

How Spy I Am

Book 5 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

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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.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are products of my imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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CHAPTER 1

“We need to do damage control.”

I suppressed an exhausted yawn along with my urge to say, ‘No shit, Sherlock’, and eyed the civilian director of clandestine operations with distaste.

Charles Stemp returned his usual impassive stare from across the table, and I let my gaze slide off his reptilian features to the much more rewarding sight of John Kane beside him.

Stemp’s flat voice continued, “Fuzzy Bunny came too close to capturing you this week. That would have been disastrous to our national security, not to mention to you personally.”

“Wouldn’t have been much worse than being captured by you,” I snapped before I could stop myself.

Stemp met my eyes levelly. “We needed you to believe you were in enemy hands. And I don’t need to remind you that Fuzzy Bunny will not stop at a small burn to force your cooperation if they capture you.”

I swallowed the sudden dryness in my throat and willed myself not to hug my bandaged arm. Hell, no, he didn’t need to remind me. The only thing cuddly about Fuzzy Bunny was their name.

God, what if they were hunting me again? My gaze flicked toward the doorway despite the knowledge that we were in a secured building.

Jeez, woman, relax.

I drew a deep breath and attempted to follow my own advice. I was safe. Kane was probably Canada's most lethal weapon, and after our conversation yesterday, I was pretty sure he'd protect me with his life. My mind sidled away from the memory of his lips framing the words 'I love you'. I'd spent half the night worrying about that.

Deal with it later.

Stemp's voice dragged my tired brain back from its rambling. "We need to convince them you are dead. And Kane informs me your cover here in Silverside is not as," he hesitated. "...Robust," he said finally, "...as we would prefer."

I met Kane's steady grey eyes, wondering exactly what he'd reported. My gaze strayed lower without my permission to admire the massive chest and bulging biceps straining his black T-shirt. Lethal and unbelievably hot, goddammit...

"Aydan?"

"Ms. Kelly?"

Kane and Stemp both spoke my name, and I herded my mind back to the meeting table yet again. "Sorry, what?" I asked, massaging the ache in my forehead.

"Do you have any ideas to contribute regarding your cover identity?" Stemp repeated.

I forced myself to appreciate his attempt to include me in the process. "Not at the moment, I'm sorry." I didn't bother to add, 'I've been a little busy trying to stay alive lately'.

"It's all right," Kane said. "We can work on it today."

I shot him a grateful look.

Stemp rose. "Very well. Have a proposal ready by end of day." He fixed me with his expressionless gaze. "Please check the network first thing for any chatter regarding yourself. Our analysts haven't picked

anything up from the public channels, so you'll need to breach Fuzzy Bunny's firewalls and check their systems directly."

He strode out, and I sighed and sank my forehead onto the table, cushioned by my crossed forearms. I grunted and quickly repositioned my arms at the jab of pain.

"Are you all right?" Kane's velvet baritone was quick with concern.

"Fine. I just bumped that burn," I mumbled into the table. I hadn't even heard him stand, and his touch startled me. "It's fine," I repeated, but he was already lifting the dressing away from my arm, his powerful hands deft and gentle.

We both contemplated the angry-looking wound. "I thought Stemp said it was just a small second-degree burn," Kane growled.

I shrugged and retrieved the bandage from him, smoothing it back down onto my skin. "Richardson panicked. I guess he held the torch on me a little longer than he meant to. It'll be fine."

"Aydan, I'm so sorry you had to go through that. I know it doesn't make it any less traumatic to know it was faked." His face darkened. "Except for that burn."

"You've got nothing to apologize for." I stood and drifted toward the door. "Stemp, on the other hand, owes me a buttload of apologies, which I'm highly unlikely to get. Let's go."

Slouched on the small sofa in my office a few minutes later, I scowled at the tiny piece of circuitry in my hand. Why the hell did it only work for me? And why the hell hadn't its unknown inventors created something that wouldn't drive flaming spikes through my brain every time I used it?

I drew a shallow breath through my mouth.

"Are you okay?" Clyde Webb's voice made me concentrate on putting a more pleasant expression on my face. It wasn't difficult when I looked up to see the concern on his youthful face.

“Fine, Spider, thanks.” I flicked my eyes in John Smith’s direction, and Spider’s expression cleared in comprehension.

I had hoped to work with Kane and Spider as usual today, but apparently Smith had orders to attend as well. I took another shallow breath, trying not to inhale his stench. Somebody really should tell him to change his shirt more than once a month. You’d think he’d get the hint when its pattern of food stains started to resemble a particularly creative Jackson Pollock canvas.

I shook off my mood with a sigh and waited for Kane to pull up a chair before eyeing my team. “Everybody ready?”

Spider nodded, his fingers already flying over his laptop keyboard. Smith concentrated on the desktop computer, and Kane gave me a nod and a smile, fingering the fob that would give him painless access to the brainwave-driven simulation network.

Painless. Huh. I wish.

I banished my self-pity with another sigh and gripped the network key, concentrating on stepping into the white void of virtual reality. A second later, Kane’s avatar popped into existence beside me.

The network was a busy place. Kane stepped protectively in front of me when a couple of researchers’ avatars approached in the virtual corridor. They exchanged wary glances and gave us a wide berth.

I patted Kane’s hard shoulder. “Don’t scare the locals. I’m pretty sure we’re safe here.”

“I’m not taking any chances,” he rumbled.

I smiled up at him. “Thanks.”

His strong square face softened into an answering smile, activating the sexy laugh lines around his eyes, and we made our way to the virtual file repository in comfortable silence.

Inside, I surveyed the towering stack of virtual files with dismay. “Shit, they really piled up.”

Guilt prodded me. If I hadn't run off last week...

I tamped it down. Too late to be sorry, just fix the problem. "Have the analysts flagged anything in particular?" I asked.

"Nothing that's a higher priority than hiding your identity," Kane said. "You need to check Fuzzy Bunny's network first. You can worry about these other files later."

"Okay. This will probably take a while." I created a virtual chair in the sim and sank into it, and Kane pulled one out of thin air beside me, reaching toward me as he sat.

I took his extended hand and gave it a little squeeze. "Thanks for being my anchor." I glimpsed his smile one more time as I faded into invisibility to seep into the data stream, feeling my consciousness stretch from his grip like a rubber band.

Hitching a ride on data packets, I shot through a roller-coaster of connections, following the delicate tracery of markers I'd left behind in my earlier surveillance. When I reached Fuzzy Bunny's first firewall, I paused for a deep virtual breath before trickling through the pinhole I'd left open in my previous visit. Their intrusion-detection software passed harmlessly over me, and I continued my stealthy progress, nosing around invisibly in their file system.

If I'd had a stomach in my current form, it would have clenched at what I discovered. I willed calm. Search it all out.

I sifted their data with the finest filter I could create before moving on to the next server. And the next.

And the next.

By the time my exhausted consciousness oozed back into the file repository, it was all I could do to recreate my avatar. When I faded into wavering existence, Kane reached carefully for my shoulders.

“Stay with me now,” he encouraged. “Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

“Okay...” I whispered, concentrating fiercely.

He gathered me up and guided me to the exit portal, the warm strength of his arm holding my virtual form together.

My momentary relief at getting to the portal was erased by the familiar explosion of pain when I returned my consciousness to my physical body.

“Aaah-God-dammit-sonuva-fucking-*bitch!*” I spat, clutching my temples.

Kane’s hands gently pushed mine away to close around my head, and I whimpered gratitude while his massage eased the worst of the pain.

At last, I slumped back on the sofa. “Thanks,” I mumbled.

Kane stooped to look into my face as I sprawled limply. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. Thanks. It just hurts more when I’m tired.” I wedged myself into a corner of the couch in an approximately upright position. “God. Shit.” I ran a hand over my still-aching face.

“What?” Kane demanded. “What did you find?”

I blew out a long sigh. “Lots of chatter about me, unfortunately. They’re not positive I’m alive, but they’re sure as hell stirred up about finding me if I am.”

He eyed me, looking concerned. “You’re shaking. Do you need to eat?”

“Yeah.” I consulted my watch. “I know it’s only ten o’clock, but if I can’t have sleep, I have to have food.”

I hauled myself up off the couch and made for the lunchroom before I had to explain I’d spent most of the previous night jerking awake from screaming nightmares of captivity and torture.

After wolfing down a cereal bar, I sank onto the sofa with a sigh and stepped back into the network. Seated again in the network's virtual file room, I reached for Kane's hand. "Okay, brace yourself for a couple more exciting hours of sitting around."

Kane gave my hand a sympathetic squeeze. "I know how tedious this seems, but it's important. This kind of clandestine work is usually 99% boredom and 1% sheer panic."

"I know, it's just that we never seem to get anywhere. Every day it's more meaningless file decryptions and more sneaking around in networks to cover my ass."

Kane chuckled. "You're our most valuable asset. It's definitely worth the effort to cover your ass."

I sighed. "I just wish I wasn't the only person who could use this stupid key. You need a trained agent, not a dumb civilian bookkeeper."

"Aydan, you're doing amazing work. Nobody could do better." He eyed me seriously. "And those decryptions aren't meaningless. We've managed to cripple some very nasty operations in the past couple of months, thanks to your work."

I gave him a smile, feeling a little better. "Our work."

He returned the smile, and I faded invisibly into the data stream.

My surveillance finally complete, I eased out of the last of Fuzzy Bunny's servers a couple of hours later and slid into the public data stream. I was just turning for home when a wave of dizziness shook me.

I tumbled in a riptide of data, my essence shredding and scrambling despite my frenzied attempts to hold it together. I knew my consciousness could neither speak nor breathe, but panic seized me when my screams strangled in my non-existent throat. Trapped in silent invisibility, my bodiless struggle churned the surrounding data stream into chaos.

Kane. Where was my anchor?

A few frantic seconds later, I identified the faint sensation of his distant grip. I concentrated all my will into a desperate surge, snapping back into my avatar with such force I tumbled off my virtual chair, dragging Kane onto the floor with me.

I lay gasping and shivering, both hands clenched around his. He jerked to his knees beside me, his gun already in his free hand.

“What?” he snapped, his gaze scouring the void around us.

“Out,” I begged, my voice a thin quaver of pure terror. “Get me out!”

He didn’t waste time on speech or subtlety. Seconds later, I was jouncing over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry while he ran flat-out for the portal.

Spider’s frantic voice sliced through the sim. “Slow down! She can’t go through the portal fast!”

Kane skidded to a halt in front of it and dropped my feet to the ground, holding me up when my knees tried to collapse. I stepped slowly out of the network.

“Aaaah! Golly jeepers whiz, son of a sea monkey! That hurts!” I clenched my hands around the stabbing agony in my real-world temples and doubled over. “Holy fudge! What *was* that?”

Silence greeted my outburst and I straightened slowly, squinting through the pain. Spider, Smith, and Kane were all eyeing me, frowning.

I felt slow heat spreading up my cheeks. “Please excuse my language. I just have an awful pain in my head. Does anyone have some ibuprofen?”

Spider shot a worried glance at Kane. “You always carry it in your waist pouch. But you said nothing touches the pain.”

“Oh.” I frowned down at my waist pouch. “Right...” I shook away the muzzy confusion, reaching for normalcy through my pounding headache. A glance at my watch made me leap to my feet.

“Crumbs, I’m going to be late to pick Cassandra up from daycare. Where’s my purse?” I peered around the room, but didn’t see the purse I knew I’d grabbed on the way out of the house this morning.

“Who’s Cassandra?” Kane inquired cautiously.

“My granddaughter. You know that.” I shot him a frown. “Where in the wide blue heavens did I leave my purse? Did you see it? It’s pink with a silver buckle...”

Kane took my arm gently. “I think you’d better sit down for a minute.” He pressed me down on the sofa. “You don’t have a granddaughter. And I’ve never seen you carry a purse.”

I frowned at him. What in heaven’s name was the man going on about?

“Of course I have a granddaughter,” I argued. “She’s three and a half, she goes to daycare in the mornings and spends afternoons with me while her mama works, and I’m going to be late to pick her up!”

I tried to get up again, but he held my arm firmly. Spider closed in from the other side, wide-eyed. “Aydan, you’re scaring me.”

Merciful Lord, they’d all lost their minds.

“Who’s Aydan?” I asked.

CHAPTER 2

Spider turned a chalk-white face to John Smith. “Call Dr. Kraus, quick!”

Smith was already reaching for the phone. Kane placed a hand under my elbow and lifted me gently.

“Let’s go downstairs,” he said, his calm voice completely at odds with the tense lines around his mouth. “We’re just going to have a doctor check you over.”

“For heaven’s sake, John, I know where Sam’s lab is, but you know I don’t have time for this right now,” I protested. “That poor child will think I’ve abandoned her just like her daddy did. I have to go.”

Spider came to stand beside me, wearing a sympathetic expression. He slid a comforting arm around my shoulders to give me a squeeze, but I could feel his hand trembling.

“It’s okay,” he soothed. “You go and pick Cassandra up, and we can finish up tomorrow. We’ll just walk down to the lobby with you.”

My surge of gratitude and affection was tempered with an odd sense of displacement, but I let it go. Cassandra had to come first, no matter what. Thank heaven Spider understood that.

I made for the door, Kane still hovering at my elbow while Smith brought up the rear. Spider slipped ahead of us to disappear down the stairs.

When we came out on the main floor, a glimpse of bare tree branches outside the window made me stumble to a halt, my head

swimming. That's right, today's forecast had threatened the first snow of the season.

But the grass had been green when I left the house in the morning, and it was shaping up to be another hot, humid day in Macon.

Another wave of dizziness shook me.

Hello, Betty, you're not in Georgia anymore.

Spider and Sam Kraus hurried toward us. Sam's normally jolly face was drawn with concern. "Aydan, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

"I think so." I turned my head experimentally back and forth. "I was really dizzy for a minute there, but it's gone now."

Sam shot a questioning look at the frowning faces surrounding me.

"Aydan?" Kane asked cautiously.

"Yeah...?" I frowned back at him.

There was something important I was supposed to do...

"Do you know who you are?"

"Yeah, why?"

His grey gaze searched my face. "Tell me your name."

I surveyed him worriedly for a second. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just tell me your name, please."

"Ookay... My name is Aydan Kelly."

A faint sense of wrongness made me rub my temples while another name flitted through my mind, fading into invisible distance.

Betty.

I frowned at Kane. "Who the hell is Betty Hooper from Macon, Georgia?"

"I haven't a clue." He shot a glance at the others, who returned puzzled looks and shrugs. Kane turned back to me. "Do you still need to pick up your granddaughter?"

I squeezed my eyes shut on another wave of vertigo. “I don’t have a granddaughter.” My knees tried to let go. “Oh, thank God, I don’t have a granddaughter.”

I slumped against the wall, sucking in a breath of sheer relief. “I don’t have a granddaughter. I don’t have a daughter who’s a single mother. Nobody needs me. Oh, thank God.”

“Come and sit down.” Kane’s strong arm closed around me, and he helped me to one of the chairs in the reception area.

I collapsed into it and hid my face in my shaking hands. The sense of deliverance was as intense as waking in my own bed after the previous night’s horrible dreams of captivity. I controlled my breathing with an effort, wrestling for composure.

At last, I drew a long breath and sat up.

“Are you okay?” Spider asked.

“Yeah.” I took another slow breath. “Yeah. I’m okay. That was... weird.”

The dizziness subsided at last, and the vivid memories of people I’d never met and places I’d never visited began to fade to sepia tones.

“Can you walk now?” Sam asked. “We need to get you into my lab and see if we can figure out what happened, if you’re okay to go down now.”

I shot an unhappy look at the heavy steel door, my pulse pounding again. “Yeah, I’m fine. Well, as fine as I ever am when I have to go into the secured area.”

Kane hovered beside me as I rose, and I trailed reluctantly over to activate the retinal scanner.

When the latch released, I turned to the others. “You guys go on ahead. I’ll come after you.”

“No,” Kane disagreed. “I’ll come with you. Just in case.”

I sighed and stepped into the chamber. As soon as the door closed behind us, I stepped forward for the next retinal scan. Kane stood beside me, and I moved away as unobtrusively as I could, mentally counting down the seconds and willing my fists not to clench.

As usual, he missed nothing. "Sorry," he said, and stepped back to flatten himself against the opposite wall.

I drew in a shallow breath, willing the claustrophobia away with all my might. "Thanks."

Seated in Sam's underground lab, I rolled my shoulders, trying to release the knotted tension. A ring of anxious faces surrounded me as he placed the band of trailing wires around my forehead.

"Just relax," Sam soothed. "I'm just going to do a quick scan and check it against your data from last week. Nothing to worry about."

"Easy for you to say," I snapped, clinging to a crumbling edge above the abyss of panic. I clenched my teeth and concentrated on my breathing. In. Out. Ocean waves.

Not trapped. I could leave if I wanted. Oh, God, what if they decided I was crazy and locked me down?

The chair arms creaked faintly under my grip, and Kane tucked a warm hand over my bloodless knuckles.

"Aydan, try to relax," he urged. "Just belly breathe. Nice and slow."

"I *am*," I gritted. "This is me being calm, all right?"

"All right," he agreed, his grip tightening when I twitched violently.

"It's okay," Sam crooned. "It's okay, don't worry, I was just moving one of these wire leads..."

"Just get it *done*, already!" I barked.

Smith's murmur drifted from behind me. "She's very agitated. Maybe she should be kept under observation for a while."

Before I could give in to the urge to leap up and run screaming, Spider's quick voice reassured him. "No, this is normal. She's just really claustrophobic. I'd be more worried if she was calm."

Thank you, Spider. I mentally heaped blessings on his head, and a few minutes later, Sam spoke again.

"I don't see anything to concern me here. There's some higher-than-normal activity in the frontal lobe..." He glanced at my uncomprehending expression and elaborated, "...the area that controls cognition and memory. But it's certainly not outside the parameters of normality in the global sense, and it was subsiding even while I was monitoring."

Sam didn't quite meet my eyes as he gave me a reassuring smile and removed the instrumentation from my forehead. "It sounds to me as though you just got tangled up in some data, maybe somebody's personal blog or something, and you absorbed a great deal of their information too quickly for you to process. Stay out of the network this afternoon, get some rest, and you should be fine tomorrow."

"Oh, thank you!" I held back the urge to throw my arms around him and fled for the stairs instead.

By the time the secured door opened into the lobby, my legs were twitching with the urge to run. I snatched up the jacket I'd left on the chair and hurried to the security desk, unclipping my security fob.

"I'm going over to Blue Eddy's. I should've been there at eleven, and I'm late. Then I'm due at Up & Coming at one. I'll be back around three," I threw over my shoulder.

"Wait." Kane's voice stopped me in the doorway.

I turned, holding back the urge to snap at him from sheer pent-up nervous energy. "What?"

"You should stay here for a while, just in case you have another... episode."

My heart rate ticked up another notch. “Sam said I was fine. It was just some weird thing in the network.”

Kane frowned. “I think he’s taking it too lightly. I don’t see how he can know for certain it was something in the network. What if it wasn’t?”

“He said it was just a harmless collision in the network.” I swallowed fear. “He should know, this is his life’s work. And he didn’t seem worried at all.”

“But he’s not-” Kane broke off and apparently decided to try another tack. “We really need to work on your cover.”

I blew out a breath and rubbed at my forehead. “Yeah, but in the mean time, this *is* my cover. I’m a bookkeeper, remember? That means I actually have to show up at my clients’ places and do some bookkeeping occasionally.”

“If Fuzzy Bunny captures you, you won’t be bookkeeping for anybody ever again. Call Eddy and tell him you’ll come tomorrow instead.”

“No.” I shot him an exasperated glance. “Eddy is one of my favourite clients. I spend my entire goddamn life here except for a few lousy hours a week when I get to do what I *really* do.”

“Aydan...” His expression was a mixture of annoyance and pleading. “You know how important this is. Your life is on the line.”

I sighed and gave in to both logic and the anxiety I’d been trying to deny.

“Fine, I’ll just grab lunch at Eddy’s and then come right back.” I turned and hurried out, hoping the compromise was good enough to prevent him from dragging me bodily back into the building. When I made it outside without incident, I gulped grateful breaths of the crisp October air while I walked to my car.

At Blue Eddy's, I let myself in the back door of the bar and felt the weight of Sirius Dynamics ease from my shoulders at the sound of the piano.

The waitress waved as I passed the kitchen. "Hi Aydan! You want your usual?"

"Yeah, thanks, Darlene." I shrugged the tension out of my muscles and followed the beguiling sound of the blues.

Eddy glanced up from the keyboard with his usual warm smile. "Hi, Aydan!"

The music pouring from his fingers never faltered, and I sank down to sit on the back corner of the stage, leaning my head against the wall behind me.

"Hi, Eddy. Have I told you lately how much I love coming here and listening to you play?"

He grinned. "Only every second time you're here." The music dwindled to a halt as he sobered, frowning. "Aydan, are you okay? You're really pale."

I summoned up a smile. "I'm fine, Eddy, thanks. Just tired."

"Why don't you go home and have a rest?" he suggested. "You can come in tomorrow instead. And maybe you should get a checkup. You work out and eat well. You shouldn't be feeling so run-down."

I seized the opportunity. "Thanks. You're probably right. Maybe I will make a doctor's appointment..." I rose to head for a table before I had to lie to him any more.

My waist pouch vibrated, and I fumbled hurriedly for my phone, catching the call just before it went to voice mail.

"Is this Aydan Kelly?" The precise female voice at the other end of the line sounded vaguely familiar.

"Speaking," I responded, suppressing a yawn and racking my sleepy brain. Not one of my bookkeeping clients...

“This is Miss Emma Lacey, Arnold Helmand’s neighbour. Are you the tall young woman with the long red hair who visits him from time to time?”

I couldn’t help smiling. Forty-seven was hardly young, but I guessed it was all about perspective.

“Yes, Miss Lacey, that’s me.” I remembered the very proper retired schoolteacher and bit back the urge to correct myself and say ‘It is I’. “How are you?” I inquired instead.

“I am very well, thank you,” she said crisply. “But I am quite concerned about Arnold. Did you know that he was in a motorcycle accident last evening?”

CHAPTER 3

Fear plunged icy talons into my heart and threatened to rip it from my chest. I swallowed hard and held onto composure, but when I spoke, my voice was thin and breathless. “No, I didn’t know. Is he...”

“He is badly injured...” she began.

The phone creaked under the sudden clenching of my fingers. “Where is he?” I interrupted. My voice trembled, and I sucked in a deep breath to steady it before demanding, “Which hospital?”

“He should be in the hospital,” she replied disapprovingly. “But he is at home. He makes light of his injuries because he doesn’t want to alarm me, but heaven only knows what he is hiding. He isn’t even capable of walking without the aid of crutches. I thought that you would want to know.”

Terror eased with the knowledge that he was able to move around under his own power, and I shoved aside the old bad memories.

“Thank you so much for calling, Miss Lacey. I’ll leave Silverside immediately. I should be in Calgary in about two hours.”

Punching the disconnect button, I surrendered to my trembling knees and sank down on the edge of the stage again, taking a few yoga belly breaths. In. Out. Slow like ocean waves.

Eddy vacated the piano stool to kneel beside me. “Aydan, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Arnie Helmand was in a motorcycle accident.” I took a couple more breaths.

Eddy's forehead creased with concern. "Hellhound? That biker guy who's such an amazing guitarist? Is he... how bad is it?"

"It sounds like he's in rough shape, but he's not in the hospital, so maybe it's not as bad as it sounds. Eddy, I've got to go. I'll let you know when I can come and do your books..."

"It's okay," he interrupted. He beckoned to Darlene before turning back to me. "The books aren't important. Darlene will wrap up your burger to go, so make sure you eat it. Drive carefully." He squeezed my hand. "Think good thoughts. He'll be okay."

Moments later I was out the door, the heat of the burger comforting my cold hand. I punched my speed-dial button with a quivering finger while I hurried to my car.

"Kane." His strong baritone restored some warmth to my body, and I drew in a deep, calming breath.

"John, it's Aydan. Arnie's neighbour just called to tell me Arnie crashed his bike. I'm going down to Calgary to see him. I'm leaving now."

"How bad?" he snapped, the words humming with steel-cable tension.

Jeez, way to dump news about a guy's best friend. Remorse stabbing me, I hastened to offer what reassurance I could. "She said he was in bad shape, but apparently he's at home, getting around on crutches and resisting any suggestions of medical care."

"Oh." His reply came out on a breath, and his voice was deep with relief when he spoke again. "That sounds like him. As long he's rejecting medical treatment, it's a good sign."

He hesitated. "You know you shouldn't leave. Stemp's not going to like this."

"Fuck Stemp."

"No, thanks. He's not my type."

I blew out a breath between clenched teeth. “I don’t give a shit whether Stemp likes it or not. Yesterday he told me I have to report all my comings and goings to you. So I’m reporting. I’m going. We’re done here.”

“Aydan, wait. Why don’t you just call Hellhound first? If he’s at home, it might not be that serious. You know how rough he looked when he left yesterday...”

Guilt twisted my stomach at the too-fresh memory of brutal fists slamming into his face and body. The horribly flat, meaty thud of impact. His blood spattering the floor. All because he was trying to protect me...

Kane was still talking. “...she’s an elderly lady, she was probably just shocked by all the bruises and bandages...”

“She said he was on crutches,” I interrupted. “There was nothing wrong with his legs yesterday. And you know damn well he’d lie and say he was fine even if he was at death’s door.”

After another short hesitation, he replied, “All right. I’ll cover for you with Stemp, but call me as soon as you get to Calgary, and get back here as soon as you can. We still need to meet this afternoon. If you have to stay with Hellhound...” He paused.

Did I hear jealousy in his voice? Shit, this was going to get complicated...

“We can figure it out after we know how he is,” he finished. “Be careful. Watch your back. And if you feel dizzy or confused or unusual in any way, call me immediately.”

“Okay.” I hung up with relief.

When I hurried up to Arnie’s condo building two hours later, an elderly woman popped out the door, her energy belying her tiny, frail-looking figure. Miss Lacey ushered me through the lobby, and I followed

while she climbed the stairs to the third floor slowly but steadily, apparently disdaining the elevator.

I knocked, and Miss Lacey and I stood in silence in the hallway outside Arnie's door. No sound came from inside. We exchanged a look and I knocked again, louder this time.

Tension mounted while we waited. I saw my worry mirrored on her face as she stiffened her already arrow-straight posture. "Try one more time," she commanded. "If he doesn't answer, I'll use the key he gave me."

I rapped again.

Waited.

Miss Lacey was just reaching for the knob when the door jerked open.

"What the fuckin' hell!" Hellhound snapped. His scowl smoothed out. "Uh, sorry, Miz Lacey."

He balanced awkwardly, a crutch under one arm, his other hand clutching a towel around his middle. His heavy muscles glistened with water droplets.

Even his extensive tattoos couldn't hide all the contusions and raw scrapes. The face above his beard was a grim collage of bandages and purplish-black bruises, his left eye swollen half-shut.

He hopped on his good foot, dropping the crutch to make a grab for the large disreputable-looking cat that made a dash for the doorway. I scooped up Hooker's furry bulk and cuddled him while Arnie retrieved his crutch.

Arnie eyed me. "Aydan? Everythin' okay?" His usual rasp held an edge of anxiety and his battered knuckles whitened on the towel.

"Fine. Everything's fine," I assured him, weak with relief. Except for the crutch, he actually looked a little better than when we'd parted the previous afternoon. At least he could see out of both eyes now.

His powerful shoulders relaxed. "Christ, don't scare me like that."

I reached up to brush a kiss across his lips. "I don't bring bad news every time I show up at your door, you know."

His swollen cheek distorted his smile. "Come on in, then, darlin'. Miz Lacey. I'll go put some clothes on."

"Thank you, Arnold, but no," Miss Lacey replied. "Aydan, if you would be so kind as to drop in at my apartment later, I would appreciate it very much." She turned and went across the hall, her door closing behind her with a decisive click.

I stepped inside Hellhound's apartment and swung the door shut, stooping to release the cat.

Hellhound grinned and let his towel drop. "Come to put some drag-racin' moves on my stickshift like ya promised?"

I returned his grin and took a moment to appreciate the scenery. "Good to see everything's still where it belongs. Miss Lacey scared the shit out of me. She phoned and said you'd been in a bike accident and you were in bad shape."

Still balancing with his crutch, he pulled me into a gentle one-armed hug and kissed my forehead. "Sorry, darlin'. I hadta explain the bruises to her somehow, an' I sure as hell couldn't tell her it was 'cuz a' your spy stuff. I didn't know she was gonna call ya."

I frowned. "Kane's the spy. I'm just an asset."

"Yeah, darlin', whatever," he replied. "If it walks like a duck, an' quacks like a duck..." He shot a pointed look at my ankle, where he knew my Glock 26 snuggled in its concealed holster. "So I told her I dumped the bike," he finished.

I pulled away to survey the damage. "Looks like you did. That's fresh road rash, and there was nothing wrong with your ankle yesterday."

"Yeah," he grunted, and limped over to sprawl on the couch. I winced as he eased his swollen ankle onto the worn coffee table.

“I was bringin’ the bike back last night, an’ some fuckin’ dipshit cut me off,” he continued. “Hadta lay ‘er down. Caught my boot in a fuckin’ pothole an’ went ass over teakettle.”

“Did you get it x-rayed?” I demanded.

“Yeah. Just a sprain. No big deal. I wasn’t goin’ very fast.”

“How’s the Harley?”

He scowled. “Scraped the shit outta the pipes an’ dented the tank. Gonna hafta get it rechromed an’ repainted. Little assrat wrote me a cheque on the spot, though. Pissed his pants an’ gave me about twice what it’s gonna cost to get it fixed.”

I eyed his fearsome visage fondly. Hellhound’s normal appearance scared most people. In his current battle-scarred state, I was surprised the hapless motorist hadn’t dropped dead of sheer terror.

His lopsided smile returned, his teeth gleaming white against his split lip. “Too bad ya rushed down here in a panic, but it’s good to see ya.” He sobered. “Did ya work things out with Kane?”

“Um. A lot of things got cleared up in the debriefing. And we talked afterwards. I think... we’re still friends.”

I bit my tongue and shut up. It wasn’t strictly a lie. We could still be friends as long as I pretended he hadn’t used the L-word...

Arnie’s too-perceptive gaze surveyed my face, and something in my expression must have prompted him to leave it alone. He reached out his arms and bounced his eyebrows, grinning.

“So, ya gonna come over here an’ comfort a poor injured man?”

“In a minute. First I have to call Kane and tell him you’re okay.”

My call completed, I cuddled close beside Hellhound on the couch and ran a careful hand over his powerful chest. “You’re so beat up, I’m afraid to touch you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He captured my hand and slid it south. “Some things ain’t hurtin’.”

I stroked him, smiling when he moved slowly against my hand and let out a raspy half-groan, half-purr.

“I don’t know,” I teased. “That’s some pretty serious swelling you’ve got down there. Maybe I shouldn’t take a chance on making it worse.”

“Trust me, darlin’, that kinda swellin’ only gets better. An’ I got some creative ideas to keep from hurtin’ anythin’ else.” His deep growl caressed my ears and vibrated in some very interesting places.

I let him see my shiver of hot anticipation. “I know just how creative you can be.”

He pulled me closer to trail whiskery kisses down my neck, and the shivers spread like wildfire.

“Ya ain’t seen nothin’ yet, darlin’.”

Some time later, I emerged smiling from Arnie’s apartment to tap on Miss Lacey’s door. When it opened, her bird-like eyes raked me up and down. “Please come in.”

I stepped into her tidy apartment and took a seat in the wing chair she indicated. “Would you like a cup of tea?” she inquired.

“Yes, thank you.”

“And perhaps a snack,” she suggested. “You must be hungry after all that exertion.”

I snapped a look up to meet her sharp black gaze. “...Uh...?”

“The walls in this condo are paper-thin,” she said. “I do hope you were using condoms. Arnold tends to be promiscuous, you know.”

“Um,” I said, feeling my face heat up. “Yes. To both. I mean, we always use... um. And I know Arnie has lots of other female company. Sorry about the, uh, sound effects.”

“It’s all right, child. I quite envied you. He must be an expert lover.”

“Um... yeah... he’s... amazing, actually.” I willed the heat out of my cheeks and tried to look nonchalant.

She chuckled as she passed me a delicate bone-china cup and saucer. “You’d do well to remember that old age doesn’t necessarily equate with prudishness. So is he your... what do you young people call it? Your booty call?”

I laughed and shook off my discomfort as I readjusted my evaluation of Miss Emma Lacey. “Not exactly. We’re friends with benefits. I’d like to think the friendship would remain even if the benefits ended.”

She perched in the opposite chair and tilted her head, increasing the impression of an inquisitive bird. “Please excuse my prying, but I’m keenly interested in the social and sexual mores of the younger female generations. With how many men do you have such an arrangement?”

I eyed her for a moment, debating whether to tell her it was none of her damn business.

I shrugged. What the hell. “Arnie’s the only one.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that he has sex with other women?”

“No. We’re both free to be with anyone else, any time, as we choose.”

She leaned forward, her black gaze piercing. “Why aren’t you jealous? I can tell you care about him deeply.”

“Yes, but I don’t want a committed relationship with him. Or with anybody, for that matter.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve been married twice. I’m done working at relationships.”

The keen gaze searched my face. “Did you have bad marriages?”

I hesitated. “One was good.”

Oh, Robert, if I’d only known...

“But...” she prompted.

“He was killed a couple of years ago, trying to protect me.” I swallowed the lump in my throat with a gulp of too-hot tea.

“And now you’re afraid to love and lose again. You poor child, don’t cut yourself off like that. Love is worth the risk.”

“No, that’s not it at all,” I denied. “I don’t want to make the sacrifices it takes to make another relationship work. I like my autonomy.”

“But what happiness and fulfillment are you denying yourself by clinging to this shallow relationship with Arnold?” she asked softly.

I bit into a brownie and chewed, studying the vivid patterns of the oriental carpet while I considered the best way to escape the conversation.

Miss Lacey straightened. “I’ve pressed you too far, and I apologize. I actually invited you here so that you could give me your honest opinion. How is Arnold? And I’m not referring to his sexual prowess,” she added.

I hid my sigh of relief. “He has a sprained ankle and a broken nose, a couple of cracked bones in his face, and lots of scrapes and bruises. He’s pretty badly beaten up, but he doesn’t have any serious injuries.”

She leaned back in her chair with a sigh of her own. “Thank heaven. I’m very fond of him. You know that he drives me to all my appointments and takes me grocery shopping.” Her bright black eyes met mine. “He’s a good man. And he conceals a brilliant mind behind that dreadful facade.”

“I know.” I smothered a smile. “I like his facade, though.”

“I do tend to fuss over him a little more than I should. I hope he wasn’t upset that I had called you.”

“No, I’m sure he wasn’t,” I reassured her. “But if you didn’t get my number from him, how did you find me? My number is unlisted.”

She hesitated. “Arnold and I exchanged emergency contact lists some years ago, shortly after I moved into this complex. I won’t bore you with that story, but in all the time I’ve known him, he has had only one

contact, a John Kane. Last week he added your name.” She smiled. “I’ve known you were special to him ever since he introduced us this summer. You are the only woman he welcomes back repeatedly, unlike his usual conquests.”

“Oh.” My heart swelled at the unexpected honour. I knew how cautious Arnie was in bestowing his trust.

Miss Lacey leaned a little closer, her bright black gaze searching my face. “He warned me never to divulge your name or number to anyone. He said you were in a difficult personal situation.”

“Uh.” I rapidly dredged up the cover story that had served me in the spring. “Yes, my ex-husband is, um... well, I’d prefer to avoid him.”

She sat back in her chair, nodding. “I understand. Your information is completely safe with me. I’m not in the habit of giving out personal information, particularly not to men like those ruffians who were showing your photo around here last week.”

The brownie turned to cardboard in my mouth.

Time for damage control, indeed.

CHAPTER 4

I was about to demand details when a rap on her door made us both start.

“Please excuse me,” she said as she rose, and I slouched in the chair and gulped more tea while she went around the corner to answer the door.

My mind raced. Could the ‘ruffians’ have been the hired goons who’d been contracted to kill me last week? Or were they working for Fuzzy Bunny? A tingle of fear rippled over my skin, and I reached down to skim my fingertips over the reassuring shape of the gun at my ankle.

God, please let them have been the contract killers. I knew they’d been called off. Fuzzy Bunny, on the other hand...

I spared a sudden moment of empathy for Stemp’s insistence on knowing my whereabouts. Leaving so abruptly this morning had probably been really stupid, but at least I’d told Kane where I was going this time. I’d better get back to Sirius, pronto.

“Aydan, you have a caller,” Miss Lacey said as she rounded the corner again.

I sprang to my feet and dodged behind the wing chair at the sight of the handsome young man following her. A spasm twisted Mark Richardson’s face when my hand flew to the wound on my arm.

“Aydan, I’m so sorry,” he said. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I know. Sorry, I'm just a little twitchy. I'll get over it." I stepped out from behind the protection of the chair. "So what's up?"

His blue-eyed gaze wavered. "I... I'm here to take you back to Sirius."

"No need, I'll drive myself."

He hesitated. "I have orders not to let you out of my sight. Your car can stay here. You're to ride back with me."

Alarm prickled the back of my neck, and I sidled over to lean on the wing chair with feigned nonchalance, placing it between us again. "What's going on?"

He shot an uneasy glance over his shoulder. "You'll be briefed when we get there. Come on, let's go."

"I'll just check in with Kane first," I said casually, and whisked my phone out of my waist pouch to punch the speed dial button.

"Sirius Dynamics." The crisp female voice on the other end of the line made me jerk the phone away from my ear to frown at the display. I'd dialled Kane's number, all right.

"May I speak to John Kane, please?" I inquired, watching Richardson's gaze dart around the room. His hand hovered in the vicinity of the concealed shoulder holster I knew he wore under his jacket.

"I'm sorry, Captain Kane is on vacation," the woman responded.

"What do you mean, he's on vacation?" I snapped. "He was in the office this morning. I have a meeting scheduled with him this afternoon."

"I'm sorry, but I was told he's on vacation," she repeated. "What is this in regards to?"

Richardson stepped toward me, reaching for my arm, and I jerked back. "Aydan, never mind," he said urgently. "Let's just go, okay?"

I backed away a few more paces, noticing Miss Lacey moving quietly in the direction of the door. Thank God. She'd be out of the line of fire, if there was one.

"It's Aydan Kelly. Let me speak to Clyde Webb," I demanded, still staring Richardson down.

"I'm sorry, he's in a meeting and can't be disturbed."

Richardson's hand hovered near his holster. "Come on, Aydan, let's go. You'll be briefed when we get there," he insisted.

Dammit, there was no way I could reach my gun before he got to his. Why the hell hadn't I worn my waist holster today?

"Give me Stemp," I barked.

Relief gushed through me when Hellhound rounded the corner behind Richardson, moving fast and silently despite his limp.

"I'm sorry, he's in a meeting and can't be disturbed," the woman singsonged.

Richardson whirled to face the movement and froze at the sight of Hellhound's gun.

"Tell Stemp one of his agents is about to take a bullet to the brain," I snarled. "Get him on the line. Now."

"Just a moment," she squeaked.

Seconds later, Stemp's flat voice came on the line. "Ms. Kelly, is there a problem?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"None that I'm aware of," he said coolly. "I presume Richardson is the one on the business end of your gun?"

"Yes." I didn't elaborate. Stemp didn't need to know about Hellhound's illegal weapon. "Did you send him?"

"Yes. You can stand down. His orders are to bring you back to Sirius."

"Why?"

“You’ll be briefed when you arrive.”

Dammit. He wouldn’t tell me anything more than I absolutely had to know, and he couldn’t tell me anything over an unsecured line anyway.

I sighed and hung up. “It’s okay, Arnie, thanks. Sorry, Mark.”

Both men relaxed, and Richardson gave Hellhound a tentative smile, the elusive dimple flickering in his cheek. “I was hoping you weren’t going to pay me back for tranking you the other day.”

Hellhound grinned and stuck the gun into the waistband of his jeans. “Nah. I’ll do that when ya least expect it.” He limped over and sank into the chair I’d vacated, wincing when the weight came off his ankle. “Hope ya don’t hafta report this.”

“I told Stemp I was holding my gun to his head,” I said quickly. “Mark, if you have to report what really happened, it’s okay, but-”

“No, it’s all right,” he interrupted. “I don’t blame you for not trusting me, and I’m not going to report anything. But we’d better get going.”

“Okay.” I stowed my phone back in my pouch. “Where’s Miss Lacey?”

“In my apartment,” Hellhound said. “She came an’ said some guy was tryin’ to force ya to go with him. I told her to stay there until I came to get her.”

“I’ll go get her, and I’ll get your crutches, too. You shouldn’t have been walking on that ankle.”

He winked. “I wasn’t. I was walkin’ on my foot.”

“Wise-ass.” I dropped a kiss on his lips and went to retrieve Miss Lacey.

On the long drive back to Silverside, I tried to pry more information out of Richardson, but he refused to tell me anything. His eyes were constantly in motion, scanning the countryside, the oncoming traffic, the

cars behind us, and even the sky. Nervousness skittered in my stomach. This couldn't be good.

My uneasiness ratcheted up another notch when he parked a block away from Sirius Dynamics. As he shot a wary glance around the bowling alley's almost-deserted parking lot, I gave him a suspicious glance of my own.

"Why are we here?" I asked, trying to keep the mistrust out of my voice.

"Secret entrance," he muttered. "Come on."

We got out of the car and he hustled me through the back door of the dilapidated building as if he expected a flock of ninjas to descend from the rooftop. Hell, by that time, it wouldn't have surprised me.

The deafening rattle of bowling pins and machinery made me stuff my fingers in my ears while we trekked through the dark corridor behind the lanes. At the opposite side of the building, Richardson produced a key and unlocked the door to an electrical room. He pulled me inside, and the closing door mercifully muffled the din.

We assessed each other from close range for a moment, and my pulse rate picked up. Small room. Too close.

The backward step I'd intended to take turned into a skittish hop when he reached for me. He stepped away instantly, his hands jerking back. "Sorry. I just need to get past you to that panel."

"Okay..." I hoped he didn't notice me hyperventilating while I sidestepped, trying to maintain maximum personal space.

After we had circled each other, Richardson pressed a series of breakers on the panel and leaned forward for a retinal scan.

Stay calm. Same old, same old. I could do this.

A section of wall swung away and I stepped into the cramped time-delay chamber holding my breath. When the door closed behind us, I let

the air out slowly. I hid my quaking knees as best I could while he triggered the retinal scan at the next door.

He glanced over. "Aydan, don't worry. I promise, I won't hurt you," he assured me. "You're safe. We're just going into the secured area under Sirius Dynamics to meet Stemp."

I took another deep breath and held my voice steady. "Thanks, Mark, I know. I'm just really claustrophobic. This time delay chamber always freaks me out."

"Oh." Relief softened his face. "I'm sorry this is hard for you, but I'm glad you're not afraid of me."

"No, I trust you," I lied.

An eternal thirty seconds later, the latch released with a muffled click and Richardson swung the door open to reveal concrete stairs. I drew in a long breath, trying to ignore the sensation of dark water closing over my head while I walked down.

A short trip down a deserted white corridor brought us to a featureless white door. My back crawled as Richardson opened the door and gestured me ahead of him.

I took a couple of long strides to face Stemp where he sat behind a desk.

"What?" I demanded. "What the hell's going on?"

"Please sit," Stemp said dispassionately.

I squelched the urge to lunge over his desk and yell. Been there, done that, and it hadn't turned out well last time. I dropped into the vacant chair, trying not to look and feel like a petulant teenager. Slowly releasing the fist that had clenched in spite of me, I tried for a poker face while I stared at Stemp.

The silence lengthened, and I cracked first. "I was told Kane is on vacation. When did that happen?"

“Kane has been on active duty 24/7 for the past ten months. He was overdue for a break, and he has a great deal of unused leave time banked.”

“And...” The word came out sounding almost like a growl.

Stemp’s snakelike eyes never flickered. “And he will be on leave until further notice.”

“*Involuntary* leave.” This time, I didn’t try to conceal the growl.

Stemp shrugged. “That is none of your concern.”

“Wrong,” I snapped. “My team. My concern.”

“Very well.” Stemp appraised me for a moment before flicking his gaze at Richardson. “You’re dismissed. You never saw Ms. Kelly.”

Richardson withdrew, and Stemp regarded me briefly before extending his hand across his desk. “Your weapon, please.”

“Why, are you afraid I’ll shoot you?”

Stemp’s expressionless facade never wavered. “Let’s just say I’ve had reason to question your emotional stability in the past.”

I felt my face twist into a snarl. “Yeah, well, I’m fresh out of husbands for you to kill, so you’re probably pretty safe.”

“Nevertheless.” He curled his fingers in a ‘give’ gesture. “If you please.”

I gritted my teeth and slid my Glock out of its holster, fighting down a combination of fury and fear. It must be bad if he was taking precautions like this. Really, really bad.

I laid the gun on the desk, ignoring his outstretched hand. “Don’t touch it,” I barked when he reached to pick it up.

One corner of his mouth twitched with what might have been the tiniest of smiles, and he sat back in his chair, steepling his hands in front of him. “You’re a quick study.”

“Skip the pleasantries. Tell me.”

He eyed me for another moment before he spoke. “Kane has been relieved of duty. He has become personally involved with you, and his judgement is unreliable. He will be reassigned to a different operation once I’m convinced he’s fit for duty again.”

As I gaped at him, he slid a file folder across the desk. “Your car has been destroyed in an accident, and you have been reported killed in the same accident. You may select another car from the choices in this folder, and you’ll be assigned your new cover identity by end of day. You will be relocated to a safe house...”

A tidal wave of shock reduced the rest of his words to garbled static.

CHAPTER 5

I sat stunned for a couple of long seconds while the shards of my shattered life tumbled and came to rest in silent chaos.

“What...? You... you...” My breathless stammer resolved itself just below a scream. “*What?*”

“I thought I had been abundantly clear,” Stemp said. “Would you like me to repeat myself?”

“Wha...? No! *Fuck!* You wrecked my car? You told everybody I *died?* You... you...”

I locked my hands onto the arms of the chair, willing myself not to snatch up my gun and shoot him where he sat. My mind shrieked and gibbered.

My beloved farm. My friends. My car. My bookkeeping business. My identity. Everything I loved, torn away and discarded with callous indifference.

A wave of dizziness reminded me breathing was not optional.

An instant later, the shock transmuted into blind rage. A fine red haze threatened to obscure Stemp’s face, and a creaking from the vicinity of the chair arms could have been the chair or the bones of my clenched fingers.

“You.” The word rattled dryly in my throat like boulders fracturing in an avalanche. I swallowed and tried again, achieving a sound slightly more similar to a human voice. “You. Have made. A serious. Mistake.”

Stemp shrugged. "I did what was necessary. What should have been done seven months ago. You will be able to live and work in safety, and our operations will be secure."

"Your operations will be dead in the water," I snarled. "I want my car back. I want my life back. I want my handler back. And until I have those things, I will do nothing. No decryptions. No surveillance in enemy networks. Nothing. Sweet fuck-all."

"You know that's not true," Stemp replied calmly. "Your behaviour has been observed and documented since March. Your psyche profile indicates that your sense of honour and duty will compel you to continue working for us. So skip the theatrics, pick out a car, and go and meet your new team."

New team. Oh, God. Oh, shit.

I drew in a long, slow breath.

After a moment, Stemp raised an eyebrow. "Ms. Kelly, it's time for you to go. This interview is over."

"Actually, no, it's not," I countered. "Let's talk for a minute."

He shot me a look, clearly mistrusting my pleasant tone. Smart man.

"This is not a conversation," he said flatly.

I finally succeeded in loosening my grip on the chair, and I let the ache in my knuckles anchor me in the churning sea of rage and rising panic.

"You're right, it's not," I agreed, holding my voice determinedly steady.

He sighed. "You're not going to issue another ultimatum, are you? You know very well it won't work."

I forced myself to lean back in the chair. "Oh, yes, I'm definitely going to issue another ultimatum. But first we're going to talk about Kane."

You have no right to screw him over. You're the one who ordered him to fake an attraction to me. Now you're punishing him for obeying."

"The operative word here is 'fake'," Stemp said. "He admitted he let his personal feelings for you get in the way when he allowed you to escape last week. Today he exhibited a serious error in judgement in allowing you to leave. When a top agent starts to make mistakes like that, it's a clear sign he's been compromised."

I snorted. "No, it's a sign he knows his asset well enough to be very convincing. If he'd tried to stop me today, he'd have had a fight on his hands. Not the kind of thing you want to do if you're supposedly in love."

I stopped to swallow a queasy sensation. God, please let him be faking that. I continued with more confidence than I felt.

"You'll notice he *admitted*..." I made air quotes around the word, "...his so-called personal feelings in yesterday's debriefing. Hell of a funny place for a declaration of love, don't you think? If you were fooled, it's a testament to his abilities, not an indication he's been compromised."

Stemp levelled a reptilian gaze across the desk. "He knew last week his cover was blown. If he was faking his feelings for you, he would have abandoned the charade then."

"Did you rescind the order?" I demanded.

"No."

"Duh."

He twitched a shoulder. "I can tell he's not faking."

"Yeah, because you're such a good judge of character," I snapped. "You've misjudged Kane, and you've misjudged me. I'm not doing any more work for you until I get what I want."

"We have reason to believe an agent has been captured and is being tortured," Stemp said. "We need you to decrypt some files so we can retrieve him as quickly as possible."

My guts twisted while the gruesome memories writhed and bled.

I forced my face into a neutral expression and propped my feet on the edge of Stemp's desk, tipping my chair onto its back legs. "You're full of shit."

"No. That agent is suffering horribly. You're the only one who can save him."

I gulped down the guilt. He was lying. He had to be.

"Oh well." I did my best indifferent tone. "I'm very sorry to hear that. I hope you write a nice letter to his mother when you finally retrieve what's left of the body."

We locked eyes.

"So you're refusing to cooperate," he said after a long moment.

"Damn skippy."

Stemp sighed. "Then your usefulness is at an end."

Suddenly I was looking into the barrel of his gun.

I rode out the burning rush of adrenaline with a long sigh of my own. "Put it away, Stemp. You know damn well you won't kill me."

"I wouldn't have before. Now, I have several very good reasons to kill you."

"Okay." I linked my hands behind my head and left my feet on his desk. "So kill me. I've got nothing left to lose."

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