

Spy Away Home

Book 10 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

By Diane Henders

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

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

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- Book 3: Reach For The Spy
- Book 4: Tell Me No Spies
- Book 5: How Spy I Am
- Book 6: A Spy For A Spy
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CHAPTER 1

I inhaled the pleasant tang of gun oil and smiled at my little Glock 26, disassembled on the kitchen table in front of me. “There you go, baby,” I cooed. “All cleaned up after that nasty humidity. Isn’t that better?”

My grin widened as I flipped my ponytail over my shoulder and leaned back in my chair to indulge in a lazy stretch, soaking up the comfort of my country home. After living in a canvas tent in the B.C. rainforest for the past four months, I’d almost forgotten how wonderful it was to be warm and dry.

Blue Alberta sky filled the window over the sink, and the morning sunbeams caressed the scuffed hardwood floor. My ancient CD player shuffled its contents before filling the room with the lively notes of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet.

Letting out a sigh of pure contentment I bent to the uncomplicated task of reassembling my pistol, belting out ‘Mack The Knife’ along with Louis despite my complete lack of vocal talent.

The phone rang as I was finishing the assembly and I grunted annoyance. Ignoring the summons, I did a final check of the slide’s

action and reached for my soft polishing cloth. Whoever it was, they could damn well leave a message. This peaceful morning was all mine...

A thunderous impact shivered my front door.

I leaped to my feet and slapped the Glock's magazine into place, sucking in an adrenaline-charged breath. Lucky I'd reinforced the lock on that door...

A shotgun blast hammered my ears and the wood around the lock exploded into splinters.

Shit!

Time slowed. Everything sprang into hard-edged focus.

I jacked a bullet into the Glock's chamber as the shattered door swung wide under a second kick. The shooter lunged through the doorway, his shotgun swivelling and rising to find me.

My pistol snapped up. Two shots kicked my hands.

The intruder staggered, his face slackening under a brand-new hole in his forehead. His body thudded to the floor with an impact I felt through my feet but couldn't hear through my gunshot-deafened ears.

He lay still.

A slow crimson puddle oozed from under the sprawled body, creeping over my doormat to dribble into the grout lines of my tiled entry floor.

I stood frozen open-mouthed, my gun still trained on him.

The phone's continued ringing was a tinny thread of sound almost lost in the bulging cottony quiet of my overloaded hearing. Louis Armstrong's gravelly voice sang a macabre accompaniment. My

answering machine played its outgoing message, adding to the jumble of sound.

I worked my jaw a couple of times in an attempt to get my ears functioning again. Prying my left hand loose from the Glock, I kept the body covered one-handed while I tottered over to the CD player and silenced it.

The voice emanating from my answering machine barely overcame the high-pitched buzzing that was replacing my deafness. "Aydan, I've been thinking of you. Pick up if you're there!"

I didn't recognize the tense voice, but the code words made me draw a breath of relief. My surveillance crew checking up on me.

Still left-handed, I picked up the handset and thumbed the Talk button.

"Hi." My voice came out ridiculously calm and level. "I'm here. I'm okay."

"Thank God!" The nameless analyst on the other end let out a whoosh of breath, and I spared him a moment of sympathy. He must have had only seconds to spot the incoming threat on the hidden surveillance cameras that monitored my front porch. "Thank God you're okay," he repeated.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks." I still sounded utterly emotionless. "Send me a clean-up crew ASAP, would you please?"

The analyst drew a deep breath before speaking with clipped efficiency. "Dispatching them now. They should be there in about twenty minutes. Glad you're okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine," I repeated mindlessly. "Thanks. 'Bye."

I clicked off the handset, still staring at the intruder over my pistol sights. He hadn't moved. A puddle of urine spread to meet the blood, feathering swirls of red into the clear liquid.

"I think I got him," I said aloud, and a shrill hysterical giggle leaked from my lips. Smothering it, I eased my trembling gun hand down.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Nice and slow. Just like ocean waves.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the dead man. The shotgun still lay in his outflung hand. His finger was too damn close to the trigger.

Heart thudding, I took one slow step after another until I was close enough to nudge the shotgun out of his grasp with my foot.

His hand flopped over and I leaped back, my gun jerking up to aim at him again. Panting, I clutched the Glock in a white-knuckled grip.

After a long moment I shook my head and forced out a cracked laugh. "He's dead, for fucksakes," I quavered. "Take a pill, woman."

Lacking any pills to take, I drew another deep breath instead and tucked my gun into the front of my jeans with shaking hands.

The slowly-expanding pool of body fluids jolted me back to reality.

"Shit!" I yelled, and sprang for the rag-bag I kept under the kitchen sink.

A few moments later I rose from my makeshift dam. The shallow gory puddle had turned my boots into islands beside the door, but at

least I'd stopped the mess before it got to the hardwood or trickled under the baseboards.

"Asshole," I growled, eyeing the bullet holes and blood spatter on my wall before scowling at the corpse again. "What the hell's your problem, anyway?"

Nothing like shooting first and asking questions afterward. Another hysterical giggle welled up.

I drew a deep breath.

Do something productive.

Keeping my breathing slow and controlled, I willed the tremors out of my hands and went to collect a pair of blue nitrile gloves. I pulled them on with a pang, wistfully recalling the days when my only messy jobs had involved paint or engine grease.

Crouching, I reached across the puddle to rifle through the intruder's pockets. My search yielded a set of car keys, a worn but fat wallet, and a perverse sense of satisfaction at the placement of my second bullet in his chest.

One to the head; one to the heart. Nothing wrong with my snap-shooting reflexes.

I let my shaking legs drop me to the floor outside the dam of rags, and sat cross-legged while I perused the contents of the wallet.

Holy shit, that was a serious wad of cash.

The twenty-five one-hundred-dollar bills were so new they stuck together when I counted them. A twenty, ten, and five looked as though they'd been around the block a few times. I frowned at the body. Who the hell carries over two thousand bucks in cash?

Time to find out.

I extracted a driver's license bearing the name Drake Mallard, and snickered in spite of myself. Either he'd been trying to be funny when he chose his alias or his parents had a twisted sense of humour.

The smile slid off my lips at the sight of the only other item in the wallet. My blue-clad fingers trembled as I raised the photograph to eye level. Brown eyes bracketed by crows-feet looked back at me from under long, mostly-still-red hair.

Shit.

I had really been hoping this was a random home invasion. No such luck.

I turned the photo over to see 'Arlene Widdenback, 47, 5'-10", 160 lbs' scrawled across the back, and I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

At least it didn't say 'Aydan Kelly'. So my cover identity was still intact.

My recovering ears caught the sound of a vehicle slowing on the gravel road and I jerked to my feet to peer out the screen door.

Frantic dismay clutched my throat, driving my voice up half an octave. "Damn-damn-*shitfuckdamn!*"

Dropping the wallet and photo, I jammed my feet into my boots. The treads slid greasily on the blood-slicked tiles as I flung on my jacket and zipped it over my gun. A couple of kicks at the dead man's legs and some more frenzied swearing allowed me to close the remains of the interior door, but that would make its damage even more obvious from the outside.

Shit!

I swung the buckshot-riddled door open again and hurried out onto my porch, letting the screen door slap closed behind me as a familiar 4x4 half-ton rolled to a stop in my driveway.

Bounding down my front steps, I jumped the last stair to land in the soggy April-brown grass beside my walk. My bloody footprints might not be obvious against the rust-coloured paint on the stairs, but the pale concrete sidewalk was a different story.

I waved and summoned a face-cracking smile while I hurried toward the truck, surreptitiously shuffling my feet between strides to clean my boots.

A lean figure topped by a cowboy hat emerged from the truck, his handsome face creasing into a smile that crinkled the weathered lines around his sky-blue eyes.

“Aydan!” His smile widened and he swept me into a hug.

Shit! The Glock was small, but he was sure to feel its hardness pressed between us.

My brain spun its wheels in frantic thought. How could I explain the hard spot? A small but rigid waist pouch? An industrial-strength hernia belt...?

My mind went completely blank as he stepped back, still smiling.

His hands slid up my arms to clasp my shoulders warmly, and my relief spilled over into a broad smile of my own. Thank God for my bulky jacket and his big-ass rodeo belt buckle. He mustn't have felt my gun.

“Hi, Tom,” I chirped far too brightly. “It's great to see you!”

“It’s great to see you, too. Welcome home.” He relinquished my shoulders to take one of my blue-gloved hands, turning it over with a grin. “Is this the new fashion out in B.C.?”

“Uh... I was getting ready to do some painting,” I stammered, desperately hoping there was no visible blood. Retrieving my hand, I pulled off the gloves and stuffed them in my pockets. “How did you know I was here?” I added. “I just got home last night. I didn’t think anybody knew I was back.”

He chuckled. “I wasn’t actually expecting to find you here, but while you were away I’ve been driving up to check your place whenever I’m out. I was just coming home from town, so I popped by. I saw the gate open and a strange car in the drive so I thought I’d better see who it was.”

“Oh. Uh, thanks... you’re such a good neighbour...”

I shot a wild-eyed glance at the rust-pocked Cavalier parked with its front wheels half off the gravelled drive. Didn’t that dipshit know you should hide your car if you were going to shoot somebody? Goddamn amateurs...

I sucked in a breath and blurted the first explanation that came to mind. “Um... that’s my nephew’s car. He just dropped by...”

My words trailed off as Tom’s forehead creased in puzzlement. “I thought you said you didn’t have any brothers or sisters,” he said. “How could you have a nephew?”

“He’s, um, not really my nephew; I just call him that...” I snatched a lame explanation out of my ass and flung it down between us. “He’s actually the son of a close friend who, um... died a few years ago...”

Tom's lean features softened in sympathy. Thank God.

"...and I kind of adopted him as my honorary nephew," I finished.

Hell, what if he wanted to meet the fictitious nephew? If he moved even slightly to the side he'd be able to see my wrecked interior door through the screen. And since he owned a shotgun himself, he'd instantly recognize the damage of close-range buckshot.

I glanced involuntarily toward the house and gulped down panic at the sight of the dead man's foot, a dark lump behind the screen.

"Um, he's kind of a... an odd kid," I embellished frantically as Tom began to speak again. Talking over his words, I continued, "He won't stay long. I was just going to give him a beer and chat with him for a while before he goes. There was no beer in the house so I was going to get one from the fridge in the garage. I mean, not that I'd let him drink and drive or anything..."

Shit, don't over-explain. I bit off my babble and went for a rueful shrug. "He's probably just here to ask me for money. Kids."

"I'm sorry to hear he's having problems," Tom said. His blue gaze searched my face. "Do you feel safe with him? You seem nervous."

I managed a laugh. "Of course I'm not nervous. He's my nephew."

"Would you like me to talk to him?" Tom gave me an understanding smile. "My son Cory went through a messed-up phase quite a few years ago, too. It's pretty common for teens whose mothers have passed away. Maybe I could help."

"Oh, thanks, that's really kind of you," I gabbled. "But I don't want to bother you, and I don't think he'd appreciate it. I'm just going to

have a quick visit with him and then he'll be on his way, just like always."

He assessed me, those blue eyes seeing too much. "If you're sure you're okay..."

"Fine, thanks!" I gave him another too-perky smile.

He relaxed, rocking back on his heels to hook his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. He nodded toward the addition on the end of my garage with a smile. "So how's the garage work going? Have you got your lift in yet?"

Shit. I had been so excited about the addition that would house my new hydraulic car lift that I'd talked his ear off about it before Christmas. He'd know something was wrong for sure if I brushed off the subject now.

I forced another smile. "Not yet. It's still in the crates. The in-floor heating system is laid out, but the floor's not poured. I thought it would be easiest to do the footings for my lift posts at the same time as the floor, but that was before I knew I was going to be gone for four months. Even if I got it all poured tomorrow, I'd still have to wait for the concrete to cure before I could put the lift on it. It'll probably be June before it's done. That pisses me off, because now I'll have to do my spring oil changes the old-fashioned way with my ramps and jack stands."

Hoping that had been enough chatter to allay his suspicions, I racked my brain for a way to encourage him to leave.

"Well, let me know when you're ready for help getting it set up. You'll likely need a few strong bodies. I can call some of my friends..." He shifted position as if to move toward the garage.

I calculated the sight lines, my pulse rate skyrocketing. From that angle he'd likely notice that the dark lump on my doormat had a leg attached to it...

I sidestepped in an attempt to block his view. "Thanks, but I don't think it'll be too big a job." My voice came out sounding tight, and I cleared my throat and tried again, making a sweeping gesture toward the garage in the hope of distracting him with the movement. "You can see how high the roof is, and I've got anchor points in the joists. I'll get a block and tackle on it so hopefully I won't need an army."

"Oh, good idea." He smiled, looking perfectly comfortable and ready to stand there all day gabbing.

The thump-swish of escalating blood pressure surged rhythmically in my eardrums and I suppressed both the urge to scream and the mental image of my head exploding under the strain.

I dragged my lips into one more smile. "Well, it was great to see you," I said brightly. "I'd better go grab that beer now."

He hesitated, then took the not-too-subtle hint with a nod. "Okay, I won't keep you, then."

I drew a silent breath of relief as he turned toward his truck.

He wheeled suddenly to look back at me and my heart kicked my ribs hard enough to rattle my teeth.

"Aydan..." he began.

"Yes?" I smiled as casually as it was possible to do with my molars grinding.

"Would you like to come over for dinner tonight? It would be nice to have a visit and catch up. It's been a while."

God, anything! Just get the hell out of my yard!

Desperation lent a squeaky note to my voice. “Oh, that sounds lovely! Thanks! What time would you like me to come?”

His slow easy smile made me clamp my teeth on my tongue to prevent myself from shrieking ‘spit it out and leave!’

“Why don’t you come around five?” he said. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Thanks! Me, too.” My smile hurt every muscle in my face. “See you then.”

He headed back to the truck with his leisurely long-legged stride and I balled my fists in my pockets.

Hurry up, goddammit! Get the hell out of here...

“See you.” He tipped his hat and swung into the cab.

I smiled hard and offered a wave that I hoped looked friendly as he drove down my lane and turned onto the road toward his farm.

When his truck vanished behind the trees that lined the creek I threw back my head and screamed at the inoffensive sky.

“Argh! Shit, shit, goddamn SHIT!”

CHAPTER 2

Finished my temper tantrum, I stomped back to my house and hesitated at the porch steps. Should I try to clean up the bloody footprints before the cleanup crew got here, or would my efforts only make their job harder?

A sudden thought tensed my shoulders. What if the analyst routed this up the chain of command and Stemp overrode my request?

Oh, God, he wouldn't.

Would he?

Surely he'd only made me do it myself last time because he was afraid the bad guys had me under surveillance...

I scowled and kicked at the bottom step. He had probably watched the analysts' camera footage and laughed his ass off at the sight of me labouring to scrape up half-frozen blood in the middle of winter. Bastard.

If he cancelled the cleanup crew this time, I'd drag this damn body over to his house and push it through his mail slot piece by piece.

A growl escaped my throat at the recollection that Stemp had no mail slot. Fine. I'd take it over there and shove it up his...

The crunch of tires on gravel rocketed my heart into my throat, but the vehicle slowing at my driveway wasn't Tom's truck returning. As a dark blue cube van rolled through my gate, two thoughts occurred in quick succession.

I'd closed and locked the gate behind me last night, so how did Mallard get in?

And what if the van held more assassins?

I sprang up the stairs. Letting the spring hinges smack the screen door shut behind me, I leaped over the body and flung myself into a crouch behind my kitchen counter. Glock in hand, I pressed against the cabinets and waited. This cupboard held my pots and pans. They might deflect bullets...

My heart hammered. Oh shit, there were so many ways this could go wrong.

If they were assassins, I'd know when the first of the bullets ripped through the walls. Or through me.

But what if they were innocent furnace-cleaners or something, lost and looking for one of the neighbours' places? They couldn't have missed seeing me dash in here, and the blood-soaked body was in plain sight through the screen door...

The phone rang.

Over six feet away. I'd have to scuttle unprotected across the open space.

Too afraid to leave the dubious shelter of my cookware, I sent a snarl in the direction of the still-ringing phone. "No shit, you guys! I *know* there's somebody coming up to my house!"

The sound of footsteps on my porch made me hunker lower.

My answering machine picked up and an unfamiliar male voice spoke. "Your cleaners are waiting outside."

I eased out a breath. Smart. Nothing incriminating on tape, but at least now I knew those weren't assassins in the van.

Well, I was pretty sure.

Almost a hundred percent certain...

I eased my head around the corner of the cabinet, ready to jerk back to relative safety at the first hint of a threat.

The movement caught the eye of a bulky coverall-clad man peeking through my screen with equal caution. The corner of his lips quirked up.

"Agent Kelly? We won't shoot if you don't," he offered.

I let out a breath and rose to totter over. "I'll hold you to that. Come on in." I nodded toward the body. "I guess I don't have to tell you where to look."

"Guess not." He jerked his chin at his silent companion and they donned disposable booties, gloves, and hairnets before stepping over the body. Lowering a bulky backpack to the floor, they extracted a body bag. A few minutes later the remains of Drake Mallard were safely stowed in the back of their van along with Mallard's shotgun, and the cleanup commenced.

Apparently the spokesman for the pair, the first man drawled, "Guess you surprised the hell outta him. Nice shooting." He bent to extract cleaning products from his backpack and continued, "He had two shells in the magazine and a spent one in the chamber. Didn't even have time to pump in a new one."

“Hmph.” I shucked off my jacket and sank onto a kitchen chair, frowning. “Yeah, that’s a little weird. He blew off the lock and kicked in the door a second later, but pump-actions are quick. He should’ve had a fresh shell in the chamber by the time he got in.”

The man shrugged and turned away to join his mute companion beside the grisly puddle. “Nice when they’re dumb.”

“Huh. Yeah.” I eyed the proceedings curiously. “Do you mind if I watch?”

“Knock yourself out.”

I observed them in silence for a while before speaking. “So you’re armed?”

“Uh-huh,” he replied without looking up.

I pulled my gun-cleaning paraphernalia toward me. “Okay, good. Then I’m going to clean and reload while you’re here. ‘Cause I’m not going to have my gun out of commission again for a good long time. And I won’t be listening to any more music, either.”

I rushed through a cursory second cleaning, my still-ringing ears straining for the sound of tires on gravel outside. Or footsteps.

Or God knew what. A paragliding ninja, or, hell, a radio-controlled exploding goose.

Right on cue, a vee of Canada geese winged overhead, their distant honking carrying through the screen door. Usually I enjoyed the wild lonely sound of their spring migration...

“Fuck,” I muttered.

The speaking half of the duo glanced up. “Everything okay?”

I blew out a sigh and pushed the reloaded magazine into the Glock. “Yeah.” I rose and tucked the gun back into my waistband. Even my ankle holster felt a little too far away at the moment.

“Here, you’ll probably want to take these with you, too,” I added as I pulled the nitrile gloves out of my pockets and handed them over.

He accepted them with a professional nod and a narrow-eyed look at my jacket. “You rub off any blood inside those pockets?”

“No idea.” I passed it to him and watched while he examined it with his special light.

“Clean.” He handed it back. “We’ll do your boots, too. Anything else?”

“I was wearing the gloves when I searched him, and I don’t think I touched anything else.”

He grimaced. “Yeah, I already picked one of your long hairs off the corpse. You ever think of wearing a hairnet?”

“Not around my house. But next time I have less than a second to kill a guy I’ll try to remember to put one on.”

He snorted either amusement or disgust, and I added, “You probably saw the bloody footprints on the porch, but I walked to the right of the sidewalk so there’ll be blood in the grass, too.” I hesitated. “I don’t know if it’s worth bothering about, though. There’s probably still a bunch of blood there from the last guy.”

That was enough to startle words out of the silent partner. “Thewe was anotheu guy?” he demanded.

Okay, now I knew why he’d been keeping his mouth shut. Despite his bulk and stature, he sounded exactly like Elmer Fudd.

I held my face under rigid control. “Yeah. End of December. I did a fast cleanup, but all I could really do was scrape up the half-frozen blood and rinse the porch. There are probably still bullets embedded in the lawn, too.”

The spokesman sighed and returned to scrubbing grout. “We’ll clean the porch and do the best we can with the rest.”

“Thanks, guys.” I bestowed my warmest smile on them. “You have no idea how much I appreciate this. How about some fresh chocolate chip cookies?”

They both brightened, and I began to assemble ingredients. The soothing routine of baking and the mouthwatering scent of warm vanilla and chocolate calmed some of my ravelled nerves. A half-dozen cookies still hot from the oven along with a tall glass of milk completed my therapy.

While the cleanup crew worked outside I turned my attention to the damaged door and wall. A few trips to my shed procured some two-by-fours and a piece of plywood big enough to replace the door, as well as the necessary tools and materials for repairing the bullet holes.

Some time later I was mudding my drywall patches when a rap on my new plywood panel made me twitch so violently I dropped the taping knife.

A male voice called, “We’re done out here.”

“Shit.” I eyed the glob of drywall compound on my freshly-cleaned tiles before raising my voice. “Hang on; I’ll be right there. I’ll have to go around back.”

When I rounded the corner of the house, the muscle-bound Elmer Fudd was sliding into the driver's seat of the Cavalier and the spokesman was already behind the wheel of the cube van.

I trotted over to the driver's-side window. "Thanks again. Here are some more cookies for the road." I handed over a bag. "Anything I need to know?"

"Nope. Thanks." He eyed the bag appreciatively before tucking it into the console beside him. "Everything's cleaned up, and we'll file a report once we finish with the car and the body. Oh, and we retrieved six bullets from your lawn. That sound about right?"

I sighed. "No idea. There could've been up to ten, but some probably lodged in the body."

"Jesus." The driver frowned with professional disapproval. "Ever hear of overkill?"

"I wasn't the shooter. Long story," I added as his eyebrows rose.

He cast an appraising glance around my isolated farmyard. "You going to be okay out here?"

I shrugged. "As much as I ever am, I guess. Nothing short of a tank is coming through that plywood tonight. I've got two-by-four crossmembers screwed into the frame behind it. But if anybody really wants in, they'll be through the windows in two seconds or less."

He offered me a sympathetic grimace and a semi-salute. "Good luck, then."

"Thanks."

I watched them drive away before trotting up the lane to lock the gate behind them and change the combination, my usual appreciation

of the open country spoiled by a nervous tingle that felt like a target on my back.

By the time I had finished the drywall patches and dragged the shot-up door to my shed, I was almost looking forward to Tom's free meal.

But not quite.

Glancing at my watch, I let out a dismal sigh.

As far as I knew Tom was a good cook. He made great chili, anyway. But the thought of holding onto my cover all evening while avoiding anything that might be construed as an expression of personal interest in him...

I sighed again.

If only Kane and Hellhound were here. A meal with them would be full of easy camaraderie and black humour about the inconvenience of dead bodies. No need to conceal my weapon or my reaction to killing a man...

Hell. I'd killed another man. Two in a week. That was absolutely fucking sick. It had been them or me, but still...

I put that thought away to examine later and resumed my pity party with another sigh.

If Kane and Hellhound were here I'd be able to relax instead of twitching and grabbing for my gun every time the house creaked. But no, dammit; right now they were laughing in the California sun, cruising the highway with their knees in the breeze or relaxing at a roadside restaurant with good food and cold beer.

"Suck it up," I said aloud, and went to put on clean clothes.

Hovering in front of my full-length mirror, I eyed my reflection anxiously and readjusted my waist holster. It didn't matter what I did; if Tom decided to hug me when I wasn't wearing my jacket, there was no way he'd miss my gun even with my sweatshirt pulled over top.

And I couldn't object to a hug after letting him hug me this afternoon. Besides, he was such a nice guy. I'd feel terrible if I hurt his feelings, especially since I'd hurt him so many times before...

"This is a really bad idea," I told my reflection. "I should just call and tell him I've got a headache. Or the stomach flu. Or leprosy or something."

"Well, shit-for-brains," my reflection replied with a scowl, "If you were going to do that, you should've done it earlier. Now it's nearly five and he'll have supper on already. And anyway, he'll know you're lying."

"But it might have come on really fast," I argued feebly.

My reflection fixed me with a skeptical gaze, and I sighed and turned away.

Pacing and muttering, I considered my options. Waist holster, risking almost-certain detection?

Ankle holster? Better concealment but not as accessible. And I'd needed every instant this morning.

Leave my gun behind entirely?

Never in a million years.

My steps slowed as another thought hit me.

Drake Mallard hadn't had a personal vendetta. I'd never seen him before, and if he needed my photo with a description written on the back, he obviously didn't know me. And the crisp two-and-a-half grand

in his beat-up wallet told me somebody else was probably pulling his strings.

If that 'somebody' saw my car in Tom's driveway, would they shoot up Tom's place to get to me?

"Okay, that's it. I can't do this," I said to my disapproving reflection.

"You're a secret agent, dipshit," my unsympathetic alter-ego snarled. "Figure something out."

"I'm not an agent, I'm just a bookkeeper..." I trailed off, my spine straightening. That wasn't true anymore.

"Okay, fine!" I snapped, and turned away to make my preparations.

CHAPTER 3

When Tom opened his door to my knock, his smile of welcome faltered.

“I brought dessert,” I volunteered, and proffered the last of the chocolate chip cookies.

“Uh... thanks...” His smile came back with a hint of a tease as he accepted the paper plate. “Come in. But you’re giving me some mixed messages here.” He nodded toward the shotgun cradled in the crook of my arm. “Are you going to shoot me if you don’t like my cooking?”

I laughed and followed his welcoming gesture into the warmth of his house. “No, I promise not to shoot you,” I assured him. I laid the gun on the floor with its barrel pointed in a safe direction and added, “It was such a nice evening I decided to walk over. I went down by the creek and through the woods, but I wasn’t sure if that cougar was still around from last summer so I thought I’d better carry the shotgun just in case.”

Not to mention that sneaking through the bush allowed me to arrive at his place unseen. And if we got attacked anyway, I’d have a

plausible explanation for being armed. With any luck I wouldn't have to pull my Glock...

"Good thinking. I like that you're comfortable with guns and know how to use them," he replied with a smile as he took my coat.

I eased out a breath as he turned away to hang it up on the wooden coat pegs behind the door. The shotgun had nicely forestalled the question of a hug, too. Bonus.

Kicking off my boots, I picked up the gun again. "I don't want to leave it here by the door in case somebody drops by. I don't have a shell in the chamber, but there are three in the magazine. Is it okay if I put it around the corner by the table?"

"Sure. Go on in and make yourself comfortable by the fire. I'm just going to put our potatoes in the oven and then I'll join you. Would you like a beer?"

"That sounds great. Thanks." I padded through the open living space to lay the shotgun on the floor within easy reach of the dining table before heading for the brown denim sofa in front of the fireplace. "I like that you don't mind me bringing a gun to dinner," I called in the direction of the kitchen. "Most city boys would faint at the sight of an outfit accessorized with a shotgun."

His laughter carried me to the sofa, where I sank into the soft cushions and curled my feet under me. The tang of woodsmoke in the air made me smile.

"What's the joke?" Tom appeared from the kitchen bearing two frosted beer mugs. He handed me one and sank into the opposite chair, stretching long denim-clad legs toward the fire.

“I was thinking that the smell of woodsmoke isn’t quite such a treat as it used to be. I just spent four months visiting my aunt and uncle on a commune where woodstoves were the only source of heat and the only way to cook.”

He shook his head and took a deep swallow of his beer. “I can’t believe people want to live like that. I grew up in a house with no central heat, and you can bet I love my gas furnace.”

I laughed and agreed, and the conversation flowed easily while he brought me up to date on the latest happenings in the small town of Silverside and I regaled him with tales of the commune that didn’t involve terrorists and secret agents.

Still talking, we moved to the table to devour melt-in-your-mouth beef ribs and loaded baked potatoes. When he brought out a caramel-chocolate cheesecake for dessert, I groaned.

“Oh, that looks so good! But I’m stuffed.”

Tom gave me his attractive crooked smile. “We can have it later if you like, but I won’t be hurt if you don’t want any. I’m a pretty plain cook. I don’t know how to bake, so I bought it.”

“Well, your ribs are amazing.” The unintentional double entendre popped out before I could stop it, and I couldn’t help glancing at his chest. Lean muscle under soft faded denim. Mmm...

I dragged my eyes up to his face again and ignored the warmth in my cheeks. Kane or Hellhound would never let me get away with a line like that, but I was pretty sure Tom was polite enough to let it pass.

He was. He nodded toward the living area, warm and welcoming in the mellow firelight. “Let’s go sit somewhere more comfortable. Maybe you’ll feel like dessert later.”

At least I thought that was politeness. Or maybe he'd just offered a double entendre of his own.

He rose and reached for my empty beer mug with a smile. "Can I get you another?"

I stood, too, and stretched before heading for the sofa. "Thanks, that'd be great. I'm not driving and it's only a short stagger home." And it might help calm my still-jangling nerves.

"I can drive you home later if you'd like," Tom called from the kitchen over the clink of beer bottles.

Okay, that *really* sounded like a double entendre to me. But it was probably just my dirty mind.

"Or I can lend you a flashlight and walk you home," he added as he returned with the fresh beers. "That path can be hard to find after dark."

"Oh, I brought a headlamp, so I should be fine. Thanks, though." I accepted the frosty mug along with a brief but rewarding glimpse of soft denim hugging his grope-worthy posterior as he turned to go back to his chair.

Down, girl.

I firmly ignored the small alcohol-fuelled voice that reminded me how safe and comfortable I could be here in Tom's bed instead of startling awake at the slightest noise in my own.

I gulped a determined swallow of beer. Not an option. There was no way to hide or explain the Glock strapped to my ankle if I took off my clothes, and the longer I stayed the more dangerous it was for Tom. I probably shouldn't even be here...

"Did you have a nice visit with your nephew?" Tom asked.

I dragged my attention back to the conversation. “It was short and sweet, but he didn’t ask me for money. It was just a social call.”

If a blast of buckshot could be considered social.

“Is there anybody else who might have been trying to visit you?” Tom asked. “I’ve seen a silver SUV around pretty often the last couple of months.”

My attention sharpened with a hard thump of my heart. “Uh, no, not that I can think of.”

“Well, it’s funny.” Tom stretched out his legs. “Nobody takes this road unless they’re visiting you or me. There’s nothing but the old Wright homestead north of us, and it’s been abandoned for years.” He swallowed some beer. “Sad to see the old house falling down like that. It’s a hazard, too. Kids go out there to drink and party, and someday there’ll be a fire...”

Spoken like the volunteer firefighter he was. I gently interrupted before the conversation diverged too far. “Um, about the SUV?”

“Oh, yeah.” He frowned. “I saw it driving past slowly several times. And once when I was coming home it was nosed into your driveway, but when I headed over to see if I could help it pulled out and left before I got there. I caught sight of it once while I was plowing your lane, too, but by the time I got back to the road it was gone again.”

My pulse accelerated. That’s how they’d gotten the combination to my gate. Tom would have left the lock hanging by its shackle while he plowed. It would only take a few moments for somebody to pop out of their car and note the combination.

Which meant they'd had my place under surveillance for a while. Long enough to know that Tom unlocked my gate and cleared off my lane whenever it snowed.

I drew a slow breath and kept my tone casual. "Did you notice the make or model? A couple of my friends from Calgary drive silver SUVs, so it might have been one of them. Could you see the driver? Or any passengers?"

"Only one driver, but I was too far away to see if it was a man or a woman. And I couldn't tell you the make or model. It was one of those crossovers, not really a truck or a car. They all look the same from a distance." Tom shrugged. "Useless things. If you need a truck, get a real truck. Otherwise, get a car."

"Mm." I frowned and sipped my beer.

Tom sat up a bit straighter, his brow furrowing. "I mean, I guess lots of people like them. I didn't mean to be insulting..."

"Huh? Oh, that's okay, you weren't," I assured him. "I was just trying to figure out who it might have been."

"Oh. Good." He sat back again, looking relieved. "So do you think it was anybody you know?"

I summoned a carefree shrug. "Oh, probably. They'll catch up with me sooner or later."

God, I hoped not.

I swallowed and changed the subject. "While I'm thinking about it, I need to write you a cheque for keeping my lane clear all winter. Oh, and I changed the combination on the lock." I recited the new one, pleased to see that he memorized it instead of writing it down.

After repeating it back to me, he said, "Don't worry about paying me. You weren't even here for most of the winter."

"No, we had a deal," I insisted. "You plowed it anyway so I need to pay you for your gas and time."

After some good-natured argument we settled on a price and I scribbled out a cheque. I was reluctantly considering leaving when Tom leaned forward, his expression grave.

"There's something I need to warn you about," he said.

A chill touched my backbone and I couldn't prevent a fast glance around the room. "Um, what?"

"Beware... the spring thing!" he intoned ominously.

"The... what...?"

The laugh lines crinkled around his sky-blue eyes and my heart gave an involuntary thump of appreciation for the crooked smile that transformed him from handsome to irresistible.

"The spring thing," he repeated, grinning. "You probably missed it last year because you'd just moved here, but as a business owner and member of the Silverside and Area Chamber of Commerce... you are still a member, aren't you?"

"Uh... yeah," I admitted warily.

Tom laughed. "Then you're doomed for sure. Brace yourself."

I managed a sickly smile. "I've already got all the doom I can handle. Should I run for the hills?"

"It won't help." He assumed a gloomy monotone. "It's already too late. No matter where you hide, they'll find you. And when they do..."

A shudder shook me. “Stop it, already!” I protested with sincerity I hoped I’d hidden in a smile that felt too stiff for my lips. “You’re creeping me out! What the hell is this spring thing, and why should I worry about it? And who the hell are *‘they’*?”

“It’s a long story, and you’ll need another beer,” Tom teased as he rose. “I’ll be right back.”

He vanished into the kitchen again, and I leaned down to touch the Glock at my ankle. My insides felt icy even though I knew he was only hamming it up. Jokes like that just didn’t seem too funny at the moment...

“Here you go.” Tom returned to hand me another frosty mug, and I sucked down a bracing swallow as he sank into his chair again. He took a drink of his own before saying, “The spring thing is a festival the Chamber sponsors every year on the Thursday before Good Friday. Usually it’s over by now, but Easter’s late this year. The schools and businesses all close so everybody can go to the parade at noon, and there’s a little fair with some rides for the kids. Then everybody gets together at the rec centre for a potluck supper.”

“Oh...” I took another drink and leaned back, surreptitiously easing the tension out of my muscles. “I guess I must have missed it last year because Easter was earlier and I was still getting settled after my move.”

I didn’t bother to mention that I had been a little occupied with eluding murderers last year around that time, too. *Déjà vu*.

“So what’s the festival called?” I added.

“The Spring Thing.”

I frowned at his mischievous expression. “That’s what it’s called? The Spring Thing?”

“Yep.” He grinned. “That’s what you get when you do things by committee. They called it the spring thing while they tried to figure out a proper name. They proposed all kinds of high-falutin’ handles, but they never could agree on one so it’s been called the Spring Thing for over thirty years. Every few years they argue over new names, but it hasn’t changed yet. I don’t suppose it ever will.”

I relaxed further and flashed him a smile before sucking back another swallow of beer. “Small-town politics are always good for a laugh.”

Tom gave me a wry look. “As long as you’re not involved in them. And you will be. All the Chamber members are expected to participate. You came home at the worst possible time. The Thing’s next weekend and everybody’s running around like chickens with their heads cut off.”

“Oh.” My smile dissolved. “So, um... what will they expect me to do? Surely all the planning is done by now.”

Tom grimaced. “It’s a committee. The planning is never done. I know they’re going to ask you to drive your Corvette in the parade. And if you don’t want to do that, they’re always looking for volunteers to help wrangle the kids into their costumes and get them rounded up for the Little Clowns Bicycle Rally...” He trailed off at the sight of my horrified expression.

“I don’t wrangle kids,” I said, perhaps a little more vehemently than necessary. “I especially don’t wrangle hyper-excited kids who are likely to run me over with their bikes. And I can’t drive the ‘Vette in the

parade. The cam's so lumpy and the timing's so advanced it won't idle low enough for parade speed. I'd burn out the clutch in the first two blocks."

"Then you better run for the hills," Tom said seriously.

"Oh, come on," I pleaded. "There has to be something else I can do that doesn't involve other people's children. You joined the Chamber to advertise your custom baling services, didn't you? What are you doing for the Spring Thing?"

"I always drive my team in the parade, pulling a hay wagon for the kids." His face softened into a fond smile. "Cory and Charlene are bringing the grandkids up from Calgary. They're just crazy about the horses and the parade, and I get such a kick out of having them here."

No sympathy for my kid-allergy here.

I tried another tack. "What are the other business owners doing?"

Tom shook himself back from his pleasant reverie. "A lot of them make floats to drive in the parade, but you're probably running out of time to do anything like that." He eyed me with a grin. "Unless you can whip something up in a week."

I squirmed and gulped another mouthful of beer. "Um, no. I'm a little busy with my home renovations."

Thanks to Drake Mallard.

Dammit, I hoped Mallard was roasting slowly in hell. Asshole. I might excuse him for trying to kill me, but forcing me to deal with hordes of screaming children was unforgiveable.

Tom took pity on me. "You're welcome to ride on the wagon with me," he offered.

“Uh... There would be lots of kids on the hayride, right?”

“Oh. Right.” He looked disappointed for a moment before suggesting, “Maybe you could ride on a float with one of your clients. You do a lot of work for Sirius Dynamics, don’t you? They put a float in the parade every year. And Blue Eddy always does, too.”

“Oh, good thinking!” I let out a breath of relief. “I’ll do that. Maybe that’ll get me off the hook.”

“Maybe,” Tom agreed, but he didn’t sound convinced.

CHAPTER 4

Having absorbed more unsettling news than I wanted to deal with, I gulped the last of my beer and stood, pushing a smile onto my lips. “Well, thanks for dinner,” I said. “It was great, but I guess I’d better get home. I have to go to work tomorrow and it’ll be a shock to wake up to an alarm clock.”

“Oh...” Tom rose, too, his brow furrowing. “But tomorrow’s Friday. Couldn’t you take the day off and start fresh on Monday morning?”

I sighed. “That’d be nice, but I really need to go in tomorrow.”

“No rest for the wicked.” He gave me a smile and nodded at the wall clock. “But it’s only eight o’clock. Would you like some dessert before you go?”

“It looked great but I’m still stuffed, especially after all that beer.” I sidled around the end of the sofa. “And I know you have to get out to the barn and do your chores tonight.”

“That’s no problem, they can wait. Surely you’ve got time for one more beer.”

“Two’s usually my limit, and I’ve already had three.” I drifted toward the dining table and my shotgun. “So thanks anyway, but I’d better not.”

“Oh.”

He looked so disappointed my heart squeezed in spite of the knowledge that leaving was the smart thing to do. The beer spoke before my brain could catch up.

“Well, maybe just a sliver of cheesecake,” I said, and was rewarded with a smile like a sunrise.

“Why don’t you go back to the couch and we can have dessert by the fire,” he suggested as he headed for the kitchen.

Warning bells chimed in my brain, too late.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Pick up your shotgun and leave. Right fucking now. Get the hell out before...

Tom hurried back bearing plates, forks, and the cheesecake that looked as sweet as his smile.

Dammit, I had no business sharing cheesecake or anything else with sweet guys. Only a few hours ago I’d killed a man and taken pride in my shots. I didn’t deserve to spend time with a sweet normal guy, and he sure as hell didn’t deserve the dangers of spending time with me.

As if sensing my inner turmoil, his smile faded. “It’s okay if you really want to leave,” he said softly. “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Oh, God.

Guilt twisted my guts and I forced a smile. “Are you kidding? That cheesecake has been calling to me all evening.”

“Well, it’s time to surrender.” He gave me that captivating crooked smile again. “Come and sit down.”

I eased out a silent sigh and plodded over to face my fate.

The last rich creamy morsel had just fallen to my fork when Tom spoke again, leaning back in his chair with elaborate nonchalance.

“So are you seeing anybody these days?”

I choked on my cheesecake.

Coughing and wiping away tears while Tom hovered worriedly, I silently debated the merits of feigning unconsciousness, or possibly death.

Probably not smart. Setting myself up for mouth-to-mouth from a firefighter with EMS training wasn’t going to lead anywhere I wanted to go tonight.

Hell, who was I kidding? It would lead exactly where I wanted to go tonight, and that was a bad, bad idea.

Wiping away the last of the tears, I straightened and accepted the glass of water Tom proffered. I sipped slowly, searching for the right words. ‘Yes, I was naked in bed with Kane and Hellhound last weekend’ probably wasn’t the best way to phrase it.

“Thanks,” I croaked instead. “Sorry. Cheesecake is a little hard on the airways.”

Oh Lord, did I just say ‘hard-on’?

Shut up. Just shut up and get out.

Tom sank back into his chair. “I’m glad you’re okay. A trip to the ER wasn’t how I’d planned to end the evening.” He grinned. “I’d never

live it down if the guys found out I'd cooked you dinner and then had to rush you to Emergency."

I forced a laugh and hauled myself to my feet. "Don't worry, I'd tell them it was the bought cheesecake that got me." Easing away in the direction of my shotgun, I added, "Well, thanks for the delicious dinner and the lethal cheesecake. I'd really better get going."

"Okay." Tom stood and followed me toward the door. "That was a tactful dodge. So I guess the answer is 'yes, you're seeing somebody'."

"Um, yeah, kinda..." I turned to face him, cursing my social ineptitude.

He smiled. "It's okay, Aydan, I didn't mean for that to be an awkward question. I'm your neighbour and your friend no matter what. I just like to know where I stand."

"Right, sorry," I mumbled, bending to lace my boots and hide my burning cheeks. "Thanks."

"I'll walk you back," he said, reaching for his fleece-lined denim jacket.

"Um, no, it's okay..." I began.

"No strings attached," he said earnestly. "If you're seeing somebody, I'd never overstep the boundaries. I just want to make sure you get home safe."

Yeah, and if he walked me home I'd have to explain why I had a barricade of plywood instead of a front door.

I straightened and tried for a humorous but decisive tone. "Remember, I just got back from living in the wilderness for four

months. I'm used to moving around in the woods after dark, and I have my shotgun. Thanks for being concerned, but I'll be fine."

He smiled. "That independence is another thing I admire about you. Just give me a quick call when you get in so I know you got back okay."

"I will. Thanks again." I stepped out into the darkness before I could change my mind.

Only a few yards beyond the reassuring glow of Tom's yardlight, I was already regretting my choice.

Squaring my shoulders, I donned the small LED headlamp I'd brought and strode forward with my best imitation of bravery.

Tom's company wouldn't make me any safer. I was probably better off without him. At least if I had to react to an attack I wouldn't have to worry about protecting him as well as myself.

That train of thought did nothing to reassure me. The silent wooded darkness brought back the too-recent memory of muzzle flashes blazing in the night and the hellish cries of dying men.

Dammit, this headlamp might as well be a glowing target on my forehead. Why the hell hadn't I brought my night-vision headset?

Because I couldn't risk Tom discovering it when he handled my jacket, that's why...

The snap of a twig and rustle of undergrowth made me jump sideways, pumping a shell into the chamber and landing in a crouch with my shotgun at the ready.

* * *

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