

# **Once Burned, Twice Spy**

Book 13 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

By Diane Henders

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

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Book 1: Never Say Spy

Book 2: The Spy Is Cast

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

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## CHAPTER 1

My heart was already thumping too fast when I sidestepped into the dark alley with my Glock at the ready.

My head wasn't in the game. Good way to get myself killed. Focus, dammit...

A clank from behind a garbage dumpster was my only warning before a shadowy figure lunged out.

Man with an assault rifle.

A blaze of adrenaline made me pull my shot just a fraction, but my bullet still hit his chest. He dropped.

Pulse jackhammering, I crept forward to press my back against the wall of the building. What was around that corner? If I poked my head out, would somebody shoot it off?

I eased down into a crouch.

Slow breath.

In.

Out for the count of three.

A quick peek...

A vicious crack made me jerk backward as a bullet struck the building where my head would have been if I'd been standing.

I scuttled back the way I'd come, past the blank gaze of the dead man beside the dumpster.

Dammit, why had I gotten myself into this?

A flash of movement to my left.

I pivoted, my pistol jerking up and my trigger finger already tightening.

*"Shit!"* The word left me in a breathless squeak as I snatched my finger out of the trigger guard. A young girl stared at me wide-eyed from only a few yards away, her face a pale oval in the murk.

Hands shaking, I was turning away when I glimpsed her reaching upward.

Toward the trigger rigged to her explosive vest...

My bullet caught her between the eyes, slapping her to the pavement an instant before she would have blown us both to oblivion.

Horror gripped my throat, but I had no time to indulge it. A bearded turban-clad man charged out of the darkness yelling, his face contorted as he brandished a long black object.

My sights snapped to his chest.

An instant later I sucked in a hard breath and swung my weapon aside to let the innocent commuter race past me, still waving his black umbrella and shouting at a departing bus.

Another bullet ricocheted nearby with a malevolent whine. I slammed my back against the nearest building, my blood pressure ratcheting up to near-stroke levels.

Enough.

“Let’s end this!” I yelled, my voice raw with tension.

“Already?” The response was taunting, and my temper ignited like a hissing fuse.

I managed not to let it explode into bellowed obscenities. “Yeah,” I snapped. “I’m done.”

The lights came on and I holstered my Glock before the range director could see how much my hands were trembling. Sliding my acoustic earmuffs down around my neck, I pulled out my earplugs and pocketed them as I made for the door of the simulator.

Braced for insults, I stepped out.

The dour-faced man eyed me with a sardonic twist to his mouth. “Don’t tell me the great Aydan Kelly lost her nerve.”

I gave him a level look. “No, I just remembered I’ve got a meeting at one and I need to get ready.”

As if I could forget Stemp’s damn meeting. That’s why I couldn’t focus in the first place.

Disbelief dripped from the range director’s tone. “Yeah, sure. A meeting. That’s why you chickened out after two minutes.” His lips curled in a smile that was probably supposed to look like friendly teasing but didn’t quite make it past a sneer. “You almost shot that non-combatant, too. Better be careful. Hate to see you lose your title as the oldest female agent to pass requalification.”

Usually I could let his bullshit roll off my back, but today...

My teeth came together with an audible click as I battled the urge to smash my elbow into his grin. Or at least remind him that my forty-eight-year-old muscle and fitness could kick his paunchy fiftyish ass any day...

I did neither.

“Have I *ever* shot a non-combatant?” I growled.

His unpleasant smile widened. “You mean, besides the three you killed last year?”

“That was the first time I’d ever been in the simulator,” I grated. “I haven’t killed a single non-combatant since. And I’ve had a one hundred percent kill rate for hostiles; and a zero percent kill rate for myself. And I do this at least twice a month, usually more. Who else has that kind of record?”

“John Kane.” His grin was cocky now that I’d risen to his bait.

“He’s not an agent anymore,” I snapped.

The range director’s smile slipped a bit, but he rallied immediately. “Greg Holt.”

To hell with this pissing contest.

I eased my jaw muscles and gave him my nicest smile. “Being compared to top agents like Kane and Holt is a huge compliment. Thanks, that makes my day!”

I used his moment of stunned silence to flee.

At the top of the stairs I took a slow breath to prepare for imminent claustrophobia, then activated the retinal scan to leave the secured area. When the heavy door of the exit chamber closed behind me with a subdued thump, I stepped hurriedly forward to trigger the next scan. Then I closed my eyes and counted down the long thirty seconds before the next door opened to freedom.

There was plenty of air in the chamber. I wouldn’t suffocate.

Much.

Only a few more seconds. Breathe...

When the chamber released me at last I scurried out into the lobby of Sirius Dynamics, mentally congratulating myself on making it through the chamber without hyperventilating. Take that, claustrophobia.

Still, though, maybe I'd just step outside for a few minutes. To check messages on my cell phone.

Right.

I tossed my security fob to the guard in his bulletproof glass wicket and made a beeline for the door.

When I stepped outside, a stinging faceful of wind-driven snow scoured away my claustrophobia in an instant. I spat an expletive and huddled into the dubious shelter of the doorway to take out my cell phone, my fingers already chilling in the bitter cold.

The display showed three new messages from my best friend, and I groaned. Bridezilla was on the rampage again. But at least listening to Nichele's wedding chatter would keep me from thinking about my upcoming meeting.

What if I was getting assigned to a new mission?

"I spent the past month preparing, dammit," I growled into the blustering wind. "I'm ready!"

And I had been certain of that, until I got the meeting request and all my doubts and fears came rushing back...

Don't think about it.

I touched the Play icon.

"Hey, girl!" Nichele's perky voice lilted out of the speaker. "This is your daily nag! Have you picked out your dress yet? I'm buying a tie for Dave's best man, and I want it to match your dress. Oh, and you

won't believe what I caught the caterer planning! And the florist; oh-em-gee, Aydan, it's like the guy's got some kind of mental *block!* Wait 'til you hear..." I tuned out the rest of her wedding woes until she concluded, "...call me ASAP, 'kay?"

The other two messages contained more cheerful nagging about the damn dress. Shivering, I punched the speed dial for her number and wrapped my free arm around myself in an attempt to conserve some body heat.

Nichele picked up with a triumphant crow on the second ring. "Aydan! Finally! I thought you'd fallen off the face of the earth, girl! Or gotten lost in this blizzard. The news says there have been over two hundred accidents in Calgary since six this morning. Is it snowing up there in Silverside, too?"

"Snowing to b-beat shit," I agreed, my teeth beginning to chatter. "And m-minus twenty and windy as all hell. I'm f-freezing my ass off."

As I spoke the words Clyde Webb bounded up the steps, his skinny six-foot-two camouflaged by a puffy hooded parka and a striped scarf that muffled him nose to chin. I mouthed 'Hi Spider' and gave him as cheery a wave as I could muster with a half-frozen hand.

He shot a watery-eyed frown at my coatless condition, then shucked off his jacket and dropped it over my shoulders despite my headshake. Countering my mute protest, he gave me a firm nod and a pat on the arm before whisking through the doors of Sirius.

I huddled gratefully into his warm parka and returned my attention to Nichele.

"...so Mitch, the best man..." she was saying. "...would you believe, the only suit and tie he had was the one he wore to his high

school graduation thirty years ago? Truckers! So I already bought him a suit but we have to get your dress soon, girl, so I can buy him a matching tie! You remember the wedding's in *three days*, right? You know most brides have all this stuff settled *months* before their weddings, right?"

I drew a deep breath. "Yeah, I know, Nichele. I'm sorry, I've been totally slammed at work lately."

"Well, why don't you just wear the dress I picked out for you a couple of summers ago?" she persisted. "It looks awesome on you, and that gorgeous green will totally work with my Christmas theme."

"Um... that dress died in a tragic hairspray accident," I mumbled. Before she could demand details, I added hurriedly, "I promise if the roads aren't closed tonight, I'll come down and we can go shopping."

I winced as the words left my mouth. A two-hour drive in the winter darkness was no picnic at the best of times, and in a howling blizzard it was damn near suicidal. And I'd still have to drive back in the middle of the night to be at work the next morning.

Unless my meeting catapulted me into even more immediate mortal danger...

I shivered despite the warmth of Spider's parka and sneaked a glance at my wristwatch. Fifteen minutes to go.

"Thanks, Aydan! I knew I could count on you! Oh, hang on..." Nichele's voice faded and the phone relayed a low-pitched mumble. A moment later she was back on the line. "Dave says to stay off the road," she reported. "You know how he is about anybody who's not a professional driver." Another mumble in the background prompted her to add, "He says he'll bobtail up in his highway tractor and get you as

soon as you're done at work, and then he'll take you home to SilverSide when we're done shopping. Just tell him what time you want him there."

My heart warmed. How lucky I was to have Dave perpetually poised to rescue me with his big truck, even if it meant driving for hours through a blizzard in pitch darkness just for the sake of a stupid dress.

I didn't voice my opinion about the dress.

"Tell him thanks," I said instead. "But I don't know yet what my afternoon's going to be like. I've got a meeting in a few minutes, and I'll know more after that. I'll call you as soon as I can..." I crossed my fingers, hoping social calls would still be on my priority list later. "...and you can leave your Bridezilla updates on my voicemail in the meantime."

"Smartass! I'm only forgiving you because we've been best friends since we were five."

"And because you know you actually are Bridezilla," I teased.

"Bite me." I could hear the smile in her voice. "But hey, while I'm being Bridezilla anyway, who are you bringing as your date?" In a suggestive sing-song she added, "I've saved a spot for Hot John. A nice big spot for his nice big-"

"Don't go there!" I interrupted. "I, um... I'll probably..."

There was no way I'd ask Kane. That would give him entirely the wrong idea. And Hellhound? My lips curved into an evil grin at the thought of Arnie's discomfort if anyone even uttered the word 'wedding'. It would be fun to tease him about it, but I wasn't mean enough to actually invite him.

"...I'll be on my own," I finished firmly.

“Oh, Aydan! Go on, just ask Hot John. I’ll save a spot for him just in case.”

Knowing the futility of arguing, I said, “Okay. I have to go now. Talk to you later.”

“See you soon, girl. Stay warm! Ciao!”

I ducked back into Sirius with a breath of relief.

Spider was standing beside the security wicket, wiping moisture from his cheeks.

“What’s wrong, Spider?” I eyed him with concern.

“Nothing; I was just walking into that wind and the snow stung my eyes.” He smiled as I handed him back his parka and added, “What were you doing out there in only your jeans and sweatshirt? You looked half-frozen.”

“I was. Thanks for your jacket. You’re such a good friend!” I gave him a smile and stepped up to the security wicket to sign in again. “I’d been down in the dungeon,” I added over my shoulder. “I just needed a breath of fresh air.”

“Oh.” He nodded sympathetic comprehension as I joined him again, fob in hand. “Well, it doesn’t get any fresher than that.”

“No kidding. My face feels like it’s been sandblasted. Who needs Botox and skin peels? All I have to do is stand in that blizzard for a few minutes and my wrinkles will be long gone.”

“You don’t have wrinkles,” he protested. Pink rose in his cheeks as the obvious lie hung in the air between us. “Well, maybe a few little ones...” he amended, reddening. “...but I still can’t believe you’re the same age as my mom.”

Jeez, was everybody conspiring to remind me of my age today?

Some of that thought must have shown on my face. Spider backpedaled, blushing harder. “Anyway, you always look great, and you’re amazing at your job, and that’s what really matters!”

“Thanks, Spider.” I gave him a one-armed hug and let him off the hook with a subject change as we turned toward the stairs. “Do you know what our meeting is about?”

He shot a wary glance at a pair of civilians waiting in the lobby. “Yes.”

We climbed the stairs in silence and my heart rate accelerated well beyond the demands of the modest exertion.

When we reached the top, I tried again. “Am I getting a new mission?” My voice cracked on the last word and I swallowed.

Spider hurried down the hallway, avoiding my gaze and evading my question. “Aren’t you looking forward to another mission? I figured you’d be bored after a month of doing decryptions day and night and having constant headaches from the network.”

I trotted beside him. “I was... am, I mean. Sort of. But...”

He paused, looking down at me worriedly. “Are you okay? Aren’t you mission-ready?”

“Well, yeah, of course... but...” I glanced up and down the empty hallway and lowered my voice. “Don’t tell anybody, but... I just... That last mission with Holt... it shook me. I thought I was better than that, you know?”

Spider frowned. “What do you mean? Your mission was successful. The terrorist attack never happened so that was a big win; and it wasn’t your fault that your informant switched sides and killed

your arms buyer. Any mission where none of the good guys die is a successful one.”

“I know, but...” I sighed. “Holt’s so... I just...”

Screw it. Now wasn’t the time for a heart-to-heart.

I shrugged and finished, “Nothing I did on that mission went right. Just bad luck, I guess.”

I didn’t utter the words that pounded inside my brain.

I had screwed everything up and Holt had to rescue me.

I wasn’t good enough.

“And I bet Holt kept needling you about it every chance he got. He’s a jerk,” Spider said hotly. “You’re a ’way better agent than him, and a ’way better person. Don’t let him get you down.”

I sighed again and turned to trudge toward the meeting room. “Thanks, Spider. I just hope I don’t get him for a partner again.”

“Not this time.” He gestured me ahead of him to the doorway.

I stepped forward only to halt at the sight of the two forbidding figures seated at the meeting table. My mouth dropped open and I blurted the first thought that flashed into my mind.

“Oh shit, who do we have to kill?”

## CHAPTER 2

Hellhound's chair creaked as he stood, his homely face creasing in a grin that flashed white teeth through his beard. "Hey, darlin'." He opened muscular tattooed arms, and my own face split in a wide smile as I stepped into his hug.

"Arnie! It's so good to see you!" I cuddled close and hugged him in return.

Successfully resisting the mischievous urge to slide my hands lower and give him a more personal squeeze, I stepped back. Better not go there in public. Given the slightest encouragement he'd melt my mind with his legendary kisses despite the presence of the other two.

Or because of it. He did love to stir the pot.

My lips twitched with wicked amusement, and I brought my inappropriate thoughts to heel by continuing, "But you're scaring me. Are you here in... um... an official capacity?"

"Yep. But don't worry, darlin', I'm a weapons specialist today. We ain't killin' anybody. 'Least, not as far's I know." He turned to the other man at the table. "Chow, ya ain't plannin' to knock off some poor schmuck at the conference, are ya?"

Dr. Chow scowled with half his face. The other half remained immobile as usual, the fire-ravaged scar tissue and prosthetic eye a horrifying reminder of his former military service.

“Maybe,” he growled. “Depends on who pisses me off.” He shot a sour look at Hellhound’s bulky arm still draped around my shoulders. “I can tell you right now, if you pull any lovey-dovey shit in front of me I’ll kill you both.”

“Oh, come on, Reggie,” I wheedled. “Don’t be jealous. You know you’ll always be my favourite Head of Weapons Research.”

The undamaged side of his mouth turned up and he shot an evil glance at Hellhound as he replied, “I know. Admit it, Kelly, you just can’t get enough of my left nut.”

I clasped my hands in an expression of rapture and breathed, “Your nuts are all I ever think about.”

Spider turned beet red and Hellhound let out a bellow of laughter just as Director Charles Stemp strode into the room and closed the door behind him.

One of his eyebrows lifted a fraction at the sight of Reggie’s and Hellhound’s unwholesome grins, and I hurriedly advised, “Don’t ask.”

Stemp returned his usual expressionless gaze. “I had no intention of doing so,” he replied without inflection. “Let’s begin.”

Hellhound dropped into his chair again, making it squeak in protest. I hurried around the table to take a seat next to Reggie, with my back to the wall. Spider slid in across from me, his blush fading but curiosity sparkling in the gaze he bounced between Hellhound, Reggie, and me.

“Agent Kelly,” Stemp said to me. “Apologies for the short notice, but we require an agent to accompany Dr. Chow and his team to Calgary for a conference today and tomorrow.”

My heart sank. Damn. I’d have to make that shitty drive after all.

“I told you I wanted her in the first place,” Reggie interrupted. “And the U.S. had already requested her, so it was pretty much a sure thing. You could have told her last week.”

Stemp betrayed no emotion, his voice as dispassionate as ever. “Noted. However, my objections to using Kelly still stand. I’m wary of such specific interest from the other countries...”

“Countries?” Reggie emphasized the plural. “Who else requested her?”

“The United Kingdom,” Stemp replied. “I don’t like it; and what’s more, her cover as Arlene Widdenback the arms dealer is still active and I don’t want anyone to make that connection with you.”

“Nobody’s going to recognize me,” Reggie countered. “And the other countries are our allies, remember?”

“Your reasoning is fresh in my mind, as is our status with Five Eyes,” Stemp replied crisply.

My pulse ticked up. Five Eyes? Was Ian Rand behind the U.K.’s request for my presence? But surely an individual MI6 agent wouldn’t have that much pull...

My stomach dropped. Shit. He’d broken his promise and reported me to his chain of command. Fear chilled my blood. Had he betrayed Moonbeam and Karma and Skidmark, too?

“So, um...” My voice came out slightly hoarse. “Do they... did the U.K. and U.S. give any reason why they wanted me, specifically? They shouldn’t even know I’m an agent, should they?”

“The United States knows,” Stemp replied. “Your clearances were registered with the Department of Homeland Security when you passed through their airports on your missions; although I had hoped they wouldn’t disseminate that information throughout all their intelligence agencies.”

“But I’ve never been to the U.K., so they wouldn’t have any record of me unless Agent Rand told them. He promised he wouldn’t, but...” I trailed off.

Ian hadn’t actually promised me that. Moonbeam and Karma and Skidmark had assured me of his word, but I couldn’t reveal their deep cover even to Charles Stemp, the Director of Clandestine Operations. And I especially couldn’t reveal it to Charles Stemp, their son.

“The United Kingdom’s request did not originate from Agent Rand’s intel,” Stemp said. “Nora Taylor, their head of Weapons Research, merely asked to meet with you while she was here.”

I frowned. “I don’t know any Nora Taylor.”

“She said as much. But she knows of you.” Stemp’s gaze sharpened. “She is Dr. Sam Kraus’s widow and the sole beneficiary of his estate.”

Spider’s eyes widened. “Sam was married? And Ms. Taylor owns the civilian research branch of Sirius Dynamics now?”

“She would, if it hadn’t been seized as the proceeds of crime after Kraus’s arrest,” Stemp replied. “However, she has not been

informed of that. As far as she knows the estate is currently tied up with probate red tape, and she has been working with us to unravel the complexities of the holdings. She wants to meet with Agent Kelly to reminisce about Kraus.”

My bullshit-detectors sprang to quivering attention. “How did she get my name? Why would she know I knew Sam?”

“When Kraus was fleeing his murderous compatriots after...” Stemp glanced at Hellhound and Reggie, obviously filtering out classified information. “...your trip to Georgia, he called his wife to tell her he feared for his life and that he might have to go into hiding for an unspecified period of time. He told her you were helping him.”

Conflicted memories twisted my guts and wrung my heart. I had helped Sam, all right. Straight into Stemp’s custody, and subsequently into a death that probably wasn’t from natural causes.

“Does she know we arrested Sam?”

“No; as far as she knows he vanished after that last phone call and was subsequently discovered dead a couple of months later. Kraus never mentioned a spouse to us, and since Ms. Taylor is a British citizen and their marriage took place in the United Kingdom, we didn’t discover their relationship until after Kraus’s estate went to probate. At that time we chose not to provide any details other than his death from a heart attack.”

“Do you think she knows anything about Sam’s... other activities?” I asked.

“When we realized Ms. Taylor was a high-level manager in MI5 with a correspondingly high security clearance, we chose not to inform her of any details while MI5 conducted a confidential internal

investigation on our behalf. They cleared her of any suspicion, and she has since been promoted to their Head of Weapons Research.”

“And do you think they did a thorough investigation?” I asked.

Stemp lifted a shoulder in one of his infinitesimal shrugs. “We have no choice but to provisionally accept their findings. But if she was involved in Kraus’s illegal operations she would certainly have a vested interest in finding out how much you know.”

I gulped. “And she’s involved in Sirius’s civilian operations now. How... isn’t that a giant security breach waiting to happen?”

“The management company that Kraus engaged years ago to run the civilian branch is continuing as before, so Ms. Taylor is not directly involved. Of necessity, the chain of command informed her of our intelligence operations here, but she has no jurisdiction or clearances. Our status is secure.”

“Well, that must be a relief to the chain of command,” Reggie drawled. “Business as usual; and Taylor has a huge security clearance. They must be absolutely creaming themselves.”

Stemp’s tone remained as clinical as ever; but I knew him well enough to identify the annoyance simmering under that cool façade. “Yes, the chain of command prefers to foster cordial relations with Ms. Taylor for the time being; and they see this as an opportunity to please both her and the United States. On the strength of Ms. Taylor’s security clearance, they divulged Kelly’s agent status to her and ordered me to assign Kelly to this conference, despite my advice to the contrary.”

Stemp transferred his attention back to me. “Dr. Chow and his team will be presenting our ultrasound weapon prototypes in a conference with the other Five Eyes countries at the Calgary facility

tomorrow. There is also a meet-and-greet this evening at twenty-one hundred hours. You and Helmand will provide security. You will also make yourself available for conversations with Ms. Taylor, and, if possible, determine whether she was aware of Kraus's activities. Webb will coordinate your operation from here."

Stemp fixed Reggie and Hellhound in his flat reptilian gaze. "Kelly is in charge. You will obey her orders immediately, without question, and to the letter."

I gulped as the magnitude of the mission dawned on me.

Oh, God, investigating Nora Taylor would have been more than enough for me to handle. But I was also going to be solely responsible for safeguarding a classified death ray and Canada's most brilliant weapon developers. If they fell into enemy hands...

My mind skittered with fear. Stemp's reservations about this mission had reawakened all my insecurities. He would have preferred to assign a top agent like Holt; not Aydan Kelly, former bookkeeper...

I straightened my spine. Shut up. I could do this. And anyway, Stemp hadn't said he was worried about my abilities; only about my identity.

Focus on what you can control.

"How many people on your team?" I asked Reggie. My voice came out sounding calmer and more professional than I felt.

"Just Melinda, Murray, and me."

Plus Hellhound and myself made five. Plus our assorted luggage and deadly weapons.

"So we'll need two vehicles," I said. "Um... why don't we just fly down? Can't we use one of the military helicopters?"

“See, that’s what I said!” Reggie seconded with a triumphant glance at Stemp. “Kelly’s in charge, right? If she thinks we should fly...”

“That would be the optimum solution,” Stemp agreed. “And I already pitched it to the chain of command. However, they say they can’t justify the expense.”

“But...” I began, then shut up. It was pointless to argue that they’d authorized helicopters for me before. I wasn’t their unique and precious decryption asset anymore; I was an agent with so much dangerous classified knowledge that it was a miracle they still allowed me outside the secured facility at all.

Claustrophobia shortened my breath. Don’t think about being locked up. Just do the job.

“Okay,” I said instead. “I don’t want to take my own car, though. No point in attracting anybody who might be watching for Arlene Widdenback. Arnie, did you drive here?”

“Yeah, I’ve got the Forester.”

“Reggie, your car has hand controls, doesn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, belligerence edging the word. “So what?”

“So if we take your car it means you have to drive, because I’ve never used hand controls before and I don’t want to take a chance using unfamiliar controls in poor road conditions,” I said in the most matter-of-fact tone I could muster.

“I’ve already requisitioned a Hummer from the motor pool,” Stemp said. “Kelly will drive.”

Reggie’s face hardened, but he said nothing.

“Webb will arrange your hotel reservations,” Stemp went on. “I suggest you leave as soon as possible. This storm is weakening and the roads have been plowed; however the forecast indicates that another front may hit later this evening.”

I barely managed to contain my sigh. “Okay. I’ll need to pick up some things from my house on the way by, but we can leave whenever everybody’s ready.”

“Melinda and Murray can be ready with the weapons in half an hour,” Reggie said. “But it’ll take me a couple of hours to powder my nose.”

He spoke the last sentence with bitterness, and I eyed him uncertainly. If it was a joke, nobody seemed to be laughing.

I abandoned speculation as Hellhound spoke. “Okay, that’ll gimme time to grab some lunch an’ gear up at Stores. Meet in the lobby at fifteen-thirty?”

“Make it fifteen hundred,” Reggie corrected. “I’ll rush it a bit. No big deal if I have to finish up in the car. I’m not driving.” Bitterness still darkened his tone.

“Sounds good,” Hellhound agreed easily. “It’ll be better if we can drive mostly in daylight. It’ll be damn near pitch dark by the time we get there anyway, with this cloud cover.”

Stemp nodded and stood. “Very well. Check-ins every hour on the hour while you’re in transit. Dismissed.” He strode out.

Spider turned to us. “I’ll book your hotel and email you the reservation information. Four adjoining rooms? Or...” A flush rose on his cheeks as he glanced at Arnie and me. “...three...?”

“Three,” Hellhound said. “I ain’t stayin’ at the hotel. I’m gonna stay at the secured facility an’ guard the weapons.”

I briefly considered pointing out that the bunker of Calgary’s facility was probably one of the safest places in the country, but Arnie knew damn well how secure it was. If he said he needed to guard the weapons, it wasn’t my place to argue.

“Okay,” Spider began, but I interrupted.

“Um, Spider... can we make it two adjoining rooms?” I glanced at Reggie. “If Reggie doesn’t mind bunking with me?”

Spider blushed scarlet as his gaze pingponged between Reggie, Arnie, and me.

I hastened to explain, “If I’m responsible for protecting everybody and something goes wrong, I don’t want to have to decide which room to run to first. Get a suite with a separate bedroom if you can, and Reggie can have the bedroom. Murray and Melinda can have the adjoining room and I’ll-”

“I want a separate room,” Reggie interrupted.

“But...”

“I. Want. A. Separate. Room,” he repeated slowly and clearly, his voice rock-hard. “If you have to decide which way to run, run to Murray and Melinda first.”

“But, Reggie, you’re the Head of-”

“I don’t give a shit!” he snapped. “Three adjoining rooms, Webb.” He rose and limped toward the door.

Worry rose, and I blurted, “Reggie, are you okay? Did you hurt your leg?”

He turned, his good eye raking me as his hand clenched. “Got a little abrasion on one of my *stumps*.” The word came out with vicious emphasis. “I’m fine.” He limped out, his shoulders rigid. Even the scar-twisted forefinger and thumb on his pincer-hand were curled as though to form a fist despite his missing fingers.

“Hell, that guy’s as sweet an’ cuddly as a fuckin’ alligator,” Hellhound observed. He grinned at me. “An’ he’s fuckin’ crazy. No guy in his right mind would turn down a chance to hit the sheets with ya, darlin’.”

“I wasn’t offering that,” I protested. “I just think it’d be easier to protect everybody if they’re closer together. Ideally we’d all be in the same room.” I shuddered. “Except that Murray and Melinda would probably use it as an opportunity to show off their kinky sex life, and that’s more than I want to know.”

Hellhound laughed. “Don’t worry, Chow can take care a’ himself. That asshole’s ornery enough to stop bullets in midair. Come on, let’s gear up at Stores an’ then grab somethin’ to eat.”

“I had lunch already, so you’re on your own after we leave Stores. I need some time to strategize.”

“Awright, let’s roll, darlin’.”

At Stores we collected a pair of two-way radios for backup communication while we were on the road, and after a moment of thought I requested bulletproof vests for myself and my three boffins.

“Shouldn’t you wear one, too?” I asked Hellhound.

“Got mine in the Forester. I’ll be wearin’ it when I pick up my cargo, an’ keepin’ it on ’til we’re in the bunker.”

My heart sank. I had been hoping he'd chuckle and tease me about being overly cautious.

Dammit, now I was really worried.

Hellhound clipped his radio to his jeans pocket and added, "I'm headin' for the Greenhorn. Sure ya don't wanna come?" Before I could reply, he leaned down to rasp softly in my ear. "Or we could go to your place for dessert, an' ya know you'll get to come."

His sexy gravelly voice sent shivers down my spine. The shivers magically warmed as they travelled south, and I sucked in a breath.

Hellhound drew back far enough to smile down at me, his eyes heating up, and I realized that my indrawn breath had sounded suspiciously like a hungry little moan.

Not surprising, since that's exactly what it had been.

I followed it up with a small self-pitying whimper. "God, Arnie, I want to. So much that it actually hurts..."

He grinned and his voice coasted down into a deep rough rumble like a big-block engine with a radical cam. "I can make it all better, darlin'."

Every nerve in my body sprang to tingling attention, and this time there was no question that I'd moaned.

"I can't." I leaned into him for just a moment, but pulled away before the heat of his hard body could ignite mine. "I have to stay here and plan. This trip was a complete surprise and I want to make sure I'm ready."

Hellhound nodded. "No problem, ya can take a rain check." His voice deepened to that sexy growl again. "An' the longer ya wait to collect it, the better it's gonna be when ya do."

I swallowed hard, fighting the temptation to abandon Reggie and his crew to their fate.

Duty won, by a shamefully small margin.

“So I’d like to split the team between your vehicle and mine,” I said, trying to sound professional. “That way we’ll limit our liability if we’re attacked.”

Hellhound straightened, his teasing smile vanishing behind the stony façade I’d named ‘The Killer’. “No can do. I ain’t qualified to transport personnel.”

“Not *qualified?*” I stared up at him, open-mouthed. “Are you kidding me? With your combat experience? Arnie, I’d put my life in your hands without hesitation, any day, any time.”

A spasm flickered across his face and was gone. “I know, darlin’,” he said quietly. “An’ that scares the shit outta me. I don’t want that kinda responsibility. I move weapons; an’ I kill people. That’s all I do.” He stared at his feet, and his next words were so soft he likely didn’t expect me to hear them. “That’s all I am.”

### CHAPTER 3

My heart twisted. “Arnie...” I began.

He flung up a hand. “Hell, darlin’, I didn’t mean that the way it came out. I just meant I ain’t cleared to transport anythin’ but weapons. Ya gotta be an agent to transport personnel.” He shrugged and added, “Unless they’re dead. Then I can take ’em.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Hope not.” He leaned down to drop a kiss on my lips. “See ya later.”

He strode off down the hall and I followed him with my gaze, half of me enjoying the play of his hard muscles and my other half worrying about the scars on his gentle heart.

I spent the next two hours coming up with every disastrous scenario I could imagine and planning my responses, but I had an uncomfortable feeling that my imagination had only scratched the surface.

We’d be dangerously exposed on our trip to Calgary. Travelling across open prairie, confined by snowbanks to a highway with dubious

traction, there would be no place to run or hide if we were attacked. An enemy had only to force us off the road and our vehicles would be immobilized. After that it was only a question of who had the most firepower.

The thought of being pinned down in a snowbank in the middle of a blizzard made me shudder.

Three o'clock came far too soon. Feeling woefully unprepared, I stopped in at Stores again on my way to the lobby and requisitioned a few more goodies, including a duffel bag containing a P90 submachine gun and more rounds of ammo than I hoped to ever use in my lifetime.

That thought wasn't as reassuring as it might have been, considering that my lifetime could be rudely terminated in only a few short hours.

I sighed, put on my bulletproof vest, and zipped my parka over it. Then I slung the heavy arms bag over one shoulder and the second duffel containing our bulletproof vests over the other, and plodded down to the lobby.

Murray and Melinda were waiting beside a small mountain of suitcases. They had spiffed up for the occasion; Murray in sharply-creased dark dress pants and a white shirt with a maroon bow tie, and Melinda in black slacks, high-heeled leather boots, and a gray cashmere sweater.

Obviously they were all set to go. Unlike me. I directed a brief burst of annoyance at Stemp. He could have at least given me a heads-up yesterday.

But he was such a stickler for ‘need-to-know’; and really, I couldn’t blame him. He was just doing his job. Jerk.

Crossing to the security wicket to turn in my fob, I surveyed the lobby. A couple of well-dressed women were seated in the reception chairs and a handsome business-suited Asian man stood near the door. Probably civilians. I adjusted the machine-gun bag on my shoulder, trying to look casual. Nothing to see here, folks.

There was no sign of Reggie, though his high-tech wheelchair lurked behind Murray and Melinda’s luggage. Dammit. I really didn’t want to hang around waiting for him.

As I crossed the lobby Hellhound stuck his head in the door, looking even more imposing than usual in his giant black parka. I had borrowed that parka on another memorable occasion; and despite my five-foot-ten height and hundred and sixty pounds, two of me would have fit comfortably inside. Today it strained across his shoulders, filled to capacity with his powerful bulk and bulletproof vest.

“All set, darlin’?” he inquired.

“Yeah, everybody’s here except R-” I broke off as the Asian businessman limped toward us.

Limped.

...Holy shit.

“*Reggie?*” I demanded, gaping at his unmarred face. No sign of the scars. The smooth skin of his left cheek, jaw, and forehead matched his right side perfectly. Even his lips had been repaired. His shiny black hair now covered his entire scalp, and he had a normal left ear instead of the featureless hole I’d seen only two hours earlier. I sneaked a glance at his pincer-hand. Four perfectly-formed fingers and

a thumb. If not for the immobility of his prosthetic eye, I wouldn't have believed it was him.

"Let's get this shit-show on the road," he grated.

Okay, that was the Reggie I knew.

Hellhound nodded and withdrew.

Pulling my attention away from Reggie's transformation with an effort, I gathered my wits and addressed the group. "Stemp got us a Hummer from the motor pool..."

I tried not to let my disappointment show. When Stemp had said 'Hummer', I had hoped for the badass H1 Alpha. The H2 we'd been assigned was nothing more than a glorified truck. A heavy-duty truck with aggressive tires and powerful four-wheel drive; but still. Not an H1.

I suppressed a sigh and finished, "...and it's idling outside. They delivered it about ten minutes ago, so we're probably down half a tank of gas by now."

Murray snickered and Melinda shook her head. "Those gas-guzzlers are an environmentalist's nightmare."

"Ordinarily I'd agree," I said. "But today I'm pretty happy to have one."

She sniffed but nodded and donned her parka before hoisting a suitcase in each hand. Murray grabbed a couple, too, and Reggie lifted the remaining two into his wheelchair and wheeled it toward the door. I brought up the rear with my concealed armament.

Outside, the bitter wind made my eyes water but at least it wasn't snowing anymore. Swirling ribbons of drifting snow chased each other down the street.

I clicked the lock release on the Hummer's key fob and slung my two duffels inside. "Load up," I said to the others. "And suit up. There are bulletproof vests in the red duffel. I'll be right back; I just have to get my winter emergency gear from my car."

My poor car. I'd have to leave it freezing in the parking lot for the next twenty-four hours. Good thing Sirius had block heater plugins, or it likely wouldn't even start by the time I got back to it tomorrow.

I jogged across the street, shivering. The snow squeaked under my boots, an audible signal of the cold.

As if I needed a reminder. I shivered some more.

When I returned with my backpack and sleeping bag, Hellhound was placing the last suitcase in the rear cargo bay of the Hummer. Murray and Melinda had already retreated to the warmth of the back seat, and Reggie stood with a proprietary hand on his folded wheelchair.

"Last thing to load, just like I promised," Hellhound said as he reached for it.

Reggie relinquished it reluctantly. "Be careful," he snapped. "That thing's expensive."

Hellhound nodded and tucked the chair expertly into a gap he'd left between the suitcases.

I leaned close to them to mutter, "Have you loaded the weapons yet?"

"Yeah, they're already in the Forester." Hellhound matched my quiet tone. "Took 'em out through the bowlin' alley right before I came in to get ya."

That explained his hasty withdrawal from the lobby. He wouldn't leave his vehicle unsupervised with classified weapons inside.

"And you're armed?" I asked.

He nodded. "Got my sidearm. Didn't bring my snipin' gear. Don't figure we'll need any long-range stuff."

"Okay, good. I've got a P90 in case we need some firepower." I turned to Reggie. "It's in the blue duffel I loaded in the back seat. If we get into a tight spot, can you do the shooting while I drive?"

He nodded, brightening as though he hoped it might actually happen.

Trying not to think too much about that, I went on, "I have to stop off at my farm and grab my overnight stuff, and then we're good to go."

Hellhound nodded. "I'll follow ya there." He shot a scowl at the snow hissing across the pavement. "It was a shitty drive up here this mornin', an' this ground drift's gonna make it even worse. Are ya okay takin' the lead? The Hummer's higher than my Forester an' ya might get better visibility."

"No problem. So we're heading to the secured facility first?"

"Nah, ya might as well go straight to the hotel," he disagreed. "I'll split off when we get to the city limits--"

"No," Reggie interrupted. "We'll all go to the secured facility so I can make sure the weapons are locked down. I have to maintain the chain of custody. We can go to the hotel afterward and grab supper, and then go back for the stupid-ass meet-and-greet."

Hellhound hesitated. "Awright," he agreed after a moment. "See ya at your place, then, darlin'. Drive safe."

"You, too." I reached up to give him a quick kiss.

“Get a room,” Reggie growled, and stalked off.

With sudden concern, I watched him limp to the passenger door of the Hummer. Would he have difficulty clambering into the tall vehicle wearing his prosthetic legs?

My worry was unfounded. Grabbing the handle above the door, he stepped up and swung into the seat, his powerful upper body making the move look effortless.

Hellhound was right. Reggie could take care of himself.

“Chain a’ custody, my ass,” Hellhound muttered. “I took over the fuckin’ chain a’ custody when I picked up the weapons from the lab. He’s got some serious control issues.”

I sighed. “Yeah, but I don’t think it’s personal. It’s not that he doesn’t trust you; it’s more that he doesn’t trust anybody.”

“Cept you,” Hellhound pointed out. “He requested ya special for this.”

“Yeah...” I darted a suspicious look toward the passenger seat. “I don’t know if that’s trust, though. He’s probably got some agenda. Remember, this is Reggie we’re talking about.”

Hellhound grunted agreement, his lips curling wryly. As I turned away he laid a light hand on my sleeve, sobering. “Hey, Aydan... that look Chow gave me when he made that crack about his nuts... ya got somethin’ goin’ on with him? I’ll back off if-”

“No,” I interrupted. “There’s nothing going on with Reggie. We’re friends and we were just joking around. And *especially* no to you backing off because you think I’m getting involved with somebody else. If I ever want you to back off, I’ll tell you.”

“Yeah, I know, darlin’; I didn’t mean that. I meant... are ya sure *he* knows you’re just jokin’ around? If he’s gonna be a problem on this trip, I can play it cool.”

“No, there won’t be a problem. Reggie can be prickly and I know you don’t like him, but he’s actually okay.”

Hellhound shrugged. “I don’t give a shit about him one way or the other. I just don’t want any fuckups on this op. ‘Specially not from any personal shit.”

“No, we’ll be fine.” I shivered, only partly due to the cold. “At least I hope so.”

“Okay, darlin’. Let’s mount up an’ do a radio check an’ then hit the road for your place.” He dropped a kiss on my lips and strode away.

From sheer force of habit I made a circuit around the Hummer with my bug detector, finding only the tracking unit that was standard equipment on all motor pool vehicles. Good to go.

I drew a breath of relief as I slid into the warmth of the driver’s seat. Reggie stared straight ahead while I completed the radio check. Murray and Melinda were exchanging whispers in the back seat, so I put the Hummer in gear without comment and headed for the highway.

The snowdrifts had already begun to finger across the westbound lane despite the efforts of the snowplow, and when we turned north onto the gravel road to my farm I was glad of the Hummer’s weight and bulk as we churned along the snowy track.

When we neared my lane, my heart sank.

“Shit,” I muttered.

“What?” Reggie snapped.

I heaved a sigh. “The best damn neighbour in the world, that’s what. Dammit.”

## CHAPTER 4

A plume of white marked the progress of Tom's snowblower as he cleared out my lane. When our little cavalcade arrived, he continued down the lane to the turnaround in front of my house, then stopped and got down from his tractor to stride toward the Hummer.

Even his heavy snowmobile suit couldn't conceal his broad shoulders and the easy gait that somehow managed to look challenging as he approached the unfamiliar vehicle.

I powered down the window when he was still a few paces away, and his snow-powdered eyebrows shot up. Then his face split in a grin, crinkling irresistible laugh lines around his sky-blue eyes. "Aydan! You bought a Hummer?"

"No." I reeled off the lie I'd hurriedly manufactured during the short drive down my lane. "This is Reggie's vehicle." I hooked a thumb at the passenger seat. "The four of us have to go down to Calgary for work this afternoon, but somebody..." I made a teasing nod toward Reggie. "...had drinks with lunch before he found out we had to drive this afternoon. He doesn't drink and drive, so I get to play with the Hummer."

“Oh.” Tom eyed Reggie’s unsmiling face. “Well... that’s good, I guess...”

I was pretty sure he was calculating the number of drinks that would leave a guy still impaired three hours later, but fortunately he didn’t go there.

“That’s a long drive in this weather,” he said instead. “I hope you’re staying over when you get there.”

“Yep, that’s why we’re here. I’m just grabbing my overnight stuff.”

“Okay, I won’t keep you, then. Drive safely.”

“Thanks, Tom. And thanks for clearing out my driveway.”

I powered up the window and reached for the door handle, only to be stopped by Reggie’s grumble. “So I’m a fucking lush now?”

“Yeah,” I said cheerfully. “But at least you’re a responsible lush. Hang tight, I’ll be right back.”

Kicking through the snow that had accumulated on my front steps, I let myself in. Warmth and silence wrapped around me like a comforting blanket, and I fought the urge to lock myself inside and hide from the world.

Suck it up.

I lifted my grab-and-go bag out of the closet and went back outside before I could change my mind.

When I slid into the driver’s seat Melinda leaned forward, wide-eyed. “That was the fastest packing job I’ve ever seen.”

“I’d love to take credit for it,” I replied as I put the Hummer in gear. “But I always have a bag packed.”

“Of course,” Murray put in warmly. “A top agent is always prepared.”

I gave him a quick smile in the rear-view mirror and didn't admit that I'd only gotten around to creating my grab-and-go bags and secret caches a month ago, after my humiliating partnership with Holt The Magnificent.

But I was ready for anything now.

Really, I was.

I'd just keep telling myself that...

I shelved my worries and concentrated on driving, which was more than enough to occupy my mind. When we turned west on the highway the crosswind buffeted us, requiring constant steering corrections. The never-ending rush of snow across our path created the disorienting illusion that the Hummer was veering sideways.

Wise to the tricks of ground drift, I concentrated on the highway lines instead but accumulating snowdrifts obscured most of them. In places the swirling snow blew high enough to obscure our view, and I slowed to allow a margin of safety in case I wasn't the only idiot forging through the storm.

Behind me, Hellhound's Forester showed only as a pair of faint glows in the whiteness, and I knew he was giving me as much space as possible without losing sight of my taillights. From his lower vantage point he probably couldn't see anything else.

Reggie sat silently in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead. I wasn't sure whether he was pissed off at me for some reason or only anxious about the road conditions and/or my driving skills. Or hell,

maybe he was sleeping. The immobile left side of his face gave away nothing.

A few soft sounds from the back seat drew my attention, but when I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw Murray and Melinda huddled together under a blanket I decided that watching the ground drift was preferable to observing their private show.

As the trip dragged on, Reggie called Stemp for our scheduled checkins but otherwise said nothing. Darkness closed in early, and the reflection of our headlights on the airborne snow reduced the visibility even more.

Giving silent thanks for the Hummer's powerful low-level fog lamps, I kept driving at half-speed, my neck and shoulders throbbing with tension and my eyes sandpaper-dry from staring into the white tunnel created by our lights.

"You doing okay?"

The sound of Reggie's voice after his long silence startled me so much that I twitched the steering wheel. The Hummer bobbed uneasily. Shit, the roads were getting icier as we neared Calgary.

I checked my rear-view mirror. Hellhound's headlights remained faint but steady behind me.

"Kelly! You getting road hypnosis?" Reggie demanded. "Talk to me."

“I’m fine. Just concentrating.” I sighed and eased one aching finger at a time on the steering wheel. “It really would’ve been nice to have a helicopter ride.”

“No kidding. Are we there yet?”

The ubiquitous question made my lips creak into a tired smile despite myself. “I figure we’re about twenty minutes out.”

“Fuck, we’ve been on the road damn near three hours already.”

“Yeah, but slow and steady wins the-”

Behind us, Hellhound’s headlights jerked, then vanished in a puff of white.

“Shit!” I feathered the brakes and the Hummer twisted under us. “*Shit-shit-shit!*” My voice cut off abruptly, strangled by adrenaline as I steered into the skid.

Easy, not too much...

The tires grabbed again, yanking the vehicle in the opposite direction.

My reflexes corrected before my conscious mind could register the change, twitching the steering wheel left, then right again as we lost traction once more.

The Hummer straightened, but not enough. We drifted toward the shoulder. The right front tire grabbed again, but the left side was still sliding, *shit-shit-shit...*

A wrenching jerk.

A blinding eruption of white.

Then blessed stillness.

“Everybody okay?” I barked.

Three tentative voices replied ‘yes’.

Reggie released the handle above the door and flexed his hand as though easing the muscles. “Nice driving.”

Adrenaline-fuelled rage flared into my veins, but before I could explode he went on, “We’re on the right side of the road, not too far into the ditch, and we didn’t even blow the airbags. Helmand should be able to get us out.”

Thank God I hadn’t bitten his head off. That had been a compliment, not a gibe.

I drew a deep shaky breath. “I’m afraid not.” My voice came out thin and tight. “That’s why I braked in the first place. We lost him back there. Reggie...” I hauled the blue duffel bag forward and extracted the P90. “Take this. I’m pretty sure we’re only dealing with black ice here, but...”

He nodded, already checking the weapon with practiced movements.

With a shaking hand I reached for my cell phone. It rang as I pulled it out of my waist pouch, and I drew a breath of relief at the sight of Hellhound’s number on the call display. Thank God.

I hit Talk. “Hi Arnie, I saw you spin out. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Planted pretty good, though. Can ya come pull me out with the Hummer?”

“Um. Maybe. We’re in the ditch, too. I’m just going to go out and see how bad it is.”

“Kay, darlin’, I’ll stand by.”

Clutching my phone, I slid out of the driver’s seat and sank up to my knees in a snowbank. After floundering in a circuit around the

vehicle, I spoke into the phone again. "We're half off the road and facing the wrong direction, but we might be able to get out on our own."

"Awright, give it a try. I'm shovellin' now, but I'm prob'ly gonna need a tow. Call me back an' lemme know how it goes."

Back in the driver's seat, I shifted into four-wheel low and crossed my fingers. Come on, Hummer, don't fail me now.

But just as I'd feared, the legendary Hummer performance didn't extend to the H2. The wheels spun and the heavy vehicle settled deeper into its snowy grave.

I sighed. "Shit. That would've been too easy. Guess I'll get out and start digging."

"I'll help," Murray volunteered immediately.

I frowned at his slacks and smart topcoat. "Do you have winter clothes?"

"These are winter clothes." He pulled on a pair of fine leather gloves as he spoke, then reached for the door handle.

"Whoa," I snapped. "No hat, no scarf, thin boots; and in those dress pants you might as well be naked from the waist down. It's minus forty-five with the windchill out here. At best, you'll freeze your hands, feet, and dick in two minutes or less. At worst, you'll die of hypothermia. You stay put. We don't need any casualties."

He opened his mouth as if to argue, but Melinda clutched his hand and gave him an imploring look. "Murray, honey, Aydan knows best; she's a professional, remember?"

Murray subsided reluctantly, and I made a mental note to thank Melinda later.

"I've got my winter gear," Reggie said.

I hesitated, trying to think of a tactful way to tell him that I'd had enough trouble slogging through the snow on two good legs. Reggie was strong enough and stubborn enough to try it with his prosthetics, but it likely wouldn't end well.

"No, I need you manning the weapon," I said. "You're the only one who can do it. Melinda and Murray don't have military training."

I wasn't actually sure whether that was true; but they didn't protest so I must have guessed correctly.

Reggie sat back with a nod, and I added yet another note to my mental Spy Manual: Always know everybody's capabilities in advance.

Out in the bitter cold again, I hurried around to the rear to unload my emergency kit and put on my ski pants, heavy parka, and giant Sorel boots.

After only a few minutes of work, sweat prickled my back despite the icy wind that stung my face. I shed my heavy parka and went to work again wearing only my lighter winter jacket. Sweat-soaked clothes could be deadly, sucking away precious body heat. Better to stay cooler now.

Twenty minutes later, I leaned on my shovel panting and sweating despite my precautions. Dammit, this didn't look hopeful. And not a single vehicle had passed us in either direction on the usually-busy highway.

Shit.

I pressed the speed dial for Hellhound's cell phone and he picked up on the first ring. "Hey darlin', how's it goin'?"

"I've cleared as much snow as I can but we're hung over the ditch embankment at a culvert. The front tires will be pretty much

useless and the back ones aren't going to get much traction, either. I'm going to lay out my traction mats and hope for the best. How about you?"

His tone was wry. "Still shovellin'."

I sighed. "Okay, I'll call you back in a few minutes."

When I got back into the Hummer and eased my foot onto the accelerator, the tires spun just as I'd feared. I tried turning the steering wheel hard left and then hard right, hoping to capture a shred of traction, but it didn't help.

"Shit." My expletive came out in a hiss of tension. "We might as well start calling tow trucks. They'll probably take hours to get here."

"I already did, while you were shovelling," Melinda said. "Apparently there's a bad accident between Calgary and Airdrie and the road is closed. With all the accidents in Calgary plus the big pileup on the highway, there are no tow trucks available. I tried all the smaller towns, too, but they won't come all the way out here. We're too close to Calgary."

"Dammit!" I drew a deep breath. "Thanks for checking, Melinda."

Fear trickled down my backbone, but I shook it off. Stay calm. We were uninjured, and the vehicle provided warmth and shelter. We'd be okay.

I punched the speed dial for Hellhound's cell.

He didn't answer.

## CHAPTER 5

When Hellhound's voicemail picked up I disconnected, staring at my phone while worry rose like a cold tide. I grabbed the radio handset. "Sirius Alpha Hotel One, this is Sirius Alpha Kilo One, over."

I waited.

No answer.

"Dammit," I muttered, then tried again, fear tightening my chest. "Sirius Alpha Hotel One, Sirius Alpha Hotel One, this is Sirius Alpha Kilo One. Acknowledge, over."

Nothing but the hiss of radio static.

"Fuck!" I slammed my fist on the steering wheel, then dropped the Hummer back into gear. Forward, reverse, forward, reverse. A bit more gas each time. The vehicle rocked dangerously, tires whining.

"Come *on*, you fucking piece of shit!" I grated.

"Aydan..."

Murray's touch on my shoulder made me corkscrew around to face him. "WHAT?"

He blanched at the sight of my expression. "Uh... should we get out and push?"

I got my temper under control, biting off words as if I could grind them to powder between my teeth. “Wouldn’t help. This fucking tank weighs over three tons and we’re high-centred. There’s no way we can shift it.”

I punched my speed dial one more time.

Voicemail.

I gripped the two-way radio like an enemy’s throat and mashed the Transmit button again. “Sirius Alpha Hotel One, Sirius Alpha Hotel One, Sirius Alpha Hotel One, this is Sirius Alpha Kilo One, *acknowledge! Over!*”

Still nothing but staticky silence.

“Fuck this,” I muttered, then raised my voice to address my companions. “Okay, I’m going to go and check on him. Stay here and wait for me to come back.” I repeated myself a little louder, making sure they understood. “Everybody stays with this vehicle, no matter what. Is that clear?”

As I spoke, I extracted my Glock from its concealed holster and tucked it into my parka pocket, then shrugged on my reflective safety vest.

Murray and Melinda clutched each other. “Wh-What if you don’t come back?” Melinda quavered.

“Just *stay put*,” I repeated. “You have winter gear and blankets, and even if it takes until tomorrow morning, you’ll be okay until a tow truck gets here. Run the engine for a few minutes every now and then, just enough to keep from freezing. Huddle together to keep warm if you run out of gas. If anybody starts shooting at you, return fire, but *stay*

*with the vehicle!* You're more likely to die from exposure than from a bullet. Got it?"

"Got it," Reggie said, his voice calm and level. "Just get your ass back here in one piece."

Hood up and scarf wrapped around my face so only my eyes were exposed, I stepped out into the darkness again. My powerful flashlight reflected only swirling white so I pointed it downward, feeling utterly alone. Stumbling along on trembling legs, I followed the edge of the pavement, stopping occasionally to kick through the drifted snow that nearly obscured the white painted line.

My sweaty clothes were already chilling and I moved a little faster to generate more body heat. Why hadn't I changed into dry clothes before I left? Stupid.

But I hadn't wanted to waste any time. What had happened to Arnie?

I fought the mental image of a deadly ambush, his body lying cold and motionless while the inexorable snow consumed his lifeblood.

I shook my head vigorously to dislodge the thought. He couldn't have been ambushed; he'd just hit some black ice. He was fine.

Oh, God, he *had* to be fine.

But how far back was he?

And in the snowy darkness with our tire tracks already drifting full, would I walk right past the Forester buried in the ditch?

My flashlight penetrated only a few feet into the profound darkness and I fought the eerie conviction that I was enclosed in a small white bubble on a never-ending treadmill, plodding interminably without ever moving forward.

Fear rose like an icy tide. I could easily die out here alone in the storm. Hypnotized by drifting snow, slowly succumbing to disorientation and the sleepy deceptive warmth of hypothermia...

Stay focused.

I checked my watch. I had been floundering over snowdrifts in my heavy boots for ten minutes, but it felt like a lot longer. Horrible certainty filled me, weakening my knees and making my breath catch in a sob.

If I didn't find Arnie in the next ten minutes, I would have to turn back. I wasn't near the limits of my endurance yet, but I would be by the time I slogged all the way back to the Hummer. Nobody could last long in these conditions.

And despite the agonizing pull of my heart toward Arnie, my duty was to the three brilliant scientists I'd left unguarded behind me.

Tears freezing on my scarf, I pushed on.

\* \* \*

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