

# Never Say Spy

Book 1 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.

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## CHAPTER 1

French-kissing the hot guy in my fantasy seemed like a good idea at the time.

I could have really enjoyed it, too, if my head didn't hurt so damn much. When I touched the sore spot, my fingertips showed a little smear of blood, but I puzzled over that for less than a second before I returned my attention to the much more interesting subject at hand. Or hands, to be exact.

I ran said hands down his back and over buns of steel. We were making a creditable attempt to lick each other's tonsils when a furious voice erupted from inches behind me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I snatched my grip off the beefcake and spun around.

"Ow, sonuvabitch!" I clutched my head when the abrupt movement slammed pain through my skull, and tried to focus my watering eyes on the source of the interruption.

Okay, that was weird. I was pretty sure I'd never had a fantasy that included a short, pissed-off paramedic.

The paramedic locked eyes with Beefcake. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he repeated.

Beefcake shrugged. "I'm not doing anything. She jumped me."

“Can’t you see she’s injured? You could have at least helped her back out of the portal!”

...Huh? It was my fantasy, but I didn’t think I was controlling the action anymore. I gaped at the two men.

The short paramedic dismissed Beefcake with a final glare and turned to me. “Ma’am, please come with me. We need to get you to a hospital.” As he spoke, he took my arm and steered me away.

“Uh...?” I was about to demand an explanation when agony punched through my eye sockets. I jerked into a ball, arms clamped over my head until the pain diminished enough for me to sit up and start swearing. After a few moments of heartfelt profanity, I recovered enough to realize the paramedic was trying to convince me to lie down on the sidewalk again.

Wait a minute.

Sidewalk? Sitting in a puddle?

Red flashing lights. Ambulance. Right, that explained the paramedic.

He had changed his clothes, though. Instead of his uniform, he wore a brown plaid shirt and khaki pants. My aching brain struggled to catch up.

The fantasy faded as awareness returned. Right, March in Silverside, Alberta. A chinook thaw, slippery sidewalks, and now my ass was awash in ice water and my head hurt like hell. I didn’t even remember slipping. You know you’re a desperate case when you get so engrossed in a fantasy you don’t even watch where you’re walking.

Embarrassment suffused me when a handful of murmuring bystanders began to gather, and I hauled myself to my feet despite the protests of the paramedic.

“I’m fine,” I mumbled, pulling soggy denim away from my butt as unobtrusively as possible.

“Better get checked at the hospital just in case,” he advised. “You need to get that abrasion on your scalp cleaned up, too.” He guided me firmly into the back of the ambulance while his two uniformed cohorts got in front.

Three paramedics and an ambulance for a bump on the head. Gotta love a small town. If I'd slipped and fallen in Calgary, I'd be lucky to rate a Boy Scout with an aspirin.

My royal treatment continued at the hospital. My khaki-clad saviour waved the other two away and escorted me into a cubicle in the tiny emergency ward. I perched on the bed, and he nodded reassuringly and withdrew, pulling the curtains closed behind him.

Moments later, I overheard his approaching murmur. “... found her in the portal so I brought her into B wing.”

A white-coated doctor strode in. “I'm Dr. Roth. How's the head?” she asked as she briefly examined my scalp and flashed a small light in each of my eyes.

“Sore, but not worth a trip to emergency.”

“I don't see any sign of a concussion,” she said. “But I'd like to ask you a few quick questions, just to make sure. Can you tell me your name and age?”

“Aydan Kelly. I'm forty-six years old. I know it's March. I know I'm in Silverside Hospital. I know it's Thursday, but I have no idea what the date is, which is normal for me. You're not going to flunk me for the date, are you?”

As I spoke, the doctor's eyes had begun to twinkle. She was a striking blonde about my age, and she smiled as she answered, “No, we'll let you away with that one. I'd normally suggest a quick MRI, but it's a very minor injury, and I think you'll be fine.”

I laughed. “There's no such thing as a quick MRI. And I don't feel much like driving two hours down to Calgary to get one.”

“No, we’d use ours...” She trailed off at my incredulous expression.

“MRI? In Silverside?” I demanded. “Population what, five thousand? No way.”

“The MRI is privately and anonymously owned,” she replied. “The hospital is allowed to use it for diagnostic procedures when it’s available.”

“Wow, who’s your celebrity hypochondriac?”

She smiled. “I’ll send Linda to clean up that abrasion for you. It should only take a few minutes, if you’d like to call your husband to pick you up.”

I stared at the plain gold band I still wore on my left hand and cranked on a smile. “That could be a little tricky. He’s been dead for two years.”

Dr. Roth looked horrified as she apologized, “I’m so sorry, I saw the ring and just assumed...”

“It’s okay. I guess it’s time I stopped wearing it. Just habit at this point.” I slipped the ring off my finger with only a slight pang. I’d come a long way since Robert died. What a shock that had been.

Given the graphic fantasy I’d just had, it was probably time I got back on the horse. So to speak. Too bad there wasn’t anybody in real life who was built like my fantasy horse... er... guy.

Realizing the silence had stretched a bit, I refocused. “No need to call anyone. I’m fine. I’ll just drive myself home.”

The young nurse arrived shortly afterward, and we chatted like old friends while she cleaned the injury on my scalp. As I got ready to leave, I remembered the odd fragment of conversation I’d heard, and spoke up.

“Hey, Linda, what’s the significance of Wing B?”

She paused, then smiled. “It’s opposite to Wing A. That’s all.”

For a moment, my overactive imagination suggested she was being evasive, but whatever. My head still hurt, and I was in a hurry to get out of there in case the roads iced up in the evening.

Back in my farmhouse, I surveyed the disarray while I assembled a meal of leftovers. Three weeks after my big move, the kitchen was mostly organized. My ancient furniture looked right at home in the graciously-proportioned though shabby living/dining area, but my unpacking was far from complete. I gobbled my supper and went to work on my computer, ignoring the boxes still piled in the corners.

A couple of hours later, I dragged my headache into the small bathroom off the master bedroom. I eyed the dark stain in the floor at the base of the toilet while I brushed my teeth. Leaky seal for sure, and the floor would be rotten underneath. Time to break out the renovation tools.

Sliding into bed, I touched the handle of the crowbar under the other pillow for reassurance. I was probably perfectly safe in my new country home, but city instincts die hard.

I live alone. If somebody breaks into my house in the middle of the night, what am I going to do? Hit them with a pillow?

I don't think so.

A day spent tearing out crusty plumbing and rotten, smelly flooring left me looking forward to my trip on Saturday. I bounced out of bed at six thirty, keeping my fingers crossed for an offer on my Calgary house by the end of the day.

Hoping to make a good impression on the prospective buyer, I overcame my normal slobbish tendencies and put on my best-fitting girly jeans and a stretchy T-shirt that clung enough to make my boobs look good without revealing too much of the muffin-top that overflowed my waistband. I brushed out my long hair and examined it in the light from the bedroom window. Still more red than grey. So far, so good.

I hit the road in high spirits, belting out the songs on the radio with far more enthusiasm than talent and happily anticipating my regular Saturday afternoon lunch date with the group of ex-basketball friends that was the closest thing I had to family. Two hours later, I strolled into Kelly's Bar and Grill in Calgary, letting the familiar shabby ambiance wrap around me with the same welcoming warmth as my friends' greetings.

We lolled on the broken-down couches at the back of the bar, enjoying the excellent food and bantering with the waitress who'd served us for so many years she was almost part of the gang herself. I soaked up the wisecracks and off-colour jokes until we finally dispersed a couple of hours later, lingering and laughing on the sidewalk outside the bar.

When I pulled into my driveway a few minutes before our meeting time, I swallowed a bubble of hope at the sight of my real estate agent's cheery wave. Just a meeting with a potential buyer. No guarantees.

"Hi, Aydan, great to see you!" Cheryl's usual upbeat greeting made me smile, and we wandered into the house to lean against the wall in the empty living room, chatting. After fifteen minutes, she called the buyer's cell phone number, but it went directly to voicemail. We made desultory conversation for the next quarter of an hour, when Cheryl tried again.

She snapped her phone shut with a scowl. "Well, I guess he's not going to show. What a waste of time this was."

"No kidding. Especially after he insisted I come down." I blew out a sigh. "At least I got to have lunch with my friends. And I've got a bed here so I don't have to go back today."

We said our goodbyes in the driveway, and I attempted an attitude adjustment while I cruised down the gentle hill toward the nearby strip mall. Maybe Cheryl could set up something for later in the evening. And I'd get to pick up the low-flow toilet I'd ordered, and maybe a few other...

A flash of movement jerked my eyes up to the rearview mirror. Shock jolted through me at the sight of the dark-haired man pushing through the collapsible back seat from the trunk.

I whipped around to stare at Beefcake from my fantasy. Disbelief paralyzed me for an instant before I recognized the black object in his hand.

Gun.

Shit!

I stomped both feet on the brake. The car jerked to a stop with a tortured squeal of tires, hurling Beefcake's body between the front seats to crash headfirst into the dash. His gun discharged with a deafening bang. In mindless panic, I punched the seat belt release, snatched the door open, and flung myself out of the car.

The vehicle was picking up speed again on the downhill slope and the ground flew out from under my feet. I crashed to the pavement, rolling frantically to avoid the rear tires as they crunched by. My feet scrabbled for purchase on the gravel-strewn asphalt as I scrambled up, my hysterical panting whistling in my throat. After a couple of eternal seconds, I gained traction and fled up the hill like a demented rabbit.

A rusted-out Chevy Suburban skidded and rocked to a stop crosswise in the street with the driver's side facing me. The driver's door started to open, and I used the little breath I still had available to scream, "Gun! *Gun!*"

I dashed for the Suburban, its bulk looming only a few yards away like a bastion of safety.

A gunshot exploded from behind me. A tall, broad-shouldered man swung out of the Suburban. In a single fluid motion, he drew a gun as his feet hit the pavement.

He aimed directly at me and fired.

## CHAPTER 2

I let out a strangled shriek and dodged sideways, trying to swerve around the front of the truck.

I wasn't going to make it. I was too close, going too fast.

A bullet thudded into the Suburban. I jumped and rolled at the front fender, caroming over the hood. As I tumbled past the windshield, I glimpsed the passenger's young face, his mouth stretched open in a 'O'.

Something plucked at my pant leg as I went over. Then I was on my feet on the other side, sprinting across two lanes of traffic while vehicles screeched to a halt with a chorus of honking horns.

Sobbing for breath, I did a broken-field run between the stopped cars. I couldn't hear any more gunfire behind me, but the hammering of my heart would have drowned it out anyway.

All eyes jerked toward me when I cannoned through the door of the nearest coffee shop. I doubled over, gasping, "911! Call 911!"

After a moment of shocked paralysis, the patrons surged to their feet in a babble of voices. Struggling for air, I braced my elbows on my shaking knees, brainlessly repeating "911" with every breath. A knot of people converged on me, offering a chair and jabbering questions and advice.

A woman's voice rose in a squeaky tremolo. "Oh my God, she's bleeding!"

I collapsed into the proffered chair and followed her white-eyed gaze to the blood-soaked rip in my jeans just above my ankle. When I pulled up my pant leg, I discovered a short, shallow gash in the skin just above my sock. It began to throb as I eyed it with the detachment gained from occasional renovation-related injuries.

Minor.

It looked impressive, though. My exertion had encouraged the bleeding. My sock was soaked down one side, and my shoe was squishy. A few drops leaked out onto the floor while I watched. I dropped the pant leg back into place, unable to summon up enough energy to care at the moment.

One of the baristas, an older woman, pushed through the crowd to pat me on the shoulder with a motherly hand. "Police and ambulance are on the way. Would you like a hot drink? Or some juice?"

"Orange juice, please," I quavered gratefully. When it arrived, I needed both trembling hands to raise it to my mouth. The bottle clattered a calypso rhythm against my teeth.

A few minutes later, the juice started to work its magic on my blood sugar. I drew a long, shaky breath, stretching out my hand to gauge the diminishing tremor. I wouldn't want to run a marathon or anything, but I could probably stand up without collapsing.

Most of the customers were still crowded around the windows, riveted on the scene in the street. The remainder drifted back to their tables, leaving me some welcome space. When the barista offered to bring a first aid kit for my leg I accepted with thanks, and she disappeared through a door behind the coffee counter.

I swallowed the last of the juice, staring anxiously toward the street and straining my ears for sirens. At last, I heard the welcome wail, and I slumped back in the chair with a sigh, letting my shoulders ease down from around my ears. Thank God.

A few moments later, a disturbance in the bystanders outside the coffee shop made me sit up again to crane my neck. The police must be arriving.

Adrenaline slammed into my bloodstream. Shit, no!

The big gunman from the Suburban moved purposefully toward the door of the coffee shop, head and shoulders taller than the still-gawking crowd.

Goddammit, where the hell were the police?

I hauled myself to my feet to hurry in the direction of the bathroom, but my movement caught his attention through the glass. He met my eyes as he began to shove his way through the onlookers into the shop. His lips were moving, but I didn't wait to find out what he was saying.

With a fresh surge of panic, I bolted into the open door behind the coffee bar, nearly colliding with the barista as she returned. She held out the first aid kit as I passed, as if maybe I would stop and doctor my leg on the fly. I rocketed past a small table and chairs, then past storage shelves, frantically scanning for a back exit.

Thank God, there it was, equipped with what architects call 'panic hardware'. How appropriate.

I crashed into the door lever with a grunt and burst through the doorway only to be confronted by a beanpole of a young man, his eyes wide in his white face. He flung out trembling arms to stop me, but I recognized the telltale 'afraid of the ball' flinch as his face turned partly away, eyes squeezing.

I passed beyond fear. My mind clicked into the magical state basketball players call 'the zone' and time slowed, my mind analyzing and my body reacting without conscious thought.

He was a good three inches taller than me, maybe more. His reach was too long to avoid, but he was ridiculously skinny. I was five-foot-ten

and a hundred and sixty pounds. I had a lot of momentum and a lot of motivation.

I could take him.

Disconnected, I saw the fear flood into his face at the sight of my maniacal grin. I didn't even try to dodge around him. Instead, I dropped my shoulder, took two hard accelerating steps, and slammed into his gut. At impact, I jerked upright, flinging my arms upward. A tangle of bony limbs catapulted over my shoulder, accompanied by the explosive bark of air leaving his lungs. I dimly heard the thud when he hit the pavement.

The orange juice was wearing off already. I forced my rubbery legs to accelerate again, but I had only taken half a dozen strides when a voice boomed behind me.

"Stop, police!"

With a hiccup of relief, I skidded to a halt and swung back to face the coffee shop.

It wasn't the police.

The big man stood beside his fallen accomplice, his gun trained on me. The bore looked enormous, but it was probably only a 9mm. I'd always liked guns. Until now.

His eyes and gun remained locked on me as he reached out one foot and nudged the kid on the ground none too gently. "Breathe, Webb."

The beanpole twitched and drew in a wailing breath, then another. If I hadn't been so terrified, I'd have felt sorry for him. I'd had the wind knocked out of me once or twice. Those first few breaths were no picnic.

The kid took a couple more breaths, and then retched and vomited. That had to hurt. He curled around his stomach and lay still, but I could see the rise and fall of his rib cage. At least I hadn't killed him outright. That would probably upset the big guy.

"oh-shit-oh-shit-oh-shit," a small voice chanted in my mind. I wondered how many people's last words were 'Oh, shit'. It made me think

of that joke, how did it go? 80% of people's last words were 'Oh, shit', except in Saskatchewan, where the usual last words were 'Here, hold my beer'.

Too much adrenaline. Focus.

I shook my head, rattling my brain back into action. Stay alert, stay smart. Get him talking.

"What do you want?" I quavered. Not very inspired, but at least it was a start.

"I want to talk to you," he responded evenly. "Don't run away. Calm down and talk to me."

"Nine millimetres of hot lead is a hell of a conversation-starter. Why are you trying to shoot me?" I asked, attempting a calm and conversational tone while my heart tried to punch through my ribs.

"If I'd tried to shoot you, you'd be dead," he said. "And it's a .40 cal."

I digested that. There was some logic there. Not the part about the .40 calibre; the other part. Earlier, he'd fired from such close range he'd have to have been completely ham-fisted to miss me. And the way he handled that gun, I was pretty sure he wasn't ham-fisted. I belatedly realized he was still talking, his voice steady and soothing.

"Let's start again. My name is John Kane. I'm with the RCMP." He jerked his chin toward his companion on the ground, his eyes never leaving me. "This is Clyde Webb. The man who was in your car was of interest to us. We want to ask you some questions. Don't run away."

I sucked in a trembling breath and studied him more closely, trying to ignore the firearm still pointing at me. My first impression of 'really big guy' hadn't just been frightened exaggeration. He nearly filled the back doorway of the coffee shop.

Short dark hair with a shading of grey at the temples, in a military-looking cut. Well-fitting dark jeans, black T-shirt stretched over wide

shoulders and a muscular chest, loose-fitting black jacket open over top. Steady grey eyes never left mine. He stood completely still, no sign of tension in his posture.

“Why should I believe you? Your buddy doesn’t look like he could have passed a police physical, and you don’t have a uniform or a badge.”

He one-handed the gun and reached into his jeans pocket to withdraw a wallet, which he flipped open and held up. “Here’s my identification.”

“Yeah, right. I can’t read it from here, and even if I could, I wouldn’t know whether it was real or out of a Crackerjack box.”

His expression stayed calm, his deep voice unhurried. “What proof would you like to see? What would make you feel more comfortable?”

My legs quivered uncontrollably. I wasn’t going to last much longer. But the more I thought about it, the more I was inclined to believe him. If he’d actually intended to shoot me, he could have done it many times over. And if he was a criminal, he wouldn’t be patiently negotiating with me.

But I couldn’t afford to be wrong.

“I’d feel a whole lot better if I saw some uniforms. I heard the police cars on the street earlier, so where are they?”

Without turning, he took two steps backward and thumped a couple of times on the door with his fist. “Come on out!”

The door opened and two men in body armour emerged, followed by two uniformed city police officers, their hands hovering near their weapons.

Officer Kane nodded toward his partner, who was still slumped on the ground. “Check on Webb.”

One of the uniforms bent over him while the others ranged themselves beside Kane to watch me.

My mind reeled. They called in a SWAT team to chase me?

Shit, I've just assaulted a police officer.

Oh thank God, I'm safe!

My knees gave up and I sat abruptly and heavily on the pavement. Long tremors rolled through my body. I'd left my jacket inside the coffee shop when I fled, and although the temperature was above zero, it was hardly shirtsleeve weather. I wrapped my arms around myself, shaking.

In seconds, Officer Kane was standing over me, patting me, which seemed odd until I realized he was searching me for concealed weapons. The only place I could have hidden one was at my ankles where the legs of my jeans flared, and he briefly examined the gash in my leg before waving one of the uniforms over.

"Bring an ambulance around," he told the man. "Have them look at Webb, too."

A few minutes later, I was sitting in the back of the ambulance, enveloped in a warm blanket while a paramedic treated my ankle. He finished cleaning the wound, which was still sluggishly oozing blood.

"This could use a few stitches," he said. "We can take you in to Emergency now if you want."

"It hardly seems worth it," I responded. "It's just a scratch. I think I must have snagged it on a piece of sharp metal or something."

"You got snagged all right, but this is a gunshot wound. We have to report these, and you were very lucky to get away with such a minor injury."

"Please tell me I don't have to go to Emergency," I begged. "It's a total waste of my time and the hospital's resources. Can't you just patch me up? I'll be making a police report anyway, so that should cover your reporting requirements."

While we talked, the bony Webb had crept to his feet. He insisted on walking to the ambulance under his own power, rejecting the stretcher that had been wheeled over for him. Surrounded by all the machismo in

SWAT gear and uniforms, he seemed to feel as though he had something to prove. He stood obstinately outside the vehicle while the paramedic examined him.

A couple of other men in body armour came around the side of the coffee shop, greeting Officer Kane with rough humour. One of them slapped him on the back and said, "Nice to see you've still got your edge after retiring to your cushy INSET job!"

"What part of this looks cushy to you, Archer? I'm out there getting my ass shot up, and you ERT ladies come prancing in with your body armour once all the shooting's over," Kane groused back without rancour.

I caught Webb's eye. "I'm really sorry," I began. "I was so scared, and I didn't know who you were..."

"It's okay," he interrupted. "I should have identified myself. It was my fault."

Kane had arrived in time to hear the last of the exchange. He closed his eyes briefly and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Webb, I only wanted you to identify yourself. Just say who you were and get her to calm down..."

Webb shuffled his feet, blushing. "I'm sorry. I got so scared I forgot. She was running right at me and I'm no good at physical stuff. I was afraid she was going to kill me."

Kane went still. "No, I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I should never have put you in that position." One of the uniformed officers signalled for his attention and he turned away.

One of the ERT men, Archer, I thought, sidled over. "Shut up, Webb," he said in low tones.

Webb turned a hurt expression to him. "What?"

Archer muttered, "How do you think he feels? Why do you think he's got a skinny, useless analyst for a sidekick instead of real partner?"

Webb evidently took no offence. “That wasn’t his fault,” he murmured. “Everybody knows Kane is the best of the best. He couldn’t have done anything to change what happened.”

Archer sighed. “Yeah, try telling him that. So don’t rub it in, okay?” They both clammed up as Kane returned.

“Are you finished here?” Officer Kane asked the paramedic.

“Both of them have declined a trip to the hospital.”

“Fine,” Kane responded. “The other team is doing the cleanup over on the street, so you can head out.” He turned to me. “I’d like to take your statement now and ask you some questions.”

I made a vague gesture that encompassed Webb along with the uniforms, ambulance, armoured men, and general chaos in the parking lot. “I’m really sorry about all this.”

He regarded me gravely. “I don’t think you have anything to apologize for at the moment. Let’s go and sit in the coffee shop and you can tell me what happened.”

Kane, Webb, and I trooped back into the building and appropriated one of the quiet corners. A couple of uniformed city police officers were finishing up with the last of the witnesses, and they waved a casual goodbye to Kane as they left.

Kane sent Webb to get writing materials from their truck, and I tried not to squirm guiltily in my chair while we waited in silence.

### CHAPTER 3

What the hell was taking Webb? I shifted in the chair again before forcing myself to lean back and feign composure.

God, what if they arrested me for assaulting a police officer? But dammit, it wasn't my fault I got carjacked by some nutcase. Surely they couldn't blame me for being a little panicky. And my squeaky-clean record had to be good for something. Only one little speeding ticket in my entire life...

Shut up, already.

I shook off my anxious ruminations and straightened as Webb rejoined us, dropping into the chair across from me.

Kane regarded me neutrally as he opened the notebook Webb had brought. "Let's start with your name and address."

I told him my name and spelled it out. "I've been living near Silverside, Alberta since the beginning of the month, but I haven't done my address change from Calgary yet," I added.

At the mention of Silverside, Webb glanced at Kane, his mouth opening. Then he snapped it shut, his gaze returning to me. Kane's face remained expressionless while he wrote down my Silverside and Calgary addresses, along with my phone numbers and other identification.

When I told him my date of birth, Webb's face lit up. "Oh, hey, that's exactly the same as my Mom's! I didn't think you were that old. I

mean..." he fumbled, "You look great! I can't imagine my Mom taking somebody out like that. You were like, Madame Rambo or something!"

I winced. "Thanks for that, I think. But Madame Rambo sounds a little too much like a 1-900 number for my taste."

Webb turned pink and I thought I caught a glint of amusement in Kane's eyes, but it passed too quickly to be sure. Kane brought us back to the business at hand by asking for a chronological list of events.

"You were right behind me, so I think you saw most of it," I told him. "That guy was hiding in my trunk, and he came through the back seat with a gun in his hand. I slammed on the brakes and jumped out, and that's when you arrived. But I don't know how he got in there, because I bought some stuff at the hardware store earlier and put my bags in the trunk. He wasn't in there then. And I went straight to my house after the store."

I pondered that for a moment. "So he must have sneaked in while I was inside the house."

"Yes," Kane confirmed. "We've had him under surveillance since Friday afternoon."

"What!" I squawked. "You watched him crawl into my trunk and you didn't *do* anything?"

"We've been watching him for several months now, both here and in Silverside. His name was Samir Ramos. We suspected him of espionage, but we couldn't find solid proof. We thought you might be his contact. We were a little surprised when you jumped out of the car."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Deciding that open-mouthed gawping was probably not an attractive look for me, I closed it and sat for a few seconds, assimilating this new information.

"But," I said, and then shut up, trying to organize my thoughts.

"Okay," I tried again. "So you and Officer Webb are working on a case, and you think this Samir guy is a spy?"

Webb let out a whoop of laughter. “*Officer Webb!* I like the sound of that!”

At my look of utter bafflement, Kane explained. “Webb is a civilian. He’s an analyst with CSIS.”

He must have noticed my unenlightened look, because he went on to explain, “CSIS stands for Canadian Security Intelligence Service. Their role is to protect Canada’s national security. Webb and I are part of an INSET team. INSET stands for Integrated National Security Enforcement Teams, and our role is counterterrorism. We believe that Ramos was attempting to steal classified information and deliver it to a terrorist group.”

Webb spoke up again. “So I’m not ‘Officer’ anything, just plain old Clyde Webb. But you can call me Spider. All my friends do. Get it? Spider Webb!”

I smiled and nodded. Quite apart from the wordplay on his name, his lanky arms and legs did make him look spiderish. “Got it.” I turned back to Kane, still trying to figure it all out. “But you’re RCMP?”

“Yes, INSET teams can be made up of police, military, and civilian members.”

“Okay... So who were the other acronyms?”

He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“You said ERT earlier, I think?”

“Yes. ERT stands for Emergency Response Team. It’s Canada’s answer to SWAT.”

I rubbed my aching temples. Already I’d forgotten what INSET meant. I moved on. “So back to the spy. Were you able to catch him, or did he get away? Can you question him? Why was he trying to shoot *me*?”

“We’d very much like to know why he was trying to shoot you. Or, more likely, capture you. If he’d wanted to kill you, he would have shot you as soon as you got into your car.”

I shuddered. Which was worse, a bullet in the brain, or being captured by a creepy spy for purposes unknown?

“Unfortunately,” Kane continued, “We can’t question him because I killed him. There were too many bystanders in the vicinity, and I couldn’t let him keep shooting.”

Oh. I flashed back to Kane’s comment to the paramedic about doing the cleanup on the street. Wet cleanup on Aisle 3. Eeuw.

I wrenched my mind away from the inappropriate humour when I realized Kane had asked me another question. “Sorry, what?”

“Did you know Ramos? Have you ever seen him before?”

“Uh,” I said, my mind working furiously.

Yes, Officer Kane, I met him in a steamy fantasy. Bad, bad answer, on so many levels.

“I think... I saw him in Silverside,” I ventured.

“When and where do you think you saw him?”

“It’s... a little confusing.”

Kane was watching me intently, and it took all my self-control to keep my eyes from shifting away from his steady gaze. Lying was probably a very bad idea, but telling the truth would make me sound at best, like a crackpot, and at worst, like a pathetic slut.

Hell, my fantasies were nobody’s business but my own. I went with simple, true, and incomplete.

“I slipped and hit my head. I guess I was knocked out for a while. I think I saw him about the time the paramedics arrived.”

“Exactly where and when was this?”

“Thursday. Around 12:30 in the afternoon. I slipped on the sidewalk in front of the ice cream shop on Main Street.”

“So there should have been a few witnesses,” Kane said.

“Um, I don’t know. Maybe the paramedic saw him.”

The paramedic sure as hell did see him, but I'd be damned if I knew how. How did he get inside my head, anyway?

"Maybe I hallucinated the whole thing," I added. "I was a little disoriented."

"Are you sure the man in your car today was the same one you saw in Silverside?"

"I... think so. But that wouldn't make any sense. If I saw him in Silverside, how could he possibly show up at my house here in Calgary? It's not like he would have had my name and address."

...Because I'd been too busy sucking face with him to exchange names...

Gah. Focus.

Kane exhaled wearily. "I'm sorry to ask you this, but will you look at the body and see if you can be positive about whether it's the same man?"

My stomach lurched, but I nodded. Looking at dead people wasn't high on my list of favourite activities. And I didn't think I was going to like seeing somebody freshly dead from a gunshot wound.

"I'm going to have to eat first, though," I said.

Webb spoke up. "You may want to wait until after we visit the medical examiner's office."

"No, I'll definitely want a full stomach."

Both of them regarded me doubtfully. "Okay, whatever you say," Webb replied.

"When should I go? And where's the morgue? Oh, and I forgot to ask, what about my car? Were you able to get it stopped before anybody got hurt? Where is it?"

"Ramos had to stop it before he could get out and start shooting," Kane responded. "Leaving it in gear probably saved your life. The car will be impounded until our team gets a chance to check it for possible clues,

but that should only take a few days. Your insurance may cover the repairs.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “Repairs? How bad?”

My poor little car.

“Just a couple of bullet holes. You can ride with us to the medical examiner’s office, and then we’ll call you a cab to get back to your house.”

*Just* a couple of bullet holes. Bullet holes were not minor in my world. I faked calm.

“Okay. I’ll grab a sandwich and a drink to go and eat them on the way, if you don’t mind me eating in your truck.”

Kane shrugged. “It’s a surveillance vehicle. It’s already full of fast-food wrappers.”

I rose to go to the sales counter and stopped as a thought hit me. “Oh, crap! I forgot, all my overnight stuff is in the car. I have nothing at the house. Can I get my backpack out of the car, or is that impounded, too?”

“It’s part of a crime scene, so technically it should stay. But you can get a few things if I supervise and catalogue their removal,” Kane replied.

“Good, that’ll work.”

Lucky I’d worn my waist pouch as usual. Someday the fashion police were going to take me down for wearing it in public, but it was convenient and impossible to leave behind. I might not be stylish, but at least I still had all my money, credit cards, and other essentials despite my wild flight.

I paid for my food, and we left the coffee shop to head toward the cordoned area in the street. The ambulance had departed, but there were still two police cruisers and a fire truck parked in the street along with Kane’s Suburban and my Saturn. As we approached, a television van drove away, and I thanked my lucky stars they’d given up moments too

soon. I could imagine the TV reporter slavering over an interview with a carjacking victim.

I glanced up at Kane pacing beside me. He had to be at least six-foot-four. It was unusual for me to have to look up at anybody, and it was a nice change. He noticed my glance and returned a questioning look.

“I was wondering about the media coverage,” I explained. “How did you get rid of them without a whole round of interviews?”

“Part of the clean-up crew’s job is to deal with media questions. Tonight on the news, they’ll report that there was a shooting this afternoon, and that it was probably drug-related. That keeps the public calm, thinking it can’t happen to them. In a couple of days, it will be old news.”

“Drug-related? Jeez, I hope nobody recognizes my car.”

Kane flashed his ID at the uniformed officer and lifted the police tape for Webb and me to duck under. Webb winced when he folded his skinny torso, and I offered him another repentant ‘sorry’. He waved a magnanimous hand.

When we arrived at my car, I sadly regarded the bullet hole in the trunk. With the white topcoat cracked away and the grey primer showing underneath, it looked very much like the gunshot decals the kids put on their cars to look cool. I wasn’t feeling very cool at all.

I brushed my fingers over the hole and murmured, “Poor little car.”

Realizing Kane and Webb were watching me, I reached into my waist pouch for my keys and encountered empty space in their usual pocket. “Oh, my keys are still in the ignition.”

Kane strode to the open driver’s door and reached in around the steering wheel. I started to follow him, but jerked to a halt when I noticed the ugly splatter at the top of the rear passenger door and over the roof. I looked away quickly. Maybe their evidence team would clean it off.

Kane handed over my loaded keychain, and Webb raised amused eyebrows. “How many keys do you need, anyway?”

“All of them. Believe it or not, I actually know what each of those keys is for. My friends call it the janitor’s set.”

“I know janitors that don’t even have that many keys,” he chuckled as I unlocked the trunk.

Before I could touch anything, Kane reached in and retrieved my small backpack. “Is this it?”

I nodded, and he opened the zipper. “Tell me what you need from this,” he said as he began to withdraw items and lay them out in the trunk.

“I’ll need everything in there,” I blurted, hoping to forestall the unpacking process.

He continued without comment, and I felt a blush spreading up my face when he pulled out my bright yellow thong underwear. Webb strolled away with heavy nonchalance, his face scarlet.

Yeah, that was probably more than he wanted to know about me.

As Kane extracted the matching yellow bra, I took myself in hand. Dammit, I was pushing fifty. Surely I was past adolescent simpering over my undies. Kane’s face showed nothing but professional detachment, so I stood a little taller and watched in silence while he completely unpacked my few items from the backpack and checked the pack itself over thoroughly.

He laid the pack in the trunk before taking a small camera out of his inside pocket to photograph the trunk and its contents. He made a note in his notebook, then methodically repacked the bag and handed it to me.

“What’s in these other bags?” he asked.

“Oh, just my winter survival gear,” I responded, glancing at their familiar lumpy bulk. “I always take it when I’m driving the highway. You know how fast the weather can change around here in March.”

As I eyed the bags, a dark spot on one of them caught my eye. No, it was a hole.

“Oh, no,” I said as I reached in before Kane could stop me. I gazed up at him. “You killed my sleeping bag.”

## CHAPTER 4

When we got into the battered Suburban, Webb offered me the front passenger seat while he got in behind. I'd noticed a couple of bullet holes in the driver's side of the truck, but apparently nothing vital had been hit. Kane pulled smoothly into traffic and we headed north.

I devoured my sandwich while Kane drove in silence and Webb chattered incessantly from the rear seat. In short order, I discovered he had two older sisters, still lived with his parents, had a computer science degree, and was a fan of World of Warcraft and Star Trek.

"You like the new Star Trek best, I suppose?" I asked.

"No, I love them all. The original ones are the best," he enthused. "Besides, you can't get all the in-jokes in the new movie unless you've seen the originals."

"I can't believe you're into a show that started, what, twenty years before you were born?"

“I’m a serious movie and TV buff,” he replied proudly. “I watch everything.”

We spent the rest of the short drive debating the merits of the latest Star Trek movie. When we arrived at our destination, Webb grew increasingly subdued while we waited for the medical examiner in the reception area. When the examiner arrived and we began the walk down the long hallway, silence reigned.

I swallowed nervousness. Death didn’t disturb me and I’d never been squeamish, but I hoped I didn’t throw up or pass out. That would be an embarrassing show of weakness.

The medical examiner led us into a room containing a drape-covered gurney. Kane glanced at Webb’s pale face.

“You stand over here by the door,” he said. “I’ve already got your puke on my pants; I don’t need any more of it.”

I glanced reflexively at Kane’s legs, and sure enough, there was a splatter on his right shoe and pant leg. I averted my eyes. Didn’t need to see that just now.

Kane took me gently by the arm and the medical examiner led us to the gurney. “Ready?” he asked.

I nodded, and the examiner lifted the sheet away from the dead man’s face.

Clearly, Kane was an excellent marksman. There was a neat dark hole in the forehead. There was very little blood on the face, but I was glad I couldn’t see the back of the head. I’d seen what a .22 bullet would do to a two-by-four as it went through. Tiny entry hole, total devastation on exit. Kane had said his gun was a .40 calibre. I really didn’t want to see the exit wound.

Holding onto composure, I concentrated on the face, trying to see it as it would have been in life. I’d only seen Beefcake for a short time, and I

hadn't been paying much attention to his face. And death changes even your dearest loved ones into remote strangers.

"I'm pretty sure it's the same guy," I said as I turned away from the table.

Kane's hand was still under my elbow. He came around in front of me without letting go of my arm and looked down into my face. "Are you all right? Do you need to sit down?"

I shook my head. "I'm fine," I lied.

A tremulous voice floated from the vicinity of the doorway. "I think... I might need to sit down."

We turned to see Webb propped against the wall. His pale face had taken on an unflattering greenish cast, tastefully highlighted with a sheen of sweat.

Kane let go of me and grabbed a handful of Spider's shirt, lifting and swivelling him into a chair. He shoved Webb's head down between his bony knees and held him in place with a hand on the back of the young man's neck.

"Breathe," Kane said. "Slow and easy. That's it."

I turned to the medical examiner, who had by now mercifully covered the damaged face on the gurney. "Could we get him a glass of water?"

He nodded and wheeled the gurney out of the room. By the time he returned a minute or two later, Webb was sitting up again, and he sipped shakily at the water.

"Are you going to be okay now?" I asked, and he nodded and rose tentatively from the chair. I noticed Kane didn't put a hand out to steady him. I guessed it was a guy thing. Besides, Kane had moved remarkably fast for such a big man. He could probably catch Webb before he hit the ground if necessary.

It seemed Spider was sufficiently recovered, though, and we proceeded uneventfully back to the reception area. When we arrived, Kane sprawled into one of the chairs in the deserted room, indicating with a wave of his hand that we should do the same. Webb and I sank into chairs of our own.

“Let’s talk this back,” Kane said, and I wondered if he was being considerate, tactfully allowing us to recover without fuss, or whether this was just for his own convenience.

Kane turned to me. “You’re reasonably sure this is the same man you saw in Silverside.”

“Yes.”

“How could you... How could you just *look* at him like that?” Spider burst out, apparently still reliving the grisly vision. “Like he was a... a... piece of meat in the supermarket.”

“He *is* just a piece of meat now,” I replied as gently as I could. “There’s nobody left inside. Whoever he was, he isn’t in there anymore. Besides,” I added, mostly to myself, “It’s not the worst thing I ever saw.”

The memory of tortured screams echoed again in my mind. I shook my head slightly and banished the ghost with the competence of long practice.

Returning to the present, I realized something must have shown on my face. Webb was staring at me, and Kane was frowning subtly. Why the hell had I said that out loud?

Kane apparently decided to let it go. “So when you saw Ramos in Silverside, was that the first time you’d ever seen him?”

“Yes.”

“So Ramos sees you, once, in Silverside, on Thursday. Instead of tracking you down in Silverside, where he saw you, he travels two hours to Calgary to stake out an empty house with a For Sale sign on it.”

I shrugged. "I don't get it either. First, how would he know who I was, and second, if he did know who I was, why would he come to Calgary instead of Silverside, and third, why the heck would he want to find me anyway?"

I could think of one reason, but I was pretty sure that hadn't been lust in his eyes.

"Oh, and fourth," I added. "How did he know I was going to show up at an empty house at all?"

"That one's easy," Kane replied. "See a For Sale sign, call a realtor."

"That makes sense." I sat up straighter. "My realtor called me and said she had a hot prospect who wanted to meet me in person. We both thought it was unusual, but she set up the appointment – and then the guy never showed."

"He showed, all right," Kane said. "You just didn't see him until it was too late."

Webb chimed in, "But it still doesn't make sense to lure you down here. Unless... he was planning to kidnap you and take you somewhere in Calgary."

My skin crawled at the thought. "Maybe he was just some nutso stalker, and it has nothing to do with your case at all," I said. "But that still doesn't explain why he would lure me here instead of just snatching me in Silverside. And anyway, that brings us back to... how did he find out who I am?"

"Think back," Kane urged. "Was your name ever mentioned in his presence? Could he have asked somebody your name and looked you up? You said you hadn't completed all your address changes yet."

That rang a faint bell. I sat still, trying to sneak up on the thought. Who had I discussed address changes with recently?

“No. Crap. Not that I can think of. The only place I’ve given my name and address recently was at the Silverside Hospital, and they wouldn’t give that record out to anybody.”

“You saw Ramos for the first time around twelve thirty on Thursday. You were admitted to the hospital on Thursday afternoon, correct?”

I nodded and Kane continued his analysis. “Ramos must have discovered your name and address sometime between Thursday afternoon and early Friday morning, because he left Silverside around eight AM Friday morning. That’s when we started following him.” He shook his head. “The hospital records are still the most likely source of his information. Records confidentiality wouldn’t stop a spy.”

“Oh!” I bolted upright. Kane and Webb both sat up fast.

“What?” Kane snapped.

“You’re right, it had to be the hospital records! I just remembered the Silverside hospital had my Calgary address. They took it off my driver’s license, and I forgot to tell them it had changed.”

Kane relaxed back into his chair. “Okay, so now we know when and how. Which leaves us with why. Think. Did he do or say anything to give you a clue?”

My guilty conscience twinged again. I hate lying. The few times I’ve told white lies, the consequences turned out to be worse than if I’d told the awkward truth in the first place.

Well, too late now. I took a deep breath.

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