

# **Spy In The Sky**

Book 16 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

By Diane Henders

Published May 2021 by PEBKAC Publishing Inc.

\* \* \*

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.

Please respect my hard work by complying with copyright laws. This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. You may not resell this e-book under any circumstances.

Thank you for reading!

Copyright © 2020 Diane Henders

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or in any means—by electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without prior written permission.

**Books in the NEVER SAY SPY series:**

- Book 1: Never Say Spy
- Book 2: The Spy Is Cast
- Book 3: Reach For The Spy
- Book 4: Tell Me No Spies
- Book 5: How Spy I Am
- Book 6: A Spy For A Spy
- Book 7: Spy, Spy Away
- Book 8: Spy Now, Pay Later
- Book 9: Spy High
- Book 10: Spy Away Home
- Book 11: The Spies That Bind
- Book 12: Kiss And Say Good Spy
- Book 13: Once Burned, Twice Spy
- Book 14: Friends In Spy Places
- Book 15: A Spy For Help
- Book 16: Spy In The Sky

More books coming! For a current list, please visit

[www.dianehenders.com](http://www.dianehenders.com)

Or sign up for my New Book Notification list at

[www.dianehenders.com/books](http://www.dianehenders.com/books)

## CHAPTER 1

Slipping into the server that had attracted my attention, I sent my invisible avatar burrowing through its files.

If I'd had a stomach in my current bodyless state, it would have clenched at what I found.

This couldn't be what I thought it was. Surely I was wrong.

Not for the first time, I cursed the fact that I couldn't simply grab the data and dump it into our own database. Instead, I memorized the worrisome words before returning to painstakingly recreate them in the Department's electronic file repository.

Had I gotten them right?

I couldn't afford to be wrong.

As I turned to follow the convoluted trail back through the internet, ever-present fear gnawed at the edges of my mind.

Would this be the time when a lost connection trapped me in electronic limbo, forever exiled from my physical body? Or worse, some signal failure amputated a piece of my consciousness?

Don't think about that. Concentrate.

It took far too long to find the server again in the ever-shifting data tunnels of the internet. It took longer still to rediscover the tiny snippet of conversation that had caught my attention.

But I hadn't been wrong.

I triple-checked the words before retreating to Sirius Dynamics, my attenuated consciousness snapping backward like a frightened elastic band. Safely inside our file repository, my invisible avatar sucked in a breath of relief.

Made it back. Thank God.

But now I had to face what I'd found. Pacing invisibly, I debated.

Maybe I was blowing the whole thing out of proportion. Those words could mean anything.

But I was pretty damn sure that was only a comforting fantasy. And the sooner I faced reality, the better.

I popped into visibility.

"Hey, Spider, I'm back," I said to the virtual ceiling.

"Aydan, thank goodness! I was afraid you'd gotten lost! I thought we still had our connection, but you weren't coming back." The relief in his tone gave me a pang of guilt over my dawdling.

"Sorry, I could still feel your anchor; I was just a bit slow." Steeling myself, I added, "What did you think of that data I dumped to the server?"

"I didn't like it." His usually cheery voice was grim. "Was there anything more?"

My heart sank. "Not that I could find around that date and time. I'll go back and look through everything in the month leading up to it, though."

“No, it’s nearly lunchtime, and Stemp wants to talk to you. As soon as I saw what you’d found, I notified him.”

My spirits sank even lower. “Um... okay. But if you need more information, it would be easier for me to go back in right away before the internet connections shift too much.”

Pretty damn pathetic that I’d risk eternal exile in cyberspace just to avoid a meeting with my director, but there it was: The lesser of two terrors.

“No, it’s okay.” Spider’s reply interrupted my gloomy thoughts. “You need a lunch break to get your strength back before you try to breach another server.” He still sounded worried. “Come on out.”

“Okay.” I trudged reluctantly down the virtual corridor, postponing my exit into reality as long as possible. At the portal I hesitated, braced myself, and then stepped through.

The usual pain crashed through my head.

Spitting obscenities, I hugged my temples and squeezed my eyes shut. When the worst of the misery had subsided, I dragged my eyes open and summoned a tooth-clenched caricature of a grin.

“God, I love my job,” I growled. “That just never gets old.”

Spider’s face scrunched into a sympathetic grimace that made him look like a high school kid instead of the late-twenties computer genius he was. “I just hate how much this hurts you! I wish there was a way to make it better.”

“There is,” I reminded him, holding out my palm to display the tiny cube of highly-classified circuitry that allowed me to sneak invisibly into any network in the world. “I could use the other network key instead of this one.”

“It’s too risky.” Spider’s hazel eyes darkened with worry. “Just because our *very* few tests...” He paused to give me a severe look that was approximately as threatening as a puppy’s growl. “...indicated a four-to-one ratio of network access time to unconsciousness, that doesn’t guarantee you won’t go into a permanent coma the next time you use the newer key. Passing out is definitely not ‘better’.” He made air quotes around the word.

“For me, it is. At least it doesn’t hurt.”

“But we don’t have enough data to be sure it’s safe,” he argued. “Tammy is the only other person we can study, and she doesn’t have any side-effects when she comes out of the network. What if losing consciousness is a sign that your brain is getting damaged?”

“Well, this pain sure feels like brain damage,” I growled. “I bet Tammy gets away without side-effects because Brock is controlling her. And there’s no way in hell I’m going to let *anybody* drive me around the internet like a cheap rental car. Especially not a self-important little shit like Brock.” Relenting at the sight of Spider’s unhappy expression, I sighed and added, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to dump on you. You’re the expert, and I trust you. I’ll go and grab some lunch and be less cranky when I get back.”

His bony shoulders relaxed, his usual boyish smile returning. “Thanks, Aydan. You aren’t cranky at all.”

“You’re ‘way too nice.” Feeling several decades older than my forty-eight years, I hauled myself off my office couch and patted him on the shoulder on my way to the door.

A necessary detour to the ladies’ room gave my cowardly rationalizations a chance to take over. I could sneak down the fire

stairs and avoid Stemp just a little longer. A few more minutes wouldn't change anything.

By the time I had finished washing my hands, I still wasn't ready to face my fate. I stepped out into the corridor, instinctively turning toward the fire stairs.

"*Shit!*" The expletive burst from my lips as I jerked to a halt face-to-face with Stemp, who was apparently returning from the men's room. Just my damn luck.

He slammed on the brakes, too, and we both stepped back to create some much-needed personal space.

"Agent Kelly," he said with his usual cool composure. "There you are. Shall we?" He gestured toward his office.

I squelched the idiot impulse to tackle him to the carpet and flee. He was a former agent and a martial arts expert. If I took him on, I'd be the one who ended up on the carpet. Literally and figuratively.

I stifled a sigh and fell into step beside him.

In his office, Stemp closed the door behind us and waved me into the chair across from his desk.

I sat, working hard to keep my body language relaxed.

"Webb told me what you found," Stemp said in his usual emotionless tone. "So it appears that someone else has developed..." He hesitated, then clarified with his usual precision, "Or redeveloped... a lethal ultrasound weapon."

"Maybe," I equivocated, afraid that if I agreed out loud it would make the nightmare real. "Or I might have misinterpreted the words. It was just a little snatch of conversation from audio surveillance at the Frankfurt airport. It could have meant anything."

Stemp's reptilian features gave me no reassurance as he quoted the words that had burned into my brain. "...*just have to get within twenty-five feet. Nobody will ever guess what the bottle is.*"

I sagged in my chair with a groan. "Okay, to anybody who doesn't know the weapon looks like a bottle and is lethal up to twenty-five feet, it could mean anything, but to us..." A heavy sigh slipped out, fanning the glowing embers of my anxiety into violent irritation. "What the hell is *wrong* with people?" I demanded. "Seriously, who sits around thinking, 'Jeez, the world could really use a silent invisible death ray? *Another* fucking silent invisible death ray?'"

Stemp's shoulders rose in a fractional shrug. "That is what we must determine. Webb has already assigned it Priority One, and he has directed Brock to make it top priority as well."

I sighed. "Well, I guess I'll get back to digging, too, then."

As I rose, Stemp said, "One more thing."

My pulse ticked up and I did my best to hide my dread while I resumed my seat.

Stemp's unnerving amber gaze scanned my face in silence for a moment. Looking for secrets.

"How are you?" he inquired politely.

Every nerve in my body flashed to red alert. Stemp never made small talk.

I returned a bland smile. "Fine, thanks. And you?"

"Very well, thank you. I trust you have fully recovered from your difficult experiences of a few weeks ago?"

It was a trap.

If I said I was fine, he'd expect me to requalify and go back to active duty. If I said I wasn't fine, I'd end up in the psychologist's office again, and Dr. Rawling would worm out my guilty secrets.

I edged unhappily into the minefield. "Yes, I've recovered."

"Excellent. When should I schedule your requalification examination?"

Blam. My first step, and already I'd lost a leg.

I summoned what I hoped was a casual but confident tone. "Probably in a few weeks. We need to get to the bottom of this weapon thing, so I'll be spending a lot of time infiltrating servers and decrypting."

Stemp's gaze sharpened. "Brock and Mellor can handle that. Your primary value is as an active agent."

"Yes, but—"

"Is there a reason why you're avoiding your requalification?"

Blam. Now I didn't have a leg to stand on.

And that thought was completely inappropriate, considering the amputations my friend Reggie had suffered in a real-life explosion. I suppressed a shudder and tried a different tack: The truth.

Or part of it.

I scowled at Stemp. "Yeah, there's a reason. I hate being an agent."

He eyed me with the detachment of an entomologist contemplating a struggling bug on a pin. "That is unfortunate. You may, of course, choose to stay on administrative duty."

"Yeah, and get locked up in the secured facility for the rest of my life." I hid the wave of panic that swept over me at the thought, and kept my voice hard and level. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Stemp sighed, his legendary expressionless façade easing into resignation. “While I sympathize with your situation, the fact remains that your ability to infiltrate and decrypt any network makes you too much of a potential security breach to live any other way. The choice is yours: Active agent or secured asset.” He raised a warning eyebrow. “And I suggest you choose soon. If you do not, Upper Command will decide for you.”

And I knew which way they’d decide. They’d love to lock me in their secure research facility.

But if I opted to requalify, the mandatory lie detector test would reveal that I’d covered up a murder.

Some choice.

“I’ll get back to you,” I muttered.

“See that you do. By Wednesday.”

“*Wednesday?*” I couldn’t keep my voice from cracking. “That’s only two days away!”

“Yes, and it has already been two weeks since you returned from your Christmas vacation. You should have requalified for active duty immediately. Unless there is a psychological issue preventing you from performing at peak efficiency in the field...” Stemp’s voice softened. “Aydan, if you’re having difficulties, I’ll arrange some sessions with Dr. Rawling-”

“No!” I tempered my knee-jerk exclamation with a sheepish smile and added, “I’m fine, I’ve just been procrastinating. Sorry. I’ll do my requalification.”

Stemp eyed me without expression as he closed off my last avenue of escape. “Very well. Report for your physical test at eleven

hundred hours on Wednesday, to be followed by your firearms qualification. Dr. Rawling will see you for your psych evaluation at thirteen hundred. As soon as you've finished with him, come to my office for your lie detector interview."

The interview I'd fail.

"Okay," I mumbled, trying to hide my despair.

"Also..." Stemp hesitated as though choosing his words carefully.

Uh-oh.

"Upper Command has asked me to inquire about the status of your mother's estate."

I couldn't prevent a probably-unattractive smirk from tugging at the corners of my mouth. "You mean, they want to know if I'm going to continue the lawsuit over the proceeds-of-crime seizure, so I can inherit Sirius Dynamics."

"Your decision is of great interest to them."

I grinned. "No doubt."

Stemp's cool formal expression didn't change, and my evil satisfaction ebbed away. As much as I wanted to stick it to the chain of command, they weren't the true cause of my problems.

I sighed. "I actually haven't decided what to do about the lawsuit. The lawyer is sure we can win, but... I feel kind of guilty about inheriting Sirius."

The rarely-revealed human side of Stemp replaced the robot across from me. He raised a puzzled brow. "Why would you feel guilty?"

“Sam was a traitor and my m...” The word ‘mother’ refused to leave my lips. “Nora...” I said instead, “...was a murderer. I know Sam built the civilian research branch of Sirius with his own money, and after he died Nora didn’t have enough time to do anything criminal with it. But still, the whole thing just feels...” I squirmed. “Tainted. Not to mention it’ll be a giant pain in the ass.”

“A giant profitable pain,” Stemp corrected with a quirk of his mouth.

“Yeah...” Another sigh slipped out. “But so what? I can’t look forward to using the extra money for exotic vacations, because the Department won’t let me out of their sight for that long. I don’t like designer clothes and I don’t need any fancy expensive shit. I don’t have kids to inherit it. What good is money when I have to keep working until I get killed in action or get too old for active service and end up locked in the secured facility until I die?”

Stemp’s frown deepened. “You wouldn’t be locked in the secured facility. You would live and work there, but you would be free to leave whenever you wanted.”

“Under escort,” I pointed out. “And only when an escort with a top-level security clearance was available. And we’re always understaffed. That’s not ‘free to leave’, that’s ‘waiting for a day pass from life imprisonment’.” He began to speak but I overrode him. “And anyway, the secured facility is in Calgary. Do you know how many years I dreamed of leaving Calgary and living out here in the country? Do you know how hard I worked for that dream? The secured facility doesn’t have a garage where I can work on my cars, or a garden where I can grow flowers and veggies, or fresh air or open fields...” My throat

tightened. I scowled at Stemp and held my voice under control. “The secured facility is not an option.”

“I am very sorry to hear that.”

He did sound sorry. For all the damn good it did.

I shrugged. “I’ll let you know as soon as I make a final decision on the lawsuit. Was that all you wanted?”

His dispassionate business face returned. “One more thing.”

God, how many ‘one more things’ could there be?

“Meet Agent Holt at the Calgary Airport tomorrow at zero-four-twenty for a flight departing at zero-six-twenty, arriving in Kansas City at twelve-forty local time. Holt will escort you to the United States Disciplinary Barracks...”

Pure terror blotted out the rest of his words.

My voice came out in a squeaky tremolo. “Y- You’re sending me to *Leavenworth?*”

\* End of excerpt \*

\* \* \*

To find purchasing information for *Spy In The Sky*, please visit  
[www.dianehenders.com/books](http://www.dianehenders.com/books)

Thanks for reading! I hope you'll come by and visit me at  
[www.dianehenders.com](http://www.dianehenders.com). I write something new there every  
couple of weeks, and I love chatting with visitors.

Or visit my Facebook page at  
[www.facebook.com/authordianehenders](http://www.facebook.com/authordianehenders) to keep up with all the  
latest news. Looking forward to seeing you!