

Spy High

Book 9 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
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CHAPTER 1

A distant shout made me jerk my head up to listen. A moment later I identified both the voice and the name it was calling.

Shit!

Snapping a glance around the forest, I dodged off the gravel path and dashed through the undergrowth to my favourite giant cedar tree.

Thank God I hadn't been spotted. Yet.

I ducked behind the tree and squashed through the large crack into its hollow trunk, hunching over awkwardly in the damp cedar-scented dimness. Even the thumping of my heart couldn't drown out the calls of my pursuer.

"Storm! Hello-o-o! Storm Cloud Dancer, where are you?" Aurora Peace Rain's strident voice made me wince and cower deeper into my hiding place.

Her calls got louder and I suppressed a groan. What the hell had I been thinking? If she caught me hiding in here, how would I explain myself?

"Storm!"

She must be standing right on the other side of the tree. If she came around it, she'd see my legs through the crack...

"Storm!"

Shit, and if she kept screeching like that, the damn tree was likely to split under the vocal assault.

The swish-thump of boots tramping through undergrowth sounded nearly on top of me and I squeezed my eyes shut.

If she caught me I'd tell her... um...

My eyes popped open as inspiration hit. I didn't have to look like a deranged chickenshit. I'd just say I was communing with the Earth Spirit in here. Anywhere else in Canada that would be good for a VIP ticket to a psych evaluation, but here on the commune they'd probably be thrilled.

She gave one more ear-piercing call before her footsteps faded, and her next shout came from farther away.

I let out my breath with a whoosh and slid down to crouch on the damp ground, giving thanks for the size of the trees here in the B.C. rainforest.

God, I needed to get back to my secluded Alberta farm. After four months of living a communal lifestyle my nerves were scraped raw. I cast a sheepish glance around my cramped refuge before thumping my forehead against my drawn-up knees.

How pathetic. Hiding like a coward just because I couldn't bear Aurora's voice. She was actually quite a nice kid... well, twenty-something. But her enthusiastic expositions on the benevolence of the Earth Spirit had gotten old after the first week. And that voice of hers, my God...

I leaned my head against the rough wood behind me and drew in a deep breath. Letting it out slowly, I debated how long to stay hidden. Aurora's calls had faded into the distance, but there was no telling whether she'd come back this way. I'd wait a little longer.

After several more minutes of crouching in silence my legs began to rebel, and the confined space made my breathing accelerate even though the opening was only a foot away. What if something happened? What if the tree somehow shifted and trapped me inside?

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Don't be stupid. That couldn't happen. Just stay in here a little longer...

Claustrophobia won at last and I was about to make my escape when the distant crunch of footsteps on gravel made me hunch down again.

Dammit, she was coming back.

Moments later I realized it wasn't Aurora when I heard quiet male voices over the footsteps.

Well, fine. In a few minutes they'd be past. The commune was all about tolerance and understanding, but that didn't mean I wanted to be known as a forty-seven-year-old woman who hid inside hollow trees like a kid.

Besides, there was no need to give away my hiding place. I might want to use it again.

I settled back to wait.

The footsteps got louder and a snatch of conversation drifted to my ears.

"...think it'll be soon?"

"Mesker will tell us when."

“Aw, come on...”

That voice sounded familiar. I frowned, trying to place it.

It went on, “...you’re his right-hand man. You must know.”

I jerked upright with recognition, nearly cracking my head on the inside of the tree.

Orion Moonjava.

A pause, then the second voice spoke again, sounding smug.

“Soon. Maybe even this week.”

The voices and footsteps were fading and I eased my head out the crack to peek at the two figures receding along the path. Orion’s broad shoulders, wavy brown hair, and buns of steel were easy to identify, but I didn’t recognize his short, slightly-built companion. All I could see of him was black hair, baggy camo pants, and military-style boots.

The smaller man spoke again, his words drifting back to me so faintly I could barely identify the words. “I can hardly wait to get rid of the filth...”

Orion laughed as they disappeared around a bend in the path and their voices dwindled.

Heart pounding, I withdrew into the safety of my tree again.

If I wasn’t on a covert mission I’d probably dismiss the conversation without a second thought, but it was my job to be suspicious. And the words ‘get rid of the filth’ had sent a shiver down my spine. I hoped he’d been talking about the mud on his boots.

Or maybe I’d heard him wrong.

Feeling antsy, I squeezed out of my hiding place and stood hesitating. Should I follow them and try to overhear more?

But that likely wouldn't work. If I walked on the path they'd hear my footsteps on the gravel, and if they caught me skulking along in the undergrowth I'd rouse their suspicions in return. Orion thought I was just a bookkeeper, and I wanted to keep it that way.

But dammit, this was the second thing about Orion that had made me uneasy...

"Storm!"

I jumped at the sound of Aurora's call and flung a wild glance toward my tree, but it was too late. She'd spotted me.

"There you are!" Her voice assaulted my ears even from several yards away as she jogged up. "There's a phone call for you," she panted. "Where were you? I've been looking and looking."

Hoping to limit our encounter, I broke into a jog toward the main building. "Thanks, Aurora," I threw over my shoulder. "If I run maybe I can catch them before they hang up."

I should have known better. She caught up easily, and short of making an obvious race of it I couldn't shake her. Hell, she could probably outrun me anyway. I was in good shape, but so was she. And she was about twenty-five years younger.

I settled into a steady jog and resigned myself to my fate as she began, "Hasn't the Earth Spirit given us a lovely day today? It's so nice to get a break from the rain..."

I kept jogging, nodding grimly and trying not to wince while her monologue battered my eardrums like machine-gun fire.

When we panted up to the main building and ducked inside I sucked in a breath of relief at the sight of the old-fashioned telephone receiver dangling by its curly cord.

“Oh, good,” I interrupted Aurora’s soliloquy. “Looks like they’re still on the line. Thanks for coming to get me.”

“You’re welcome, Storm!” Her voice rose in enthusiasm and I took an involuntary step backward.

“Talk to you later, then,” I said, and hurried over to snatch up the receiver.

Aurora gave me a sunny smile and departed, and my “Hello?” wafted into the receiver on a sigh of relief.

“Is this Aydan Kelly?” The voice of my best friend made my heart lift.

“Nichele!” I clutched the receiver, grinning. “How the hell are you? It’s so great to hear your voice!”

“Aydan, finally!” Her squeal of delight would have made me yank the receiver away from my ear if I hadn’t just been subjected to Aurora’s jackhammer voice. “Girl, I can’t believe I’m finally getting to talk to you! Where were you? You sound like you just ran a mile!”

“I damn near did.” I sucked in a few deep breaths, trying to control my panting. “I was on the other side of the commune. Sorry you had to wait so long. Talk to me while I catch my breath.”

She launched into her usual exuberant chatter and I leaned against the wall, still grinning. This was going to take a while.

CHAPTER 2

“...secluded raincoast paradise, my ass!” I jammed the receiver between my chin and shoulder, the better to wave my arms while I paced. “Secluded, yeah, it’s ‘way out in the sticks; and ‘raincoast’ is no exaggeration. But ‘paradise’? Ha! If there’s really a hell, it’s not fiery-hot like everybody thinks. It’s cold and wet and gloomy...”

The curly cord jerked taut and I barely managed to catch the receiver before it hit the floor. “This shitty old phone!” I stuffed it back under my chin.

“Why don’t you just use your cell phone?” Nichele asked, her words blurred by the crackling of the bad connection. “It’s such a pain to call you on the land line. Nobody can ever find you and they’re lousy at taking messages. We’ve talked, what? Twice in the last four months?”

“Yeah. Sorry about that. I’d use my cell if I could, but the commune doesn’t allow them.”

“How would they know?” Nichele scoffed. “If they can’t even find you, they can’t possibly know if you sneak a cell phone in there.”

“Yeah, but...” I paused, ransacking my brain for a plausible reason besides ‘I can’t use it in case some bad guy tracks its signal and comes to kill me’.

“Um, I just don’t like to go against their rules,” I mumbled, and changed the subject. “Anyway, I can’t believe I fell for that ‘paradise’ bullshit. I knew damn well how rainy the west coast of Vancouver Island is in winter. If I have to listen to the pitter-patter of raindrops on canvas one more day I swear I’ll go insane.”

Nichele’s giggle danced above the static.

“Yeah, laugh it up,” I snarled, my acrimony only half-feigned. “I haven’t been completely dry in months. There’s mould growing in my underwear drawer, for shit’s sake!”

“Girl, if you’ve got mould in your underwear it means you’re not getting enough action,” Nichele teased. “Why haven’t you found some artsy hippy-type guy who’s into all that tantric sex stuff? And anyway, I thought you said Hellhound and Hot John were going to come out and visit you.” I could imagine her grin and bouncing eyebrows. “You can’t tell me the two of them weren’t enough to burn the mould off your panties.”

I smiled in spite of myself. “Your fascination with my sex life is downright twisted.”

“What sex life?” she demanded. “Somebody should pay attention to it, ‘cause you obviously aren’t.”

“Mm.” My smile faded. “John was here a couple of months ago...”

“*Really?*” Nichele’s squeal coincided with a moment of clarity on the line and I jerked the receiver away from my ear, wincing. The static

promptly returned, making me strain to hear her next words. “Oh-em-gee, he is soooo hot! Why would you even need underwear if he was there?”

“He was convalescing,” I protested. “He was in pretty rough shape because he’d fallen on some ice and broken a rib a few weeks earlier.”

The cover story left a bad taste in my mouth. It wasn’t fair to make Kane sound like an accident-prone wimp, but revealing that he was really a secret agent recovering from a gunshot wound would tend to negate the ‘secret’ part...

She interrupted my thoughts with a lascivious purr. “Anybody with a bit of imagination can work around a broken rib.”

“Yeah...” My word floated out on a sigh. “But we didn’t get a chance to try. He’d only been here a few hours when he got a call saying his dad had been taken to the hospital with chest pain, so he left right away and flew out to Winnipeg. His dad had stents put in and he’s fine now, thank God, but by the time things settled down John had to go back to work instead of coming here.”

“But you’ll see him when you get home, right?”

I held in another sigh. “Probably not. We aren’t working together anymore and he has to travel a lot for his new job. I haven’t heard a thing from him in over a month. I don’t even know where he is.”

My gut clenched. He could be anywhere in the world, in danger I’d never know about unless I got a call that began with the words ‘We have bad news’...

“So, um... what about Hellhound?” Nichele inquired cautiously. “You’re not going to spoil what you’ve got with John by sleeping with Hellhound again, are you?”

“There’s nothing to spoil. John and I are just good friends...” The half-lie sounded feeble, but I forged on regardless. “...and I told you, I don’t know...” I bit off the word ‘if’. “...when I’ll see him again. And I haven’t seen Arnie since I left in December. We’ve talked on the phone a couple of times, but he’s been too busy with his P.I. cases to come out here.” I kept my tone light, hiding my twinge of hurt.

Apparently I hadn’t hidden it as well as I’d hoped. Nichele snorted. “Well, fine. Forget those losers, then. Why not sample the herd there?” A wicked grin lurked in Nichele’s faux-innocent tone. “Aren’t any of those skinny granola-fed guys up to it?”

I glanced around the corner to be sure I was alone before lowering my voice as I slid down the wall to sit on the floor. “Finding somebody who’s interested isn’t the problem. They all are. They’ve got this sixties-style free love thing going on, and everybody sleeps with everybody else. By now every man here has made a pass at me including Skidmark, who I’m pretty sure has lived here for seventy years and been stoned the whole time.”

“*Every* man?” Nichele’s voice rose to a squeak of revulsion. “Your *uncle* propositioned you? *Eeeeuwww!*”

“No, no!” I amended quickly. “No, of course Uncle Karma didn’t, and all the other guys just asked nicely and it was no big deal when I turned them down. But still...”

“Yeah, still. Skidmark? Eeuw.” She giggled again. “Why do they call him that? You mean, like, he has skidmarks in his underwear?”

“Jeez, Nichele! I don’t even want to think about his underwear! Until this moment I was perfectly happy believing everybody calls him that because he’s the closest thing to a mechanic they have out here in the middle of Bumfuck Nowhere. Funny, though, he’s the only one who doesn’t have some hippy-type name. Everybody else is Flower this and Rainbow that.”

“I still think it’s hilarious that you have these freaky-deaky relatives you didn’t know anything about until this year. ‘Uncle Karma and Auntie Moonbeam’. What a hoot! I’d love to come out and meet them!”

“No!” I converted my yelp of dismay to a calmer but still discouraging tone. “You’d hate it here. It’s really primitive. We only have power four hours a day and we get hot showers on a twice-a-week rotation, so just about everybody reeks of body odour. And anyway Karma and Moonbeam aren’t really my aunt and uncle. They’re cousins of my aunt, but they were close friends with my mom before she died...” I let the lie trail off before I could dig myself in any deeper.

“That’s so weird.” Nichele sounded dangerously pensive. “I was at your place pretty much every day when we were kids. They must have visited if they were that close to your mom, but I don’t remember them. And I know I’d remember wacko names like that.”

Shit, shit! Time for a distraction.

I hurriedly reintroduced the apparently-fascinating topic of my sex life. Or lack thereof. “Um, one of the guys here is kind of interesting...” I let the sentence trail off tantalizingly.

Thank God, she took the bait.

“Oooh, Aydan, that’s awesome! What’s his name? What’s he like? Tell me, tell me!”

I drew a silent breath of relief. “Everyone calls him Orion Moonjava. I don’t know what his real name is; Moonbeam gives everybody a new name when they arrive at the commune and she’s such a sweetheart that everybody just plays along...”

I bit my tongue. That wouldn’t help discourage Nichele’s visit. I returned to my distraction. “Anyway, Orion’s probably too young for me, but-”

“How old is he?” Nichele demanded.

“I don’t know, maybe mid-thirties? Or maybe a little older, but it’s hard to tell. He’s in really good shape.”

“Mid-thirties isn’t too young. Half your age plus eight years, that’s the rule. So thirty-one-and-a-half is your bottom limit.”

“There’s a rule?” I massaged my blossoming headache with my free hand.

“Of course there’s a rule. Now dish, girl! And please tell me he doesn’t reek of B.O.”

“He doesn’t reek of B.O.,” I parroted obligingly before reeling off the description I’d provided in my secret report to Charles Stemp. “He’s about six-foot-one, brown hair, green eyes, athletic build; maybe one-seventy-five, one-eighty pounds. He sounds just as Canadian as the rest of us, but every now and then there’s a turn of phrase or a funny...

I don't know... cadence or something in the way he talks that makes him sound British."

Which was why I'd flagged him in my security report. He just didn't quite fit in with the back-to-the-earth types around here. And now I'd overheard that odd conversation...

Nichele's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Oooh, British! I looove a man with an accent! Is he hot?"

I diverged from my official report. "Smokin', and he's been flirting with me ever since he got here in January. But like I said, he doesn't really have an accent."

"But he's young and hot and interested and you're turning him down?" Her voice rose to an incredulous crescendo. "Girl, are you *nuts?*"

"Probably."

I was definitely nuts. And I was also under orders to observe Orion Moonjava without engaging him, but I couldn't tell Nichele that.

"Well, if you aren't going to give Mr. Smokin' Hot Brit an entry visa and you hate it there, why don't you just come home?"

I crossed my fingers to dilute my lie. "I can't yet. The commune is in the middle of an audit. They're hippies, not bookkeepers, and their books are a total disaster. I'm trying to help them but it just keeps dragging on and on."

"Aydan, that's a load of crap and you know it!"

My heart stopped. Oh shit, how had she found out it was all a cover story? Had Dave blabbed? Shit, *shit*...

Before I could blurt out anything incriminating she went on, "You were supposed to be back by the end of February. It's already the

middle of April, and I don't care if you're getting a free vacation in their so-called paradise; they're taking advantage of you. They never bothered to say boo to you for forty-some years of your life, and now all of a sudden they want to be your favourite aunt and uncle until you solve their financial woes? Tell them to stick it."

I drew a secret breath of relief and tried to keep the tremor of adrenaline out of my voice. "I'd love to, but I can't." I hoped the sincerity of my desire to escape was sufficiently concealed by my fake concern. "They're really nice people..." At least that part was the truth. "...and I just can't abandon them in the middle of this mess."

Nichele's voice softened and I could hear the smile in her words. "You're such a pushover. But if it makes you feel any better, there's still a foot of snow here in Calgary and we're freezing our asses off. You couldn't start your garden anyway."

"Thanks, Nichele, that'll keep me from screaming for one more day..." I glanced up as a wrinkled apparition in a rainbow tie-dyed caftan floated around the corner. "Aunt Moonbeam needs the phone so I have to go now. Take care, and say hi to Dave."

"I will, and you take care, too. And have a little taste of Britain. Seriously, girl, I mean it. You're cranky as hell. You need to get laid."

"You are 'way too interested in my sex life. Pervert."

Nichele's giggle dissolved in the click of the disconnect as I hauled myself upright to replace the phone in the cradle.

Moonbeam's sweet face crumpled into concern. "Oh, Storm Cloud Dancer, I didn't need the phone. You didn't have to hang up on your friend."

“That’s okay, we were done.” I hesitated. I knew there wasn’t much hope, but I had to try. Again. “Storm Cloud Dancer is such a mouthful. Why don’t you just call me Aydan? Or Storm like everybody else does?”

“Oh, no, dear, the vibrations are all wrong. With your aura, you need a name that emphasizes your artistic expression. In numerology that’s a three, so you need C and L and U.”

“Are you sure about that aura thing?” I asked as deferentially as I could. “I haven’t painted in thirty years and I wasn’t any Picasso back then. I don’t write poetry or play a musical instrument or anything. I couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. I can’t even draw stick people.”

“Well, of course. That’s exactly what I mean.” Moonbeam nodded as though we were in perfect agreement. “By the way, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but did I hear you call me Aunt Moonbeam?”

“Um.” I tried to suppress the guilty flush that warmed my cheeks. “I... um, didn’t want to explain to Nichele why I was here so I kind of... fibbed a bit. I told her you and Karma were my distant aunt and uncle. I’m sorry.”

“Oh...” She hesitated. “That does explain the grayish overlay on your aura. It always indicates deception.” Lines of concern furrowed her forehead. “But why are you concealing the truth from your friend? There’s no shame in retreating from a trauma to heal, and a true friend would support you through the process.”

“I, uh...”

Damn cover stories. I cast my gaze down to my toes, hoping I looked traumatized instead of guilty. “I’m not... ready to talk about it yet.” I changed the subject. “I’m sorry if my lie bothered you. I’ll call

her back and confess if you want, but..." I gave her my best pleading big brown eyes. "If you could just play along as Aunt Moonbeam and Uncle Karma, I'd really appreciate it..."

"Oh, my dear, it's quite all right. We'd love to adopt you. But please, it's Aunt Moonbeam Meadow Sky and Uncle Karma Wolf Song. Shortening our names..."

"...messes with the vibrations," I finished with resignation. "I'm sorry. I'll try to remember."

"You're completely forgiven." She hugged me, her arms remarkably strong despite their apparent fragility in the billowing caftan. She smoothed the hair away from my face with firm hands. "Please don't hold guilt, Storm Cloud Dancer; it makes your aura so murky." She gazed at me, her faded china-blue eyes focused somewhere beyond my physical form. "But your aura is much clearer now than when you came, thank the Spirit. And I notice you're sleeping better, too."

My flush returned with a vengeance. Goddamn tents; if you so much as farted in the night, the whole commune knew. My screaming nightmares were sheer humiliation.

I hid my discomfiture as best I could. "Yeah, it's been nearly two months since I woke up the whole camp. I'm sure everybody else is just as happy about that as I am."

"Oh, my dear, don't be embarrassed. Cosmic River Stone said you'd been through some terrible experiences. We knew you were coming here for healing, and I'm glad you're finding it."

Yeah, right; healing. And to secretly protect his parents and watch everybody else at the commune. I respected his expertise, but

Cosmic River Stone, a.k.a. Charles Stemp, was a lousy, manipulative bastard.

“You’re very dear to him, you know.” Moonbeam’s gentle voice interrupted my dark thoughts.

“Huh? Dear to whom?”

“To Cosmic River Stone, of course.” At my strangled half-laugh-half-snort, Moonbeam’s brow furrowed. “No wonder your aura has that gray overlay. You’re deceiving yourself if you think he doesn’t care for you. He has never sent a female friend to be with us before.” Her expression grew dreamy. “How wonderful it would be to have grandchildren. Cosmic River Stone is a good man, you know, and his manager’s position at the research facility is very secure. And he’s only forty-three. Not too old to start a family-”

My bark of laughter made her start. I hurriedly hunched over, elbows on knees, hacking and gasping theatrically. “Sorry...” I choked. “Spit... down the wrong... pipe...”

That seemed more tactful than falling to the ground and kicking my heels in helpless hilarity at the thought of Stemp and me together. Never in a million years; unless the profound desire to place my hands around his throat and squeeze counted as ‘being together’.

Time to nip this in the bud. I straightened slowly, wiping my eyes and letting out a few last fake coughs.

“Oh, Storm Cloud Dancer, I’m sorry I upset you,” Moonbeam cried, her face drawn in distress. She stroked my hand. “It was insensitive of me to say that. I’m so sorry. I should have known by the brown shadow in your aura around your uterus.”

“Uh... wha...?” I croaked. I shook off my sudden sense of unreality and returned to the point I’d intended to make. “Ste... Char... jeez, *Cosmic River Stone* and I will never be a source of grandchildren for you. In the first place our office has rules against employee relationships...” I held up a hand to forestall Moonbeam’s protest. “...and in the second place I can’t have children...” My words slowed as I considered the fact that she’d apparently already known somehow. “...I’ve had a hysterectomy,” I finished lamely.

“Oh...” Her face clouded, and guilt prodded my heart in spite of myself. Then her luminous smile broke through again. “I’m glad that’s all it is. I was afraid the shadow might have been some reproductive illness.”

“Oh. Um, no, I’m fine.” I backed away. “Well, nice talking to you. I’m going to... um... go check on the garden.”

“That’s a good idea, dear. Your aura clears so beautifully when you’re in the garden. You have so much green in your aura, you know. I can tell you’re deeply grounded in the Earth Spirit...”

I smiled, nodded, and fled.

CHAPTER 3

Rattled, I strode along the path to the garden without appreciating the vivid greens of the rainforest as much as usual. I didn't believe in all that woo-woo stuff, but Moonbeam's diagnosis had given me a distinctly creepy feeling. What if there really were auras and she could see them? If grey meant deception it was a miracle she could see any other colour in mine, since I'd been spouting Stemp's cover-story lies for the past four months...

The sound of voices ahead jerked me to a halt near the garden clearing and I sidestepped into the thick undergrowth to listen. Aurora's brassy tones penetrated the forest silence, interspersed with a softer male voice. That would be Zen Earth Star, her more-or-less constant companion, though they didn't seem to be in a relationship. No more so than anybody else here, anyway.

Aurora let out a piercing laugh that set my teeth on edge. Damn, not again. Once a day was more than enough.

I turned and retraced my steps as quietly as possible.

Wandering down the path, I considered my options. I needed to wash a few clothes, but the idea of scrubbing them on the washboard and wringing them by hand didn't appeal. Better to wait until the power

came on in a few hours and then jockey for position at the ancient wringer washer.

I wanted to report to Stemp, but I had to let the memory of his mother's matchmaking subside or I was likely to either laugh or gag at the sound of his voice; I wasn't sure which.

Working out was always an option. The gym was the only up-to-date part of the whole commune, and I'd made good use of it in the past few months. I was in better shape than I'd ever been, but I was still feeling the effects of the previous day's hard workout. Skip that.

Or I could re-read one of the tattered paperbacks from the tiny library. At least it was in the main building so it was dry and relatively warm, unlike my dank canvas tent...

I sighed and kept walking. God, I was going slowly crazy here. Surely it must be safe for me to resurface in my real life by now. After nearly four months all the bad guys from my last case should finally be behind bars.

A dark suspicion crossed my mind. Maybe Stemp was lying about the potential danger back home. Maybe he had decided to protect his secrets by warehousing me permanently out here, isolated from the rest of the world and slowly rotting away until I became just another bump under the moss of the forest floor.

I kicked at an inoffensive fern as I passed. Maybe I should just say screw it and leave against his orders...

A narrow offshoot of the path caught my attention and I turned down it, desperate for any form of novelty.

The faint trail wove through deep undergrowth, the soggy earth squishing under my hiking boots and the wet ferns soaking the legs of my jeans.

But at least it was silent and I could savour a few rare moments of solitude. I drew a deep breath of moist spicy forest air, feeling the tension easing between my shoulder blades.

After ten minutes of unhurried uphill walking, my equanimity was almost restored and I was beginning to wonder where the trail led. I hadn't met or heard another human being, but the trail showed signs of recent use in its squashed moss and the occasional broken fern frond.

I was debating whether to turn back when a thicket of bright green a few yards off the path made me pause. A couple of steps closer, my heart lurched into a rapid rhythm.

Shit, I'd stumbled onto somebody's marijuana crop. Bad place to linger unless I was looking for a neighbourly greeting from the business end of a shotgun.

I was turning to hurry away when a shout jolted adrenaline into my veins. My hand twitched reflexively toward my ankle holster, but I squelched the urge. The commune members might be a little naïve, but even they wouldn't believe a bookkeeper needed to carry a baby Glock.

Scanning the forest, I tensed at the sound of another yell, then relaxed when I identified the words.

"Skidmark! Where are you? Get out here, old man! You lazy, useless..."

The rest of the shouted insults were obscured by my sigh of relief. Not busted after all. Now I just needed to get my ass out of here before I really did get caught.

The pot garden was probably Skidmark's private stash, and at least now I knew where he wasn't. Better to head for the commotion and look innocent when he arrived than to get caught scurrying guiltily away in the direction I'd come. I fled up the path as quietly as possible toward the sounds of irritable impatience.

A few minutes later the verdant shade lightened as I approached a clearing, and I struck out into the undergrowth to circle it and approach from the opposite direction.

When I stepped out of the forest, a skinny dark-bearded young man jerked around to face me, his black brows knotted in annoyance. His camo pants and military boots looked familiar.

Orion's companion.

He cast a single glare at me before turning his back to rail at the trees again. "Skidmark! I need this truck now! Get out here!"

Thus soundly ignored, I took in the scene at my leisure. I had obviously arrived at Skidmark's automotive empire via the back way. Grass and weeds almost hid the gravel that paved the small clearing, and to my left a narrow gravelled track wound through the forest downhill to the main road. The commune's dilapidated 1970 Chevy one-ton truck sagged dispiritedly beside a moss-covered garage, and the other communal vehicle, a gigantic rust-pocked station wagon, slouched across from it.

The rodent-faced young man's complexion was reddening and cords stood out in his neck. "SKIDMARK! Curse you to a thousand hells, I NEED THIS TRUCK NOW!"

This didn't seem like a good time to visit. I began to retreat.

The crunch of my boots on gravel made Ratboy whip around to face me again. As he did, Skidmark shuffled out from behind the shed.

"Dude," he mumbled. "Be cool, man."

Ratboy spun, his fists clenching, and I took a couple of quick steps closer in case he attacked the older man.

I wasn't sure who might win if they actually fought. Skidmark was probably in his early seventies, but his arms were corded with ropy muscle. I'd seen him work out and I was pretty sure he could take Ratboy if he was sober.

But he wasn't. As usual.

Slack-faced, he swayed gently as he worked grubby fingers through his long grey beard as though searching for his own chin. In his other hand a twist of cigarette paper emitted a thin curl of smoke, and the sickly-sweet odour of smouldering marijuana drifted to my nose.

He raised the joint and blinked at it as if surprised to find it in his hand before offering it to Ratboy. "Toke?"

"No!" A sudden sweep of Ratboy's arm made me jump toward them, but he was only snatching the cigarette to fling it to the gravel. He crushed it under his heel, glaring at Skidmark from close range. "Fix. The. Truck," he ground out. "Now."

"I can have a look at it if you want," I offered, hoping to defuse the situation. "Those old trucks are usually pretty easy to work on."

Ratboy shot me a contemptuous look before deliberately turning his back.

Skidmark blinked again, his hand poised as though still holding the now-defunct doobie. His gaze tracked slowly to Ratboy's glare. "Fixing trucks is men's work," he mumbled.

Ordinarily I'd have responded to a comment like that with an insult of the unprintable variety, but the tension in their exchange stilled my tongue.

"Mm," I murmured noncommittally and fell back a pace, watching.

Ratboy gave a sharp nod and jabbed a finger at Skidmark's face. "Fix it. Or I'll have the woman do it."

Okay, that was enough to piss me off.

"Oh, I don't know," I drawled. "I don't think *the woman* will be able to do it after all. Men's work is much too complicated."

Ratboy barked an unintelligible word and strode away, his boots crunching angrily on the gravel.

Skidmark and I watched in silence while he marched down the road, his shoulders rigid. When he rounded a curve and the trees hid him from view, Skidmark yawned and scratched his head under the lank grey ponytail that dangled half-way down his back.

"He called you a whore," he translated helpfully.

I turned to stare at him and he smiled, his blank innocent eyes incongruous in his weathered face.

"Well, golly gee," I said after a moment. "Now my feelings are hurt and I'm going to go home and cry. What a little dickwad."

Skidmark wheezed what might have been laughter. Then he directed a puzzled frown at his empty fingers and mumbled, "Coulda sworn I rolled a bomber just before I came out here..."

"Ratboy squished it," I reminded him, and pointed to the crushed cigarette.

"Aw, man..." Skidmark squatted slowly, eyeing the scrap of paper with intense concentration. "Bummer..." He bowed his head as if in requiem. He stayed that way for so long I was about to bend down and make sure he was okay when he moved at last, reaching for the mangled joint. "Good roach..." he muttered, and brushed most of the dirt off it before tucking it into the pocket of his stained coveralls. "Smoke it later..."

He rose in slow motion and drifted over to stand contemplating the truck. After several minutes he sighed. "Need a toke," he said, and shuffled away.

I shook my head and wandered over to the truck. The keys were in the ignition, and I popped the hood before sliding into the driver's seat.

The starter cranked over reassuringly, but the engine didn't even hint at catching. I grunted and slid down from the seat to go around the front. Poking my head under the hood, I eyed the greasy old V-8 squatting in the middle of its cavernous bay, festooned with grimy wires and half-perished rubber hoses. I sucked in a deep breath of burnt-oil scent and smiled. Likely an electrical problem.

After a brief visual inventory, I began to trace the ignition path. Examining the wire leading up from the ignition coil, I let out a 'hmp' of surprise when it dropped away from the distributor cap.

“Well, that’ll do it,” I muttered, and reconnected it.

Sure enough, the engine fired up on the first try, and I was basking in the satisfaction of an easy fix when it abruptly died.

“What the...?” I hopped out of the cab just in time to catch Skidmark carefully laying the wire in its original loosened position on the distributor cap.

“What the hell?” I demanded.

He straightened and took a drag from a fresh joint. After a long pause, smoke filtered through his beard as he mumbled, “Patience is a virtue, girlie.”

My mouth dropped open in indignation, but then I caught the barest hint of a twinkle in his eye.

I snickered. “Ratboy’s patience?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Skidmark said, and offered me his cigarette. “Toke?”

“No thanks.”

He nodded sleepily before taking another long draw himself. I stepped away from the eye-watering combination of pot smoke and body odour and was about to head for the road when he spoke again.

“So you’re a girl mechanic.”

“I’m not a mechanic. I just like working on cars.”

“Huh.” He squinted blearily at me. “Hey, you’re really tall...” He blinked. “...Are you a dude in women’s clothes?”

“Yeah,” I replied, deadpan.

He stared in silence for a long moment, his cigarette hand drifting up to his lips as though of its own volition.

“Far out...” he mumbled, and took another drag. After a long exhalation of smoke, his eyes narrowed as though an idea had braved the burned-out corridors of his brain. “Wanna go back to my place and screw?” he inquired.

“I just finished telling you I’m a man.”

He shrugged. “So I’m into equal rights. Can I touch your ass?”

“No.”

His shoulders jerked rhythmically, accompanied by the wheezing that served him for laughter. “You’re a woman all right.” He offered his joint. “Toke?”

“No,” I repeated.

The distant crunch of approaching footsteps made me turn, my pulse kicking up a notch at the thought of another confrontation with Ratboy. My heart rate failed to slow at the sight of the man rounding the bend in the road.

Orion.

He smiled and waved, and I waved back while Skidmark stood blinking placidly in the mist that was beginning to gather itself into raindrops.

“Hi, Storm,” Orion greeted me as he strode up. “Hi, Skidmark.”

I managed a casual ‘hi’ in return.

Damn, it should be illegal for a man to have eyelashes that thick and dark. They framed moss-green eyes alight with intelligence, almost the same colour as the soft corduroy shirt he wore loosely over a brown T-shirt that showcased the hard contours of his chest and abs. He had been clean-shaven with close-cropped hair when he had arrived at the commune a few months ago, but now short whiskers accented a chin

that might have been carved by Michelangelo and his hair fell in those soft waves that begged me to run my fingers through it...

My cheeks warmed when I realized he'd spoken while I was ogling him.

"Sorry, I'm brain-dead today. What did you say?" I stammered.

He smiled. "Word of advice: Don't stand so close to Skidmark. If you've been breathing that fug, you're probably half-stoned."

My brain snapped out of ogle-mode and into full alert. There it was again. A wholly Canadian accent, but 'fug'? Nobody used that word around here.

Stemp had enemies overseas. If someone was going to come after his parents to gain revenge on him, they might have some sort of British or European accent...

I forced a chuckle, and Skidmark emitted his wheezy laughter before offering Orion the much-diminished joint. "Toke?"

"Sure." Orion appropriated the butt and took a short drag before offering it to me.

"No thanks," I said for the third time.

Orion was handing the roach back to Skidmark when the sudden clamour of bells made me flinch and swear.

CHAPTER 4

“Jesus, not again,” I muttered.

“Come on!” Orion seized my hand and dragged me into a full run. The pealing of the bells mounted to a frenetic crescendo, and I dug in my heels as we reached the first bend of the road.

“Hang on!” I pulled free of his grip. “You go ahead if you want, but they can honour the Earth Spirit without me this time. Moonbeam already hauled me out of bed in the middle of the night a couple of days ago. I’m all honoured-out for this week.”

“Come on, Storm!” Orion grabbed my hand again and pulled. “Hurry up!”

Damn, he was strong. Dragged into a reluctant jog, I protested, “Hell, Orion, you’re a smart guy. You don’t really believe the ground’s going to open up and swallow us if we skip some hokey ceremony, do you?”

He skidded to a halt. “It’s not hokey! This is important! Why are we here if not to honour the Earth Spirit?”

“Honouring the Earth Spirit is fine if that’s what you believe in, but these random rituals are bullshi...” My heart smote me as his

beautiful eyes widened with hurt. I blew out a breath. "Sorry." I let him pull me into a run again.

When we panted up to the main building, Aurora Peace Rain was practically dancing with impatience beside the door.

"Hurry, hurry!" she brayed. "You're the last ones, and the Earth Spirit needs us!"

Clenching my teeth against the onslaught of her voice, I accepted the rolled-up mat she pushed at me and followed Orion into the darkened building. Weaving between supine bodies, I tiptoed to my designated spot, where I unrolled the mat and lay down.

Blissful humming rose from the commune members and I closed my eyes, trying without much hope to achieve the meditative state Moonbeam wanted. It hadn't happened in four months, so it didn't seem likely now.

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Hell, even the little kids were lying perfectly still and humming along with their parents. Surely I could manage some form of meditation. What had Moonbeam said? Something about grounding my root chakra to the Earth Spirit...

But wasn't my root chakra somewhere down around my ass? So if I was going to ground it to the Earth Spirit, wouldn't it make more sense to sit instead of lying down?

But sitting on the Earth Spirit's face seemed a tad disrespectful.

Then again, dragging me out of bed in the middle of the night for a 'Spirit Calling' was damn disrespectful, too.

Maybe the Earth Spirit could just kiss my chakra.

My eyes popped open in defiance of Moonbeam's 'eyes closed' edict and I studied my surroundings without moving. The heavy hand-

hewn beams above us were barely visible in the dimness cast by the heavy shutters shrouding the windows. The wall beside me radiated a damp chill, and I wondered what architectural madness had impelled the builder to pour a four-foot-high concrete base and then finish the building with wood frame construction.

A soft green glow swelled into the room, and I slitted my eyes to peer between my lashes, shifting slowly to get a clear sight line without disturbing my humming neighbours.

The raised dais at the front of the room always held a large copper gong suspended from a wooden frame, with a small table a few feet in front of it. But now green light pulsated from the heart of the large crystal that occupied the centre of the table.

While I watched, Aurora and her sidekick Zen rose from their mats below the dais and stepped up to the crystal, each pressing an ear against it from opposite sides while their hands stroked a complex pattern over its surface.

The green glow brightened, illuminating their exalted expressions, then abruptly extinguished.

Blinking to clear the afterimage, I barely saw Aurora and Zen exchange nods. Zen crossed to the back of the dais and struck the gong once.

As though animated by the mellow reverberation, the recumbent bodies stirred and sat up, looking expectantly toward the dais. I sighed and did the same. I knew what was coming.

“The Earth Spirit has spoken! Come; follow.” Aurora’s voice ravaged my eardrums like a jackhammer after the peace of the meditation.

Everyone rose and split into two groups, one behind Aurora, the other behind Zen. Two other leaders whose names I had forgotten brought up the rear, apparently to corral any stragglers.

Cold rain pelted down as we filed out of the building, and I hitched my jacket collar up and muttered to Orion beside me, "Remember, this was your idea."

"Silence! We must honour the Earth Spirit with our silence."

Aurora had caught me. She gave me a severe look and I ducked my head, hoping I looked contrite and holding back the urge to reply, "I'll shut up if you will."

Instead, I bit my tongue and joined the rest of the mute group to plod off into the wet forest single-file behind Aurora. With superhuman restraint, I managed not to grouse about the stupidity of tramping the winding forest trails instead taking the direct route along the gravelled road. After about fifteen minutes of hiking, our dripping crew filed into a large open field, meeting Zen's band as they arrived from the opposite side.

Like well-drilled soldiers, we split into groups under our four leaders and moved to the cardinal points of the field where we knelt in the sodden grass, still silent.

The icy wetness made my knees ache and the rain trickled in cold rivulets down the back of my neck. A raw breeze moaned through the trees behind me, cutting effortlessly through my soggy jeans. In front of me a bald man with a bushy beard shivered uncontrollably, and I blessed my long thick hair. It was soaking wet, but at least it provided a bit of insulation.

After what seemed like forever, Aurora and Zen must have received some sign from their beloved Earth Spirit. They released us with a joyous cry of, “The blessings of the Earth Spirit are upon you!”

The supplicants replied with an equally enthusiastic, “And upon you, too!” as they scrambled to their feet, though I could have sworn the bald man had actually said, “And fuck you, too.”

Or maybe that was just me.

Shivering, I hurried for the road and made a beeline for the main building, jostling past the smiling and chattering commune members who seemed impervious to the bone-chilling rain.

Orion found me half an hour later at one of the big woodstoves in the communal kitchen, where I was reheating a pot of soup and huddling as close to the stove as I could get without actually branding myself for life.

His hair hung in dripping ringlets against cheeks ruddy with cold, and his green eyes sparkled with amusement at the sight of me.

“Are you just a bit chilly, then?” he inquired, grinning.

“Shut up.” I licked the hot soup off the spoon before clasping it between my icy hands. Its warmth dissipated almost instantly, and I sighed and resumed stirring.

He touched the towel I’d wrapped turban-style around my head. “I like it. You look exotic.”

“I look like I’m in the final stages of hypothermia. Which, by an amazing coincidence, I am.” I scowled and licked the spoon again before lovingly embracing its tiny heat.

He moved a little closer, his eyes darkening. “You’d warm up a lot faster if you did that to me instead of to the spoon.”

I hid my sudden breathlessness in a snort. “If I put these cold hands on you, you’d have indoor plumbing for the rest of your life.”

“It’s a chance I’m willing to take.”

Those green eyes. Dammit.

His eyes crinkled at the corners, dark lashes lowering over heat. “I’m up for shower rotation today. My slot is in an hour. You could share it with me.” A slow blink, his eyes hooded with desire. “Nothing like a steamy-hot shower to warm you up.”

Speaking of steam...

A curl of vapour drifted past my face. I stepped away from the stove just in case, but it was likely only wafting up from my suddenly-overheated nether regions.

I suppressed a sigh. After four months of peaceful cohabitation it seemed unlikely that Orion was a threat to Moonbeam and Karma, but still. I was under orders. And there was that niggling suspicion...

I leaned past him to grab a bowl. “Sorry, the power will come on in half an hour and I want to blow-dry my hair. And I want to wash some clothes while the power’s on, too.”

“Well, you know where I’ll be if you change your mind.” He gave me one last scorching look before withdrawing from my personal space to sink into a nearby chair. “I don’t suppose there’s enough soup in your pot for two?”

I glanced up to see if that was some kind of innuendo, but he was hungrily eyeing the saucepan on the stove.

“You’re in luck.”

He grinned. “It’s not really the way I was hoping to get lucky, but it’s almost as good.”

I shrugged and ladled out soup. “You can get as lucky as you want. Any of the women and probably half the men would be delighted to share your shower.”

“Not *any* of the women.” When I glanced up, he was studying me intently. “You won’t.”

I sank into a chair and directed my attention to my soup before he could read my face. “So I’m a freak. Nothing personal.”

“Are you... er...” He hesitated. “Do you *prefer* indoor plumbing?”

Soup shot into my sinuses and tears streamed down my face while I choked and groped for a napkin.

“Jesus!” I sputtered when my coughing subsided. “Don’t do that when I’ve got a mouthful of soup! No, I like your plumbing just fine...” My face heated. “I mean, as far as I know,” I added hurriedly. “Not that I’ve been looking... oh shit, shut up! Isn’t it time for you to go take a shower or something?”

Orion leaned back in his chair and laughed. “Not quite.”

Hoping to fill my mouth with food so my foot wouldn’t fit in again, I reapplied myself to spooning soup. Conversations from the other occupied tables rose around us, emphasizing our little island of silence.

Moonbeam and Karma strolled in looking warm and dry, their arms around each other and heads together in quiet conversation. I jerked my chin in their direction and muttered, “I didn’t see them freezing their asses off in the rain.”

Orion stiffened. “Moonbeam and Karma perform very important rituals when the Earth Spirit calls. Sometimes those rituals can be extremely uncomfortable, so please show some respect.”

I clamped my teeth on my spoon so I wouldn't say anything I'd regret. Orion seemed like such a nice normal guy most of the time, but he turned into a total freak over this Earth Spirit thing.

Well, freedom of religion. If it was important to him and everybody else at the commune, I should respect their beliefs even if I didn't share them. And besides, his defense of them was reassuring. Maybe he didn't mean them any harm.

I swallowed my mouthful. "You're right, Orion, I'm sorry. That was rude and disrespectful of me."

His stiffness melted into a smile that made me want to apologize again just to see that deliciously edible dimple one more time. "You're forgiven, Storm. Thank you." He reached across the table and squeezed my hand just as Skidmark wandered into the kitchen.

In deference to the no-smoking-in-buildings rule, he wasn't actually carrying a joint, but the heavy cloak of marijuana scent preceded him by several feet. His thicket of beard and moustache twitched in a smile at the sight of Orion's and my clasped hands, and he wove unsteadily to our table.

"Sweet love..." he warbled in a key entirely of his own making. "Sweet, sweet love..." He swayed and caught himself by gripping the edge of our table. One of his eyelids drooped in a lascivious wink. "If you kids're gonna get it on, can I join in? Ol' Skidmark knows a thing or two 'bout lovin'..."

Just in time to hear Skidmark's overture, Ratboy strode into the kitchen and froze, glaring.

Apparently Skidmark wasn't as far gone as I'd thought. When my gaze snapped over to focus behind him he spun with surprising

agility to face the threat, then staggered with the sudden movement. I jumped up and seized his shoulders, steadying him.

Skidmark raised his voice in a tone that might have been dulcet if not for the rasp of too many decades of accumulated tar on his vocal cords. “Be cool, man,” he cooed at Ratboy. “You’re invited, too. You got such a nice tight little tushie. Tushie-wushie...” He squeezed the air with both hands as though fondling buttocks.

Ratboy went rigid. Then his face twisted in rage and he closed the distance to Skidmark in a couple of fast strides. Orion sprang to intercept him, but Ratboy had already spat in Skidmark’s face.

“*Filth!*” Ratboy hissed, and stormed out.

“Aw, man...” Skidmark said plaintively. “You mean our date’s off?” He appropriated my napkin to wipe the spittle off his face before drifting away humming, apparently unfazed.

I sank back into my chair and drew a deep breath, willing the tremors out of my hands.

Filth. Was it coincidence Ratboy had used that particular word? If not, it imparted a whole new aura of menace to the words ‘get rid of the filth’.

“Are you all right?” Orion bent to clasp my hands between his own.

“Fine. I just... that scared me. That guy is seriously unbalanced.” I seized the opportunity. “Who is he?”

“One of the renters.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “What’s a renter? Is that some Spirit-thing, too?”

Orion laughed. “No, an actual renter. The commune has several acres of extra land they rent to various groups. That group has occupied the land for nearly a year.”

“Why haven’t I noticed them before?”

There was another layer to my innocent question. What the hell kind of secret agent was I, if an entire group of commune members had escaped my notice? How could I possibly have missed them in the nearly four months I’d been here? And if they were all as wacko as Ratboy, were they a threat to Moonbeam and Karma? And if Orion was friends with Ratboy...

* * *

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