my mind from skittering to nervous speculations about what the next day might hold.

Dammit, lying to Stemp had been my only option at the time, but what the hell was I going to do now? Tomorrow he'd expect me to act like the experienced secret agent I'd told him I was, not the shit-scared civilian bookkeeper I truly was...

The muffled thud of a car door slamming in my driveway made me hurry for the door, mentally cataloguing the reassuring weight of my gun in its ankle holster.

Who the hell would be driving into my yard this late in the evening?

The doorbell rang just as I reached the front door. When I peeked through the fisheye lens, a sigh of mingled relief and worry leaked out.

Two uniformed RCMP officers. An unmarked black sedan faded into the darkness in the driveway behind them, its shape suggested only by the gleam of its curves in my porch light.

I composed my expression into polite inquiry and drew a deep, careful breath before unlocking the deadbolt to swing the inside door open.

“Aydan Kelly?” The shorter, dark-haired man spoke through the screen door, his face expressionless while his hard blue eyes memorized me.

“Um...”

I tried to hide my hesitation while my tired mind riffled through the possibilities. Tell them my real name? Or use my cover identity? The police were supposed to know about my fake death, weren't they? Dammit, I should've clarified that with Stemp...

“...yes?” I ventured.

The two officers exchanged a split-second sidelong glance, their posture stiffening almost imperceptibly.

Shit!

“Um, actually, sorry, no,” I babbled. “I meant, yes, this is... was Aydan Kelly's place. I'm not Aydan Kelly, I'm Arlene Widdenback. Aydan died recently and I'm just taking care of things...”

This time their shared glance included frowns. The taller officer turned a disapproving gaze back to me. “May we come in?”

“Uh...” I pushed the screen door open, forcing them to move back as I stepped out onto the porch. I pulled the interior door closed behind me and propped the screen door open with my hip. “Let's talk

out here.” I offered a friendly smile and a placating tone. “How can I help you?”

The taller officer eyed my bare arms, already rising into gooseflesh in the frosty late-October wind. “We should go inside. You’ll be more comfortable.”

“No, that’s okay.” I suppressed a shiver along with the urge to glance up at the surveillance camera silently recording us from its concealment in the eaves. No way I’d leave its benevolent scrutiny, not even for uniformed police officers. Especially if they decided to arrest me for something. Like lying about my identity...

As if reading my mind, the shorter officer withdrew a photo from his inside pocket. He studied it briefly before turning it toward me. “This is a picture of Aydan Kelly. Forty-seven years old. Long red hair. Brown eyes. Five foot ten, a hundred and sixty pounds. You look just like her.”

I resisted the urge to gulp as I eyed the photo and held my voice steady. “Yes, I guess we look... looked a lot alike. I’ve had quite a few cases of mistaken identity.”

The blue eyes skewered me. “Intentionally mistaken?”

Oh. Apparently they were familiar with my sleazy cover identity. Thank God. At least now I knew how to react.

I let my shoulders slump and added a hint of whine to my voice. “No, I’ve turned over a new leaf. It was just the stupid reporters that got us mixed up. It wasn’t my fault. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

I cast my eyes down and scuffed a toe at my doormat in not-too-feigned discomfort. Fear chilled my gut when my conscious mind finally registered the detail that had been nagging at me.

Brown shoes.

They both wore RCMP uniforms, but the dark-haired man was wearing brown tasselled loafers.

I jerked my gaze up in time to see them eyeing each other as if reaching a silent agreement.

“Ms. Widdenback, we have a search warrant for this house.” The shorter officer flashed a closely-typed sheet of paper in my face before refolding it and returning it to his pocket. “Please step aside.”

“Okay...” I backed up a pace and gauged the tensing of their shoulders when I reached for the doorknob. Why the hell hadn't I worn my waist holster tonight? They could shoot me twice over before I could grab my gun. Shit, even if the surveillance analysts had already called in an alarm, help was still at least ten minutes away.

I gulped down my pounding heart and held my voice steady. “May I have your badge numbers, please? I'd just like to call and check with your detachment.”

The shorter officer scowled and took an aggressive step forward. Adrenaline searing my veins, I sprang backward into the house and slammed the door, scrabbling frantically at the lock. The deadbolt snapped into place an instant before the door shivered under a heavy thud.

Bolting for the basement, I lurched down the stairs, nearly tripping myself while I fumbled the gun out of my ankle holster.

Great, fucking great, break my neck falling down the fucking basement stairs trying to avoid being shot or kidnapped or whatever they wanted...

Find a defensible position. I dashed around the corner to flatten myself against the wall beside the stairs.

With my back pressed to the cold concrete, I trained my gun on the foot of the stairs. I'd hear them coming. I should be able to get a shot in before they spotted me...

Tension racked my shoulders while long minutes crawled by. No more sounds came from above and at last I surrendered to aching fatigue and lowered my shaking gun.

What the hell were they doing? Were they still outside? And why the hell hadn't I asked Stemp for a monitor for the surveillance cameras so I could see what was going on? Surely the Department could spare me one lousy monitor.

I strained my ears. Still nothing.

Should I just wait it out? Either John Kane or helicopters full of armed men or both would likely arrive on my doorstep in a few minutes, but it was stupid to cower in my basement if the fake officers were already gone.

I levered myself away from the wall and scuttled over to grab the phone handset. Clutching my gun, I fumbled at the phone with my other hand, trying to watch the numbers and the stairs at the same time. I had only managed the first two digits of Stemp's number when the doorbell rang again.

Jesus Christ, now what? My heart battered my sore ribs.

I jabbed the Off button with a shaking finger and crept up the stairs to jitter a safe distance away from the door, swallowing hard and weighing the possibilities. If it was the fake RCMP officers again, did they really think I'd answer the door if they rang the doorbell?



The chime sounded again, making me start violently and hiss through my teeth at the resulting pain. A knock and the sound of a too-familiar voice from outside made me bite back the obscenities that begged to be shrieked.

I stuffed my gun back into my ankle holster, yanking my pant leg over it while my lips moved in silent but earnest supplication.

God, why me? And why don't You just smite me and get it over with instead of tormenting me like this?

## CHAPTER 2

The voice called again from the other side of the door. “Hello? Anybody in there?”

I blew out a short breath and unclenched my teeth and fists before opening the door, trying for a pleasant expression.

The lean, handsome Stetson-clad man staggered back a step, his face blanching.

“Aydan...?” His voice was a bare whisper.

“Tom, uh...”

What the hell was the matter with him? His frozen expression suddenly clued me in. Shit, I hadn’t seen or talked to him since my supposed death last week. As the realization dawned on me, his paralysis broke.

“Aydan!” He sprang forward and swept me into his arms, crushing a yelp of pain out of me. “Aydan...” He kissed me hard before pulling away to cup my face in his callused palms, his sky-blue eyes dancing. “Aydan, thank God!”

His lips met mine again, and heat flashed through me when he pulled me against his work-hardened body. Before I could stop them, my hands slid inside the warmth of his fleece-lined denim jacket to find

the lean muscle of his chest. His kiss changed from joyous celebration to seductive invitation. To hot temptation.

Common sense kicked in a moment later and I jerked away.

Dammit, this was far too dangerous. The fake RCMP guys could return at any moment with violent intentions. I couldn't tell Tom anything about my secret life, but my secrets could harm him just the same. And Stemp's team was going to be all over the place in minutes, and how the hell would I explain that?

"Aydan, what's wrong?" Concern sharpened his voice. "You're shaking."

"Nothing, I'm fine."

Get rid of him, fast. Think, think!

"I've just had..." I fumbled for words while considering and discarding options at light-speed. "The last few days have been..."

Maybe he was safer here inside the house. At least I had a gun. If he went back outside, they could easily pick him off from the concealment of the darkness. He'd never even know what hit him.

Right. Keep him here.

"Come on in and sit down." I manufactured a smile. "Would you like something to drink? I'm just going to grab an orange juice."

I waved him in the direction of the kitchen table and headed for the fridge.

"No thanks, I'm fine." He waited until I took my seat at the table before pulling up a chair to sit beside me. "What happened?" he demanded. "Thank God you're alive! Are you all right? Are you safe?"

"Yes..." I sipped my juice, stalling. "Kind of... I, um..." Dammit, I really didn't want to get into that.

“How did you know I was here?” I asked, postponing the inevitable.

“I didn’t. I thought you were dead.” He frowned. “I was coming home, and I saw lights through the trees when I turned in my lane. I thought maybe one of your friends was here packing up your things. I was going to offer to help.” His hand closed around mine. “Thank God you’re alive,” he repeated.

“I’m really sorry you were...” I trailed off, not quite knowing how to finish that sentence. Worried? That didn’t quite seem to cover it. I tried again. “I’m sorry, I should’ve called you. I thought everybody knew...”

“It’s all right, you wouldn’t have been able to get me,” he interrupted gently. “I was in Arizona with my folks. We left the day after your funeral. They go down every year at the end of October, and I always go with them to get them settled for the winter.”

His brow slowly furrowed and he drew back, his sky-blue gaze searching my face. “What do you mean, you’re *kind of* safe? What were those police officers doing here?”

Shit, he’d seen them. And double-shit, that meant they’d seen him, too.

I eased out a breath. “Long story.”

His eyes narrowed, taking in my hunched posture and cautious breathing. “You’re hurt. Were they here about John Kane? Has he been harassing you again?” His grip tightened on my hand. “Aydan, did he hurt you?”

“No, no,” I gabbled, hurrying to quench the anger kindling in his eyes. “No, it was nothing to do with John.”

He studied my face as if searching for evidence of a lie. The tension eased from his body when he apparently found none, and he continued, frowning. "Was it about your car accident? Or the men who kidnapped your friend and tried to kill you last week? Are they still looking for you?"

"Like I said, it's a long story. Short answer: no, no, and no. The police caught those men and the car accident was just a dumb coincidence." It was sort of the truth.

"Nichele is safe." Thank God that part was true. I bit back a sigh and laid out the rest of my cover story.

"The police got Nichele back from the kidnappers and arrested them, so that took care of the guys who were trying to kill me."

Which was neither a direct outcome nor true.

I forged on. "The car accident was just some poor dumb schmuck who stole my car and crashed it. I was in Victoria at the time, so I didn't realize until I got back that everybody thought I was dead and my funeral was already over."

Not only untrue but also a cruelty to my friends for which I'd never forgive Stemp. I swallowed a burning lump of anger and kept my face under control.

Tom straightened, his brows drawing together. "How could the medical examiner make that kind of mistake? When there's a fatality accident, they don't assume the driver was the owner of the car. They verify the identity."

I shrugged. "It crashed and burned. I guess there wasn't much left."

“That doesn’t make sense.” He shook his head slowly. “There’s usually something left. Teeth. They should have checked dental records...”

Damn, I should have known better than to try to slip this past a firefighter. I went for a diversion.

“Look, Tom...” I leaned closer, giving him the big brown eyes. “Um... this is kind of embarrassing, but... there’s, um... more to the story. I have to ask you a big favour.”

His frown eased. “You know I’ll do anything I can.”

“Um... Other than just the local people around here... don’t mention to anybody else I’m alive, okay?”

His eyes hardened into blue glaciers. “Aydan, who are you hiding from? Who’s threatening you? Tell me.”

I laid a hand over the fist he had clenched on the table beside me. “No, it’s nothing like that. Like I said, it’s... just embarrassing... um...” I couldn’t quite meet his gaze. “Everybody thinks I’m a porn star. I’m hiding from the media.”

“What?” The word blew out on an incredulous gust of half-laughter, half-indignation. “They think you’re a *what*? Why in heaven’s name...?”

Well, even if my cover story forced me to lie through my teeth, at least I could be honest about my embarrassment.

I felt heat climbing my face. “Um... Well, there’s this woman, Arlene Widdenback. She’s this skanky internet porn star. She’s done a bunch of videos where she fu... um... with this creepy little guy no woman in her right mind would touch with rubber gloves, and she’s

been to jail for fraud a couple of times. She calls herself Arlene Cherry and, she, um... looks just like me. Well, mostly..."

I bit my tongue before I could mention that the only difference was the digitally enhanced volleyball-sized boobs. I chanced a glance at Tom's face and hurriedly looked down at my lap.

Damn Stemp and his goddamn porn-star cover story. I'd kill him for saddling me with this. Kill him slowly. With much screaming, the bastard.

"So anyway, when I was in Victoria, some reporter saw me and thought I was her," I added rapidly. "And now the media is all fired up about stalking her for interviews and some *moron* got the idea that somehow when I'd died in the car accident, she'd assumed my identity and I'm really her, pretending to be me to avoid publicity..."

This time I didn't look up.

"Aydan, that's..." Tom's response was cut short by the sound of the doorbell. I rose without looking at him to approach the door hesitantly, my heart pounding with renewed fear. It had to be Stemp's team by now. It couldn't be the other guys.

Could it?

Dammit, if it was the fake RCMP guys and I had to pull my gun, how the hell would I explain that to Tom?

Suddenly he was beside me, frowning. "Aydan, are you afraid to answer the door?"

"Um, no, I was just..."

Even if I could have summoned up a plausible explanation, it would have been too late.

"Stay back." He strode forward and flung open the door.

John Kane loomed outside the screen, his dark hair and clothing blending with the night. The porch light threw the scar that bisected his eyebrow into sinister relief and dramatically shadowed his strong features.

Tom was tall and hard-muscled, but Kane's six-foot-four height and mountainous shoulders dwarfed him. Braced in the doorway, Tom's lean figure in faded denim contrasted starkly against Kane's towering darkness like some medieval depiction of good versus evil.

Which was absolute bullshit since Kane was the best of the good guys and the sole reason I wasn't dead several times over. Too bad Tom didn't see it that way.

And I couldn't tell him.

"Kane," Tom said, his neutral tone not quite concealing the hard edge beneath.

Kane nodded, his face expressionless. "Rossburn." His grey gaze tracked to me, rooted to the floor while I assessed the tension between them.

Oh, God, please don't let them fight.

"Aydan," Kane said, his everybody-stay-calm cop voice matching his impassive cop face. "May I come in?"

I found my voice. "Of course. Sorry." I scurried forward to reach past Tom and open the screen door.

Kane stepped unhurriedly into the room while Tom reluctantly moved a couple of paces back. The two men eyed each other without visible hostility, but the hair on the back of my neck bristled with the electric sensation of impending combat.



“I need to speak with Aydan privately for a few minutes,” Kane said mildly. “If you’ll excuse us, this won’t take long.”

And if Tom didn’t excuse us, I knew it wouldn’t take long, either. In hand-to-hand combat, Kane was just as deadly as he looked. Even Tom’s considerable strength and courage wouldn’t have a prayer.

I didn’t give him an opportunity to think it over.

“Sorry, Tom, this’ll just take a minute. John and I need to go over some work stuff.” I grabbed Kane’s sleeve and towed him down the hall into my office without looking back.

Inside, Kane swung the door shut behind us and tilted my chin up to survey my face, his touch lingering. “Are you all right?”

“Fine.” I backed away and leaned nonchalantly against my desk.

Kane’s big warm hands closed around my shoulders. “Try again. Are you all right? Do you need help getting rid of Rossburn?”

I considered pulling away, but the warm strength of his grip eased my vibrating tension. I gave him a reassuring smile. “Really, I’m fine. And you don’t need to worry about Tom unless there’s a helicopter and armed men out there that need to be explained away.”

He chuckled. “No helicopter. Just me and a few of Stemp’s tactical team. We scrambled as soon as the analysts reported the uniforms on your porch. We’ve secured the perimeter, and the tac team is concealed in the trees down by the creek.”

I blew out my relief in a sigh. “Good. So who were those guys?”

He hadn’t let go of my shoulders. The heat of his hands radiated, and a whiff of gun oil and leather summoned a knee-weakening wave of memories I’d been doing my best to avoid. I made

the mistake of looking up at him. His eyes darkened, focusing on my mouth.

“We’re not sure yet,” he said, his velvet baritone caressing my ears. “Definitely not RCMP.” His gaze tracked up to hold mine. “Maybe you should come and stay in the bunker tonight just to be on the safe side.” His voice deepened. “I have a T-shirt you could borrow.”

I swallowed hard and tore my mind away from the invitation sizzling in his eyes. With a supreme effort, I kept my hands off his body and my eyes above his chin.

“No, I’ll be fine.” I pulled out of his grasp. “Let me know as soon as you find out anything. I’d better go and talk to Tom before he decides you’re ravishing me in here...” My perfidious voice went husky on the ‘ravishing’ part.

“...and rushes in to save me,” I finished hurriedly, and scuttled out the door.

When I re-entered the kitchen, Tom stopped in mid-pace. His head jerked up, his arms uncrossing as his gaze snapped to Kane striding behind me.

Kane spoke before Tom could. “Thanks for the update. Good night, Aydan.” He strolled to the door and stooped to don his boots. When he straightened, he fixed Tom with a level gaze. “Rossburn.” His tone was casual, but challenge lurked in its depths.

Tom’s eyes narrowed, blue lasers slicing the thickening tension. “Kane.”

They held each other’s gaze for a long moment before the corner of Kane’s mouth quirked up. He turned and strode out, the quiet click of

the door puncturing the barrier of suspense that had momentarily stopped my breath.

As I eased out an unobtrusive but painful sigh, Tom turned to study me. "You're shaking again. Did he do something to upset you?"

"No, of course not. We were just talking about work." I stiffened my knees, willing my legs to stop quivering.

He frowned. "You never did tell me why the police were here."

"Um... yeah, sorry." I seized on the first excuse that came to mind. "They were just tying up the last loose ends from their investigation of that car crash. They were in some pretty hot water after getting my identity wrong."

His face softened. "You've had the week from hell. No wonder you're feeling shaky." He stepped closer to gather me into his arms. "Remember you don't have to go through these things alone. I'm here for you."

The softness in his voice and the warmth of his arms brought a flood of unexpected emotion. I pulled away, blinking rapidly at the floor. Jesus, woman, get it together.

"Thanks," I muttered. "I'm fine."

"Aydan..." Tom hesitated. "Why won't you let me help you? Is it... Are you too polite to tell me to get lost? If you don't want me around, just say so. I accused Kane of stalking you, but I just realized maybe I'm the one who's being a pest."

When I glanced up, his expression twisted my heart. "Oh, no, Tom, of course you're not!" I blurted before I thought.

I bit my tongue. Idiot. I could have ended everything cleanly right here and sent him away to live safely ever after without me.

His shoulders relaxed, the tense lines easing from his face. “What is it then?” he asked softly. “Why won’t you let down your guard with me? What are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid...” I began, but stopped and dropped my gaze to the floor as I recognized an opportunity to steer him away. “Um...” I gave him a quick glance before eyeing the floor again. “Tom...” I hesitated, mentally trying and discarding several choices of words.

“Just say it, Aydan,” he said quietly. “You don’t have to sugar-coat anything for me.”

His bleak expression wrung my heart. Goddammit, I was sick of hurting good people.

I took his hand and told him half the truth.

“Tom, I really like you, but I’m afraid to spend any time with you because I don’t want to get involved again. Not with you, and not with anybody.”

His face softened, and he stroked my hand. “Aydan, you don’t have to be afraid. I’ll never hurt you. Let me prove it to you.”

I took a moment to relax my clenched teeth and ease out a secret breath of frustration. “No, you don’t understand. I’m not afraid you’ll hurt me. I just don’t have what it takes to be in a relationship again.”

“I know it might feel like that right now, but it’s only been a couple of years since your husband died,” he said gently. “Give yourself time. Someday you’ll be ready to share your life again.”

I blew out a breath and pulled my hand away. “I don’t want that. I just can’t get involved again, and I don’t want to try.”

“It’s okay, I understand,” Tom said. He smiled down at me. “I just want you to know I’m here for you as a friend. Or anything else you want me to be.” The smile lingered in his eyes. “You look exhausted. I’ll leave so you can get some rest.”

He moved to the door to slip on his boots and jacket before studying me intently again, one hand on the doorknob.

“Do you need a hug?” he asked softly. “From a friend?”

The sudden quaking need to curl into his arms frightened me.

I stood a little taller and held my voice very steady. “Thanks, but I’m fine.”

## CHAPTER 3

Trapped!

The coffin squeezed tighter, pinning my arms and legs. I thrashed uselessly, my terrified screams crushed into empty whispers by the implacable pressure of my shrinking prison...

“Aydan! Are you all right?” Kane’s shout dragged me free of the nightmare.

I jerked into sitting position, the horror slithering away to coil itself back into the dark corners of my mind.

“Yeah,” I croaked, my throat still raw from my screams.

Kane slipped through my bedroom door, smooth and silent as a panther. Lethal black-on-black highlights glinted off his gun as he snapped a glance around the moonlit room.

“It’s okay. Just my usual shit.” I groaned and slumped forward to massage my aching face, struggling to bring my breathing under control. “Sorry.”

The bed dipped as Kane perched beside me. “Bad dream?” His hand stroked my hair.

I drew as deep a breath as I could comfortably manage and eased it out, willing my heart rate to slow. “Yeah.” I dragged my head

out of my hands to give him an apologetic grimace. "I didn't think you'd be able to hear me from outside. Sorry."

"All clear." Kane spoke into a small radio before pocketing it to draw me closer. I leaned into him, letting the cold fabric of his jacket soothe my sweaty forehead. When I pulled away, he surveyed me, his expression shadowed into obscurity against the moonlit window. "After what you've been through lately, you don't need to apologize for bad dreams. It happens to everybody."

"Yeah, but I bet you don't wake the neighbours screaming," I muttered.

He sighed. "No. I wake up punching. After my first broken knuckle, I learned to move my bed away from the wall for the first few nights after a tough mission."

"Oh." I sat up straighter, feeling slightly comforted. "Gotta hate it when you hit a stud instead of nice soft drywall."

His chuckle rumbled through the darkness. "You can say that again. Go back to sleep. I'll sit with you for a while."

Embarrassment made me squirm. "No, that's okay, I'm fine. But you and the tac team should come in the house and get warm." I shot a glance at the glowing digits of the clock radio. "God, it's after midnight. You've been out there for nearly four hours. You must be freezing."

"It's only minus five. We're dressed for it, and we keep moving."

"Well, call them on the radio and tell them to come in. I don't think those fake RCMP guys were much of a threat. If they'd been serious about it, they would've grabbed me or shot me right off the bat."

I searched his face, unable to read him in the darkness. "You can protect me just as easily and a lot more comfortably from inside the

house. And anyway, you need sleep. Stemp doesn't expect you to hang around here all night, does he?"

Kane shifted on the bed. "Stemp doesn't know I'm still here. My orders were to secure the area and leave the tac team in place."

I eyed his shadowed features with exasperation. "Well, he knows now, because you just came through the camera surveillance. Go home and get some rest, for chrissake, or you won't be able to function tomorrow." My words ended in a gulp as all my worry flooded back at the thought of my upcoming meeting. I wrenched my mind back to the conversation at hand. "And next week... you're going to need every advantage you can get if you're going to be saddled with me as a partner. Or do you think Stemp will just send me out on my own...?" I swallowed papery fear.

Kane chuckled. "You've been undercover too long. You can abandon the Oscar-winning act when you're with me."

My hand clenched on the duvet hard enough to crack my knuckles. "It's not an act," I hissed. "John, you have to believe me. I was lying when I told Stemp I was an agent. I'm just a dumb civilian bookkeeper and I don't know the first thing about-

"Shhh." His fingertips pressed gently against my lips. "It's all right. I know you can't drop your cover."

I gripped his wrist. "Listen. Please listen to me. If we go on a mission and if you don't treat me like a brainless civilian, you will die expecting me to use some fancy spy skills that *I don't have!* I can't do this!"

He went still. "You wouldn't break cover even if our lives were at stake?"



I let go of his wrist to thump my forehead with the heels of both hands. “No! I mean, I would if I could, but I-”

His kiss stifled my protest, but before I could react he pulled away and stood. The moonlight silvered the curve of his smile. “Aydan, I wouldn’t expect anything else. I’ll willingly stake my life on a partnership with you. You’re amazing.” His grin flashed through the dimness. “You’re also naked. I’m leaving while I still have some willpower, and before the surveillance analysts get suspicious.” His wicked grin widened. “But if they didn’t know I was here...”

He turned and strode out, leaving the unfinished sentence vibrating on suddenly overheated air.

I managed to get through the rest of the night without screaming, largely because I couldn’t go back to sleep. Squinting in the too-bright bathroom lights the next morning, I groaned at the sight of bags under my eyes big enough to carry sandwiches.

A shower and breakfast roused me sufficiently to stumble around the house pulling together the essentials to pack into my spare waist pouch along with the replacement identification cards Stemp had issued me the previous day. At least there were some advantages to working with the Department. Instant replacement ID when yours gets blown up, for one.

I tucked my spare knives into their accustomed spot, feeling smug. Nichele had teased me for my anal-retentive tendencies when I’d bought duplicates, but I loved that lock-bladed knife, dammit. And who was laughing now?

My momentary surge of satisfaction waned fast when I stepped out into the cold morning light, and my breakfast churned in my stomach during the drive to Silverside. With nothing to distract me on the empty country highway, my mind chattered and scrabbled like a trapped rat.

How could I convince Stemp to demote me back to being an asset instead of an agent? Sure, that meant he'd kill me as soon as he found another way to decrypt files and hack computer networks, but if he sent me out on a mission, I'd probably end up dead in short order anyway. And at least as an asset, nobody else's life would depend on me.

I braked when Silverside's single traffic light turned red as usual at my approach.

I could try telling Stemp the truth, but he likely wouldn't believe it. I could see it now: 'Director, y'know before, when you thought I was telling the truth? I was lying then. But I'm telling the truth now. Really, I am.' Yeah, that would work just fine, wouldn't it?

Or maybe... What if he sent me out on a mission, and I purposely screwed it up badly enough that he'd have to demote me?

The light changed, and I groaned as I drove through the intersection. Screwing up one of Stemp's missions meant breaches of national security and innocent people dying. Not an option.

What if I just refused to go?

I parked the truck in the lot across from the Sirius Dynamics building and stared blindly through the windshield, my heart racing.

Insubordination. What would Stemp do?

My grip tightened on the steering wheel and I willed my fingers to slacken enough to ease the pain in my knuckles. I knew damn well what he'd do. My heart fluttered into my throat and lodged there, vibrating.

Jail.

Captivity.

A deluge of adrenaline turned my breathing fast and shallow, and I fought down panic. Breathe. Just belly breathe. In. Out. Stay calm.

Okay, so insubordination wasn't an option.

A figure loomed up in the half-light outside my window and I let out a strangled yelp, jerking around in my seat. For an instant I thought I was hallucinating out of sheer anxiety, but in the next moment I registered Stemp's flesh-and-blood presence. I pried my fingers off the steering wheel and opened the door, hoping my trembling knees wouldn't drop me in the grubby snow of the parking lot.

"Kelly." Stemp surveyed me with his usual lack of expression. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine." I slammed the truck door behind me and forced my legs into what I hoped was a confident stride. Stemp matched my pace as I headed for the building, and I halted abruptly, feigning sudden realization. "Oh, I forgot my gloves in the truck."

I turned back, sending out a psychic plea for him to just keep walking. "See you later," I added, hoping he'd get the hint.

"Sooner," he corrected. "Sign in and report directly to my office in the secured area."

“Okay.” The word squeezed out of my suddenly constricted throat, and I trudged back to the truck, repressing the urge to get back in, drive away, and keep on driving forever.

At the security wicket in the lobby, I dropped the pen twice before managing to scrawl a shaky version of my signature on the sign-in sheet. I held still for the retinal scan outside the heavy door to the secured area with roughly the same enthusiasm as if the small aperture contained a firing squad.

When the door released, I sucked in a deep breath before stepping into the confines of the time delay chamber. Trying to ignore the muffled thud-click of the door behind me, I took two rapid steps forward to activate the next retinal scan.

My breath hissed out between my teeth while I eyed the second hand on my old wristwatch, willing it to traverse the thirty-second arc faster. The low ceiling felt like a rock slab, poised to flatten me.

Shit, stop it! Think about open spaces.

I clamped down on the need to pant in the still air, forcing myself to take deep, slow breaths. When the click of the release sounded at last, I snatched the door open and stumbled down the cramped concrete stairwell as rapidly as I could on wobbly legs. At the bottom, I yanked the door open and lurched into the white corridor, propping myself against the wall beside the door and clamping my eyes shut.

Cool air wafted against my face, and I concentrated on slowing my pounding heart. Not trapped. I could be out of here in thirty seconds. Only thirty seconds. Lots of nice, fresh air down here. Nothing to worry about.

My adrenal glands remained unconvinced.

“Are you all right?”

Every muscle in my body convulsed and I crushed my scream into a squeak behind clenched teeth as my eyes flew open. The small man in front of me took a quick step away from my half-raised fists.

“Are you all right? Do you need help?”

His soothing tones heated my cheeks with a flush of embarrassment. It was Saturday, for chrissake. I had thought the researchers would be gone for the weekend and I’d be alone down here with my claustrophobia.

Nothing like getting caught acting like a raving loony.

I twisted my stiff lips into what I hoped resembled a smile. Judging by his uncertain expression, it might not have been as convincing as I’d hoped.

“I’m fine.” I attempted a light laugh that came out sounding more like a bleat. “Sorry, you just startled me. I didn’t expect anybody else to be down here. I’m just a little claustrophobic, so it usually takes me a few minutes to adjust to being down here. I was just taking a few minutes...” I bit my tongue before I could babble any more and pulled myself together. “Thanks for asking. I’m fine.”

I turned and strode down the hall, hoping he couldn’t see how much my legs were shaking.

Steeling myself, I tapped on the door of Stemp’s office. At his ‘Come’, I swung the door open, and my heart sank at the sight of the stunning blonde woman seated in one of his guest chairs. Sure enough, she had her little briefcase with her.

Oh, shit.

I held my voice under tight control, but it came out shrill despite my best efforts. “Hi, Jack. What are you doing here on a Saturday?”

Her radiant smile warmed the room. “Hi, Aydan.” She avoided my question with a solicitous, “How are you feeling?”

I cleared my throat and tried again for a casual tone. “Fine. Still a little sore, but okay other than the bruises.”

As I shuffled closer, she rose and squeezed my hand. “I’m so glad you’re all right. We came so close to losing you.” A faint crease formed between her flawless brows, her big blue eyes full of concern. “You still look as though you’re in pain. Are you sure you shouldn’t take it easy for a few days?”

I summoned up a smile. “No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Stemp spoke for the first time, his reptilian gaze dissecting me. “Dr. Travers, please hook her up to the polygraph.”

I sank into the chair he indicated, controlling my breathing and keeping my posture relaxed.

Earlier, it had seemed like a good idea to convince him I’d been lying about being an agent. Now it occurred to me that he might just decide I couldn’t be trusted and kill me on the spot. Especially if his questions forced me to tell him the details I’d deliberately omitted from my last report...

I resisted the urge to gulp.

Jack laid her small case on his desk and extracted the familiar band of electrodes. She shot me a brief smile as she settled it around my forehead before turning back to twiddle some knobs in the case.

“There.” She stepped back, giving Stemp a nod. “You may begin, Director.”

“Thank you. You’re dismissed, Dr. Travers.” Stemp’s flat gaze flicked in her direction before returning to bore into me. “I’ll call you when we’re finished.”

Jack stiffened. “Director... I... uh... you...” She straightened her spine, her usual crisp tone returning. “You do realize that this polygraph is experimental technology, do you not? Though all my current research indicates it’s accurate, I haven’t completed testing-”

“Yes, of course.” Stemp waved a dismissive hand.

She stood her ground a moment longer, her blue gaze raking his impassive face. “Don’t shoot her this time,” she snapped before turning on her heel to march out. The door closed behind her with unnecessary firmness.

Stemp leaned back in his chair, steepling his hands and appraising me over top of them. “If you would be so kind as to place your weapon on my desk. Slowly.”

I leaned painfully down to ease my gun out of my ankle holster. When I laid it on his desk, he fixed me with his snake-like eyes. “You will answer yes or no. Are you carrying any other weapons?”

I sank back into my chair. “No.” Realization struck even as I spoke the word. “Uh... not really...”

A flicker of movement made me jerk my gaze up to see his gun trained steadily on my chest. “Would you care to try that answer again?”

My brain bobbed weightlessly in a sea of adrenaline while the damning red light pulsed in my peripheral vision, but apparently I had

catapulted beyond fear. My voice came out sounding incongruously conversational.

“I forgot about my knives. I don’t even think of them as weapons.”

Stemp nodded almost imperceptibly toward his desk. “If you please. Slowly.”

“Okay.” I carefully unzipped the front pocket of my waist pouch and extracted my sturdy lock-bladed knife and a smaller multi-tool jackknife. I slid them onto his desk before leaning back cautiously in my chair again.

“Thank you. Are you carrying any other weapons?”

“No...” The word came out suffused with guilt while I racked my brain for anything else I’d forgotten, but apparently the polygraph was satisfied this time. Its light glowed green.

Stemp fixed me with an unblinking stare. “Do you have any other means of harming me?”

What did he think I was going to do? Break out some secret ninja skills? Use the awesome power of my mind to melt the gun in his hand? The only weapon I could possibly use against him was his big secret, and we both knew I’d never blab that.

“No.”

The light shone blood-red again. My heart battered my chest while Stemp sat in silence, his gun and gaze trained on me with equal deadliness. A small, detached portion of my racing mind admired my composed tone.

“Could you rephrase the question?”

His voice was completely flat. “Why would I do that?”



I couldn't prevent myself from glancing around the room before I met his gaze and spoke softly. "Is this room secure? Could we be overheard?"

"It's secure. Stop stalling. Do you have any other means of harming me? Yes or no."

"Yes. I know about your wife and daughter in Bulgaria. That information could harm you if it reached the wrong ears."

His gaze faltered, his knuckles whitening on the gun, and for an instant I thought he'd pull the trigger. Instead, he matched my quiet tone. "True. Do you have any other means of harming me besides that?"

"No."

I eased out a breath when the light glowed green.

Stemp slowly laid his gun on his desk, his eyes never leaving me. "I can see this will be an interesting conversation."

## CHAPTER 4

Stemp regarded me in silence for a long moment before speaking. “Let’s begin at the beginning. Is your real name Aydan Kelly?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever used another name?”

“N...” I caught myself just in time. That would have been true a couple of weeks ago, but not anymore. “Yes.” The green light flashed reassurance.

“Do you also use the names Arlene Widdenback and Arlene Cherry?”

I tried to keep my expression neutral, but I was pretty sure some venom leaked through. Someday I’d make him regret assigning me that cover...

“Yes.”

“Have you ever used any other names besides those?”

“No.”

I knew better than to relax into the easy questions. Sure enough, the next one was a biggie.

“Are you a secret agent?”

“N... uh... yes...” Dammit, both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ were equal parts truth and lie. I wasn’t an agent, but he’d promoted me to agent status, so did that make me an agent or not?

I shot an anxious glance at the case. Green light. What would it have done if I’d said ‘no’?

Stemp’s next question pulled me back from my nervous speculations. “Does your direct command work within the Sirius Dynamics command structure?”

At least that was an easy one. “Yes.”

“Would your direct command do anything to compromise national security or our operations?”

“I seriously doubt it.” Stemp might be a dickhead, but I was pretty sure he was loyal.

He eyed me. “Yes or no, please.”

“How the hell should I know? You tell me. Are you a traitor?”

He raised an eyebrow. “So we’re talking about me, are we? Thank you for your vote of confidence. No, I’m not a traitor.” After a short silence, he spoke again. “Let’s talk about your other chain of command.”

I swallowed my palpitating heart and held my voice steady. “I don’t have another chain of command.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. “That is directly contrary to what you told me four days ago.”

My shrug felt more like a nervous twitch. “Yes, but then I told you afterward that I didn’t have any other ops.”

“Very well, Kelly. Let’s find out. Do you have any other ops? Yes or no.”

“No.”

Stemp sat back slowly in his chair, eyeing the green light.

“Did you have another op four days ago?”

My heart pistoned against my ribs, and I couldn't prevent another involuntary swallow to moisten my dry throat. “Y-yes.” My voice was just above a whisper.

Shit, shit, shit...

“You told me four days ago that if anyone else found out about your other op, the consequences to you would be...” He hesitated, apparently searching for the correct word. “...disastrous. Does that still hold true?”

“Yes,” I croaked.

My mind scurried away in a desperate bid for freedom. Jack should put some more lights on that thing. A big honkin' strobe for when somebody spoke a truth of the magnitude I'd just uttered. When Stemp found out I'd been lying, 'disaster' wouldn't even begin to cover it...

His voice jerked my attention back to the situation at hand. “Would your direct command for any of your other ops do anything to compromise national security or jeopardize our clandestine operations?”

Another easy one, since I'd only had one so-called 'op' and my 'direct command' had been me, myself, and I.

“No.”

Stemp glanced at the green light before scrutinizing me for approximately a lifetime. My nerves twisted into knots, anticipating the killing blow.

I managed not to betray myself with a start when he spoke again. “You seem very sure.”

“Yes.”

Another long pause. “You must have been working under that command for some time, then.”

Yeah, for my entire life...

“Yes.” I held myself under rigid control, stifling a hysterical giggle when the green light flashed again.

“Have you ever conveyed sensitive information to anyone outside your command structure?”

“No.”

“Do you have reason to believe any of your other ops would ever compromise national security or our operations?”

“No.”

“Would you ever intentionally compromise national security or our operations?”

“No.”

Green light all the way.

Stemp sat immobile, his monochrome colouring and expressionless eyes reminding me all over again of a rattlesnake. I held myself completely still while his gaze ripped my soul from its moorings and inspected it like a cheap T-shirt held up to the light.

\* \* \*

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