

# Live And Let Spy

Book 17 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.

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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- Book 3: Reach For The Spy
- Book 4: Tell Me No Spies
- Book 5: How Spy I Am
- Book 6: A Spy For A Spy
- Book 7: Spy, Spy Away
- Book 8: Spy Now, Pay Later
- Book 9: Spy High
- Book 10: Spy Away Home
- Book 11: The Spies That Bind
- Book 12: Kiss And Say Good Spy
- Book 13: Once Burned, Twice Spy
- Book 14: Friends In Spy Places
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## CHAPTER 1

“Tell me you found something.”

Despite the apparent optimism of the request, Agent Greg Holt’s tone was devoid of hope.

Muttering obscenities, I ignored him and hugged my splitting head. I had made it safely out of virtual reality, but I still felt as though billions of terabytes of data were surging through my aching brain.

Never one to take a hint, Holt raised his voice. “Come on, give!”

“Shut up!” I hissed, squeezing my eyes closed so my eyeballs wouldn’t explode.

“Just give her a minute.” Spider’s youthful voice was accompanied by his gentle fingertips massaging my temples. “Aydan, try to relax,” he encouraged. “Just breathe.”

The sound of sudden movement made my eyes snap open, only to involuntarily clamp shut once more against the pain. Holt’s hands shoved Spider’s aside and wrapped roughly around my head. Powerful fingertips ground into my pressure points.

The explosion of agony and relief yanked an inarticulate cry out of me as my spine arched, then released.

“*That’s* how you do it,” Holt said with satisfaction as I collapsed bonelessly on the sofa in my office.

Prying one eye open, I squinted up at the smug grin creasing his craggy features. “Thanks,” I croaked. “Asshole.”

His grin widened as he wiggled his fingers lasciviously. “Magic hands.”

“Save it for your girlfriend.”

I regretted the thoughtless words as soon as they left my mouth. Holt’s stab of unhappiness was concealed almost instantly behind his impassive cop face, and I almost added ‘Sorry’. But he hated sympathy.

“So I’m guessing you didn’t find anything,” he said flatly.

“No.” A long sigh escaped me. “I swear I’ve checked under every virtual rock in the whole damn internet. That weapons expert is a friggin’ ghost.”

Holt’s brows drew together. “Maybe he never existed at all. Maybe Kane and Stemp were lying about him, and it was just an excuse for Stemp to take the death ray out of the country last year.” Holt’s scowl deepened. “I bet Stemp took the original weapon to Volslav, and that’s how they developed the second prototype. Hell, I still say Stemp *is* Volslav.”

Indignation jerked me upright despite my still-aching head. “Kane was the best agent in the Department, and Stemp is the best damn Director we’ve ever had. They’d never sell out! And besides,” I added with belated logic, “We know Tawny Harchman was Volslav, along with Dawn White and Yana Orlov. And Kane and Stemp both passed lie detector tests, so we know we can trust them.”

“Speak for yourself,” Holt growled. “I don’t trust anybody.”

“No shit, you paranoid bastard.”

He gave me a superior smirk, his equilibrium apparently restored by our usual insults. “Kane only completed a standard exit interview, and Stemp only did a standard requalification. Neither of them was questioned directly about Volslav under the lie detector.”

I shook my head. “Requalification and exit interviews ask whether you’ve violated your oath as an agent, so that covers it. You’ve been listening to Dermott’s conspiracy theories again, haven’t you?”

I couldn’t quite prevent myself from glancing at the doorway as I spoke. If Dermott happened to overhear me, it would shatter our six months of precarious civility.

“You know I’m right,” Holt needled. “Someday that blind trust of yours is going to turn around and bite you in the ass.”

The thought of anyone putting me and trust in the same sentence jerked a snort of amusement out of me. I lowered my voice. “You know Dermott’s got an agenda. He’s just panting for the chance to get rid of Stemp and take over as Director.”

This time both Spider and I glanced at the door. Spider’s boyish features scrunched into an anxious expression, while Holt looked thoughtful.

“That’s true,” Holt agreed. “But at least Dermott doesn’t sneak off to Europe and disappear every time somebody whispers the name ‘Volslav’.”

“Stemp doesn’t...” I began hotly.

But Stemp *did* sneak off to Europe and disappear every time there was a new development with Volslav. And I couldn't tell anyone that he was protecting his secret wife and child.

"Okay, he does," I amended. "But you know he's only going off-grid so he can protect the contacts he had when he was working as an agent over there."

Holt grunted. "You say 'contacts'; I say 'sleazeball arms dealers'. I still say he's up to-" His words hitched almost imperceptibly as the man himself appeared in the doorway. "...something," Holt finished smoothly, looking as innocent as a cynical lantern-jawed agent could.

Director Charles Stemp's customary emotionless façade remained undisturbed except for the fractional elevation of one eyebrow. "Developments?" he inquired.

"No," Holt replied. "Kelly still can't find anything." Desperation edged his voice. "We need to get out in the field! We're not accomplishing anything sitting here day after fucking day!" His gesture at my office looked like a barely-controlled explosion.

Stemp's response was dry. "What do you expect to find in the field, when Agent Kelly has access to every scrap of data..." He hesitated uncharacteristically before amending, "...almost every scrap of data in the internet?"

Uh-oh. I didn't like that hesitation. Or that amendment.

Holt's fists clenched. "I won't know until I try. But we're sure as hell not getting anywhere here." His voice rose. "It's been damn near *six months* since we got that flash drive from Volslav. And we've found *nothing* since then!"

“Hardly ‘nothing’.” Stemp eyed my tired slump and glanced at his wristwatch. “Get some lunch. Briefing in my office at thirteen hundred.” He withdrew.

Slouching lower on the sofa, I groaned. “A briefing. What fresh hell will this be?”

Holt straightened, hope rising on his face. “Finally! Something besides endless update meetings where he asks ‘What did you find’ and we say ‘fuck-all’.” His steel-blue eyes lit up. “Maybe we’re getting another mission.”

With a tremendous effort of will, I managed not to curl into a fetal ball. “Hooray.” The word emerged with all the animation of a week-old corpse.

Holt shot me a contemptuous look, but he was grinning. “You’re such a pussy. See you at the *briefing*.” His grin widened as he emphasized the word, and he strode out with a spring in his step.

Another groan escaped me.

“Is your head still hurting?” Spider asked. “I could-” A tiny electronic ping cut across his words, and he jolted as though he’d been poked with a cattle prod. He dove for the phone on my desk. “I have to call Linda!” Halting, he flushed. “Um, I mean... is it okay if I...?” He gestured toward my phone but before I could answer, he spun for the door. “Never mind, I’ll-”

“Use my phone,” I interrupted.

“Thanks!” He snatched up the receiver and dialled, his bony fingers flashing over the keypad.

He jittered from foot to foot while he waited for the call to connect, his free hand drumming a rapid tempo on my desk. Despite my discouragement, his anxious anticipation made me smile.

He stiffened, his eyes widening. “Sweetie? Is it time?” His shoulders slumped. “Oh. Sure, that sounds great. Okay, see you then. I love you, too. ‘Bye.” He let out a long breath as he replaced the receiver in its cradle.

“False alarm?” I asked.

He gave me a sheepish smile. “No alarm at all. But soon...” Blowing out a shivery breath, he hugged himself as his smile widened. “Oh, Aydan, I’m so excited! Today is Linda’s official due date. Any day now I’ll be a dad!”

I got up and went over to give him an affectionate side-hug. “You started being a dad about nine months ago.”

“I know, but... I’ll be a *real* dad. I’ll get to meet my daughter for the first time and hold her in my arms, and oh, Aydan! It’s going to be *so awesome!*”

He bounced in sheer joy, and I gave him another squeeze before letting him go. “You and Linda will be amazing parents. Have you picked a name yet?”

“We have some ideas, but we want to meet her first.” His eyes sparkled. “We want to see if she’s a ‘Sophia’ or a ‘Lily’ an ‘Isabella’ or...” He broke off. “Sorry, I know babies aren’t really your thing.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “If you’re happy, I’m happy. Let’s go and get lunch, and you can talk about babies all you want.”

I hadn't realized exactly how much an excited father-to-be could talk about babies. By the time we returned from the Melted Spoon, my head was aching as much as it had earlier. It was a relief when we sank into chairs in Stemp's office and Spider fell silent at last.

Holt was already seated, every line of his body telegraphing alert readiness. My abysmal posture was probably telegraphing, 'please just let me stay safely in my office forever'. Or more likely, 'I'm too old for this shit'.

That was enough to make me straighten up. At forty-eight... hell, almost forty-nine now... it was a point of pride for me to be the oldest female agent to pass the physical qualification for active duty. And not just a point of pride; a point of self-preservation. If Command decided I was unfit for active duty, I'd be living and working in the underground secured area for the rest of my life.

Hiding my shudder, I pasted on what I hoped was an expression of attentive competence.

Stemp eyed me with a small frown. "Agent Kelly, are you feeling unwell?"

Apparently my 'attentive competence' looked a lot like indigestion. I forced a smile. "I'm fine. Just the usual headache."

"Ah." He leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingertips in precise alignment. "In that case, you will be pleased to hear that you will be getting a break from your daily network surveillance."

I did my best to look pleased. That expression might not have been convincing, either.

Stemp cast me a dubious look and continued, including Spider and Holt with a glance. "Despite your earlier assertion that you have

found 'nothing', your progress is acceptable. Tracing the financial connections between the three players in Volslav was helpful, and the government was able to seize their accounts." Stemp dipped his chin toward me. "And Command appreciated the twenty million dollars Volslav transferred to your cover identity. The funds from the proceeds-of-crime seizure go into the government's general revenue, but the twenty million went to the Department's operational funds."

"So what?" Holt demanded. "That was months ago. So we fattened the coffers, big deal. Shutting down the lab that made the death ray prototype was small potatoes, too. Another lab will just take over. The weapons expert we're hunting will know which labs can make another; and he'll have intel on Volslav, too. Maybe enough for us to take down their whole operation." His fist clenched. "*We need that fucking expert!*"

"That would be optimum," Stemp agreed. "Which leads us to this briefing. Agent Kelly-"

"We need to re-interview everybody who interacted with the weapons expert," Holt interrupted. "This time, under the lie detector."

Stemp eyed him. "Including me?"

For an instant I thought Holt might back down, but I should have known better.

Holt thrust out his chest in his classic alpha-male posture. "Yes."

Stemp nodded coolly. "I believe it is available, and I have time immediately following this briefing. Agent Kelly can contact John Kane, too, and arrange for him to come in at his earliest convenience." He transferred his attention back to me with a level gaze that felt like a challenge.

I met it with my best casual tone. “Sure. I’ll give him a call as soon as we’re finished here.”

Stemp nodded. “Very well. Returning to our briefing... Agent Kelly, it is my understanding that you have exhausted all available leads online.”

Uh-oh.

My pulse ticked up. “Um, yeah, so far... but it’s the whole internet. There are new connections every nanosecond. The problem is, sometimes the connections shift and I end up ’way the hell on the other side of the planet swimming through data in foreign languages I can’t read. It might be exactly what we need, but I’d never know.”

“Indeed. I believe we have a solution to that.” Despite his customary lack of expression, a tiny crimp of satisfaction appeared at the corner of Stemp’s mouth. “Rebecca Stile.”

I couldn’t help wincing.

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