

# **Spy Now, Pay Later**

Book 8 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

Choking on frantic sobs, I yanked the lever of the last remaining fire extinguisher. Only a few droplets dribbled out, sizzling uselessly in the flames that ravaged Kane's motionless body.

It was too late. He was already dead.

I had killed him...

*"John!"* I bolted up in bed, my scream ripping the dark silence.

Panting, I wrapped my arms around myself. "Oh, Jesus. God..." I sucked in a shuddering breath and drew my knees up to rest my sweaty forehead on them. "Shit, stop it! He's fine, I'm fine, everything's okay, nothing bad is happening..."

Another deep breath. "Okay. It's okay..."

I flopped back on the pillow, pawing my tangled hair away from my face with a shaking hand.

"Okay. Breathe."

I stopped babbling to follow my own advice. Eyes closed. Belly breaths. Nice and slow. In, two... three... four. Out, two... three... four. Ocean waves rolling in...

At last my heart consented to resume a more-or-less normal rhythm, and the end of my exhalation turned into a groan when I opened my eyes to the glowing numbers of my bedside clock.

Six A.M. Just over an hour since I'd last woken screaming.

"Fine," I croaked. "Screw this. I'm done." I hauled myself out of bed, hissing quiet but sincere obscenities when the two-day-old bruises on my knee and elbow reminded me of their presence.

I was tottering toward the bathroom when the ring of the phone slammed adrenaline into my veins. I spun, tripped over sleep-clumsy feet, and sprawled across the bed to snatch up the receiver.

"Ow! Shit! What?" My raw-throated rasp drew an instant of silence at the other end of the line.

"Is this Aydan Kelly?"

"Yes! Who-"

"Surveillance cameras just picked up Paul Hibbert heading for your front door. Looks like he's carrying a bouquet of flowers."

"*Shit!*" I dropped the phone and snatched my gun from under the pillow before lurching to my feet to grab for the jeans and sweatshirt I always kept beside my bed.

"What the hell does that asshole want?" I demanded in the direction of the receiver as I jerked the clothes on.

The faint crackle of the analyst's response was drowned out by the sound of my doorbell, and I yanked the spare blanket off my bed and threw it around myself. Hurrying for the door, I draped a fold of blanket over my gun hand.

The doorbell rang again, and I hesitated. What the hell was Hibbert up to? I couldn't imagine him bringing me anything but poison ivy in an exploding vase, unless I had somehow misinterpreted 'I'll get you, bitch'.

Maybe he'd meant to say 'I'll get you *flowers*, bitch'. I snickered despite my pounding heart.

Loud knocking made me twitch my gun into ready position.

“Flowers from Mr. Parr!” Another barrage of knocks rattled my door. “Open up, bitch! I know you’re in there!”

Yep, Mr. Sweetness-And-Light as usual. But he wasn’t kicking the door in. So far, so good.

“Fuck off!” I yelled.

“Open the fucking door! Parr will chew my ass off if I don’t deliver these flowers right into your hands!”

“Stick them up your ass! He can enjoy them while he’s chewing!”

The door shivered under what sounded like a vigorous kick. “Open the fucking door or I’ll dent every square inch of it!”

Well, wasn’t that interesting? He was threatening my door, but not me. Parr must have thrown some serious fear into him.

A series of loud thuds convinced me to make a decision, pronto.

“All right, I’m coming! Take a pill already!” I tucked my blanket-wrapped gun close to my body and unlocked the door left-handed, stepping back rapidly. He probably wouldn’t attack me, but...

The door swung open and Hibbert shoved a magnificent bouquet in my direction. “Here. Choke on them.”

He let go of the flowers so fast I had to make a two-handed grab to save them. Fortunately he was already wheeling to stalk away, so he couldn’t have heard the muffled clunk of my blanket-wrapped gun against the heavy vase.

Christ, that vase looked like crystal. What the hell...?

I swung the door almost shut against the frigid air and watched through the crack while Hibbert stomped down my lane into the darkness, his shoulders hunched around his ears. A few minutes later the slam of a car door shattered the country silence like a gunshot and headlights blazed to life on the opposite side of my gate. I closed the door on the angry revving of his engine as his taillights receded down the snowy road.

Shivering, I propped the vase awkwardly in the crook of my elbow while I re-locked my door, then trailed over to place the ostentatious bouquet on my kitchen table and extract the card from its blown-glass holder.

The creamy envelope was lined with rich metallic foil, and the heavy matte paper of the card would have screamed 'big money' if it hadn't been far too well-bred to communicate in anything but a discreet murmur:

*'Dear Arlene – I hope you are recovering. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything. Sincerely, Nick Parr'*

Shit, Parr had written it personally. I had thought he was in Vegas or Ibiza or Monte Carlo, but maybe he had come back to do damage control...

I sank into a chair and drew my icy bare feet up under me, my tired mind groaning into reluctant action. Why would Parr send me flowers at six o'clock on Christmas morning? And why the *hell* would he send them with Hibbert when he knew about our mutual loathing?

The flowers and note supported Parr's carefully-cultivated façade as the respectable and philanthropic CEO of Fuzzy Bunny's international toy empire, so that made sense. Just a good PR gesture, buttering up a distraught passenger after a fire on their corporate jet. But he wouldn't send flowers at an ungodly hour on a holiday. That had to be Hibbert's little gesture of goodwill.

So maybe Parr was testing Hibbert's loyalty by assigning him a demeaning delivery-boy errand. And since Hibbert had to know that crossing Parr was a good way to end up dead, waking me with insults at six A.M. would be his passive-aggressive way to goad me without too much risk to himself.

Dangerous game. But no more dangerous than the one I was playing. If Parr found out I wasn't really Arlene Widdenback the cheesy porn star and fraud artist, I'd end up unpleasantly dead, too...

I shook off that thought with a shudder and rose to stumble back to the bedroom. The phone still lay on my bed, and I hurried over to pick it up.

"Hi, are you still there?" I asked.

"Of course." The surveillance analyst sounded peeved. "Is everything secure there?"

Poor bastard. He must be low man on the totem pole if he had drawn surveillance duty on Christmas morning.

"Fine. Thanks for being there."

"You're welcome." He sounded slightly mollified, and I hung up and hauled myself to the bathroom.

The mirror reflected a baggy-eyed hag who looked closer to sixty-seven than my actual forty-seven, and I sighed and dragged a brush through my tangled hair before throwing my shoulders back, sucking in my gut, and pasting on a fake smile.

Better. Now I only looked ten years older than my real age.

My reflection twisted its face into a rude grimace, and I retreated to the heavenly embrace of a hot shower.

Forehead pressed against the cool tile, eyes squeezed shut while the steaming water cascaded down my back, I summoned the previous evening's happy memories, hoping to calm the weak trembling of too much adrenaline and not enough sleep.

Just relax. Think good thoughts...

...Spider's and Linda's faces glowing with happiness, their eyes sparkling as brightly as the brand-new diamond on her finger. The sound of Christmas carols and the lively chatter of their family and friends.

Eggnog blessing my tongue with its creamy caress. Jack and Germain stealing a kiss under the mistletoe, her golden curls gleaming like angel wings against his black hair. And Kane, tall and strong and miraculously *alive*, his smile and murmured ‘Merry Christmas’ still warming my heart...

I let out a long breath, the knots slowly easing from my shoulders. “Merry Christmas, John,” I whispered. “I hope you’re having a better Christmas than this.”

A smile eased my lips. I knew he would. He was headed for Calgary this morning for some precious family time with his dad and Arnie.

When I emerged from the shower at last, I was alert enough to consider the flowers with renewed suspicion. Even after a reprimand from Parr, I wouldn’t put it past Hibbert to sabotage the bouquet. Hell, I’d be shocked if he *hadn’t* sabotaged the bouquet. And pissed on my doorstep, to boot.

I considered calling the surveillance analyst and asking about the state of my doorstep, but I decided I didn’t really want to know. Instead, I threw on some clothes and took out my bug detector, feeling slightly foolish at my own paranoia.

My heart clutched when the indicator light blinked red.

Long intervals between flashes. The listening device was in my house, but probably not in this room.

I had just cleared the house last night.

So that’s what the flowers were for. Parr had bugged the bouquet. Or Hibbert had.

As I moved toward the kitchen, the cadence of the flashes accelerated. Heart pattering, I halted in the hallway to think.

What if there was a surveillance camera in the bouquet, too? My cover would be completely blown if I walked around the corner with classified technology in my hand.

A sudden thought made my mouth go dry. God, had I kept my gun concealed the whole time I was in the kitchen?

I must have. I had still been wearing the blanket when I'd gone back to the bedroom to pick up the phone...

I tucked the bug detector into the pocket of my jeans with an unsteady hand and drew a deep breath before strolling into the kitchen.

My face felt frozen in an 'I'm-on-camera' stare, and I tried to relax it with a fake yawn as I approached the table. I coaxed my stiff lips into a smile and murmured, "Let's see, where should I put you beauties?" as I picked up the vase, turning it in my hands as if admiring it.

Sure enough, the gilt sticker on the bottom of the vase looked too thick. But not thick enough to hide a camera, and anyway, Fuzzy Bunny probably didn't have a burning desire for a close-up of my tabletop.

Just a bug, then.

Unless there was a camera hidden in the flowers...

"Maybe I should trim your stems," I added for the benefit of my audience, and proceeded to dismantle the entire arrangement, diligently trimming stems and scrutinizing every bloom, leaf, and stalk.

When I finished reassembling the bouquet, it was a sad caricature of the once-beautiful arrangement, but I was certain it didn't contain a camera. I sent a mental apology to the high-priced floral designer who would undoubtedly blanch at my desecration, and replaced the vase in the middle of the table. Then I threw on my jacket and boots and hurried out to my heated garage.

A check of my bug detector revealed a reassuring green light, and I extracted a secured phone from my car's glove compartment and pressed the speed dial button.

The phone rang and rang, and I braced myself for Dermott's wrath. At last, the connection clicked open.

“What?” he snarled.

“It’s Kelly,” I said crisply. “Parr just sent Hibbert over with a bugged flower arrangement for me.”

“At six o’fucking-clock on Christmas fucking morning?” Dermott sounded like he’d been gargling battery acid and wouldn’t hesitate to spit some my way, so I refrained from pointing out that it was actually almost six-thirty.

“Just sharing the joy,” I said instead. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing. Or disinformation; whichever you want. We can discuss it in the briefing with Stemp. Merry fucking Christmas.” The line went dead in my ear, and I sighed and retraced my steps to the house.

Only two more days of Dermott’s crankiness. I couldn’t believe I was actually looking forward to having Charles Stemp back in his rightful position as director. Stemp might be a ruthless bastard, but at least he was instantly alert at any hour of the day or night, and his customary emotionless façade precluded any displays of temper.

Inside, I shed my jacket and boots and shivered over to ransack the cupboards. A bowl of cereal soothed my growling stomach, but the early-morning blackness outside the windows encroached like a malevolent presence.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, and crept to the bedroom to burrow back into bed. I was floating on the hazy edge of slumber when the phone jolted me awake again, and I stared in disbelief at the clock.

Seven-thirty.

“Jesus, *seriously?*” I fumbled the receiver to my ear, clamping my eyes shut. “Hello?”

“Hi, Aydan, it’s Germain. I hope I’m not calling too early...” He trailed off uncomfortably.

I prodded my Little Miss Sunshine persona into reluctant wakefulness. “Hi, Carl! No, it’s fine, I’ve been up since six. Merry Christmas!”

“Oh, good.” Relief warmed his voice. “Merry Christmas to you, too. I knew you were a morning person and I was afraid I’d miss you if I waited any longer. I really hate to ask you this, but I was wondering if I could borrow your truck today. My car won’t start, and I have to be in Calgary by eleven. I called Kane hoping to catch a ride, but he’s already halfway there.”

I ground the heel of my hand into my forehead. “Well, normally I’d say sure, but when I was on my way home last week the steering started pulling. If it’s a ball joint or tie rod end, it’s not safe to drive. I was going to get it up on the hoist and look at it, but I haven’t had time yet.”

“It’s all right, I’ll risk it. I have to be there.” His uncharacteristic intensity made my eyes pop open.

“I’ll come and give you a boost. Maybe that’ll do it. ”

“No, I already got the hotel manager to boost it. It didn’t help. The starter’s probably gone.”

I squeezed my eyes shut again, thinking out loud. “Shit. If it’s your starter it’ll take days before the garage can get a new one in. Don’t worry, I’ll come and get you and drive you down-”

“No, that’s too much trouble,” he protested. “I’ll take my chances with the truck. I hate to bother you at all, but...” I sensed his embarrassed shrug at the other end of the line.

“Carl, you saved me from a fiery plane crash less than forty-eight hours ago. This is the least I can do, and it’s no trouble at all. I was going down to meet friends for brunch anyway, so I’ll just go a little earlier and drop you wherever you need to go. Then you can rent a car while you’re there.”

“Oh.” His breath of relief floated over the line. “Thank you. That would be great.”

“Okay, good. I’ll be waiting in front of the hotel by...” I did a rapid mental calculation. “...eight-thirty.”

“Thanks!”

We said our goodbyes and I hung up slowly. Germain was the most laid-back agent I knew. Dodging bullets or landing a burning 737, his easy calm never faltered.

So what could possibly make him sound this anxious?

## CHAPTER 2

I dragged my complaining self out of bed for the second time to dress and sleepwalk to the kitchen. When another phone call interrupted my tea and toast, I glared at the clock and mumbled a peanut-butter-muffled epithet.

Gulping my mouthful, I eyed the unfamiliar number on the call display and let it go to voice mail. A few moments later, a crisp voice emanated from the answering machine. "Hello, Ms. Widdenback, this is Earl Anderson. I'm the investigator from the Transportation Safety Board--"

Shit, did these guys normally work every day of the year, or was he on Fuzzy Bunny's payroll? Either way, with an active bug in the room, I couldn't ignore the call.

I snatched up the receiver. "H'lo?" I cleared a patch of peanut butter from the roof of my mouth and tried again. "Hi, sorry, this is Arlene. You caught me in the middle of breakfast."

"Hello, Ms. Widdenback, I was hoping you'd have time to clarify a few points in the report you provided at the hospital yesterday. I'm sorry to bother you so early on Christmas morning, but you said you were a morning person..."

Damn, I had to stop telling people that.

"No, it's fine, I was up..." My mouth kept talking while I mentally reviewed the cover story Kane and I had agreed on. "...I have to leave in ten minutes, but if I can answer a few quick questions, I'll be happy to."

That was pure bullshit. I wasn't happy about it at all. But he didn't need to know that, and neither did Fuzzy Bunny.

"Oh, good, I won't take too much of your time. Would you please walk me through what happened again?"

"I... can't really remember it very well," I prevaricated. "It was such a... I was in shock, you know?"

"Perfectly understandable. Just do your best." He sounded patient and reassuring, and I wondered how many times he'd had to coax reports out of terrified people.

Uncomfortably aware of the invisible audience behind the bug, I swallowed. "Okay... Um... I was just sitting there reading-"

"I'm sorry, sitting where?" he interrupted.

"Oh. In the sitting room. The second cabin from the front. I smelled smoke, and when I looked up, Thomas..." My voice wavered and I stopped to steady it before continuing. "...the cabin steward... was doing something at the counter. I couldn't really see, but something must have been hot because the next thing I knew a bottle fell over and then there was fire everywhere..."

I squeezed my eyes shut, reliving the moment when my plan had gone so horribly wrong.

"What bottle? Where was the bottle that fell over?" He still sounded patient, but there was a keen note in his voice that hadn't been there before. Damn, maybe I hadn't mentioned the bottle earlier.

I pulled myself back from the memory and dropped into a chair, clutching the phone like an anchor. "It was a bottle of brandy. Sitting on the counter. There was a lot of turbulence. It must have fallen over..."

Dammit, if Thomas had still been alive, he never would have let that happen. He had been so smart and professional. My throat tightened at

the memory of his handsome young face and sparkling smile slackening into death.

"...I think one of the passengers put it on the counter. There was a problem with the guy in the back." My voice came out husky, and I cleared my throat.

That part was true. The next part, not so much...

"The guy was drunk," I went on. "He'd been drinking brandy, and Thomas was cooking something for him just to keep him happy while we landed. Thomas tried to get him to go back to his seat, but he argued and then he shoved Thomas..."

"Do you know the man's name? Can you describe him?"

"Um... he was sitting in the rear cabin so I didn't pay much attention to him." At least not until his hands went for my throat. "Maybe, um, five-foot-ten, kind of heavysset? Brown hair..." I trailed off.

"So there was a physical altercation and the bottle fell over. Then what happened?" The investigator sounded as though he had all day.

I shot an anxious glance at my watch. If I didn't leave in few minutes, I'd be late. Then Germain would be late for whatever critical thing had him so edgy. Dammit.

"It broke." I squeezed my eyes shut and reeled off my lies and half-truths. "The brandy caught fire and went everywhere. Thomas used a fire extinguisher on it and the fire was almost out, but the other guy was yelling and freaking out and the drink cart fell over and broke a bunch more bottles and then the alcohol from it caught fire and then the wood panelling caught fire. Thomas pushed me to the back and put the breathing mask on me and told me to stay in the bedroom and keep the door shut. He was grabbing more fire extinguishers when I closed the door."

"And what about the other passengers?"

Shit, I was pretty sure he hadn't asked me that before.

"Um... I don't know. I didn't really notice, with that big hood on my head and Thomas yelling and pushing me into the bedroom. I was so scared..."

The story about Thomas was a bald-faced lie, but I didn't have to fake the tremor in my voice. 'Scared' didn't even come close to the terror I'd felt. Was still feeling. I swallowed hard and eased my sweaty grip on the phone.

"Just take a moment if you need to," Anderson said gently.

I drew a deep breath. "Thanks. I'm sorry, but I have to go very soon. Was there anything else?"

"Did you see another female passenger?"

Yana Orlov, the bitch. May she roast in hell for killing Thomas.

I kept my tone grave and concerned. "Yes, I think she was in the front cabin. But I didn't see her after the fire started."

"And how did you come to be holding the cabin steward's shoe?"

Shit! I had forgotten about that, and Kane and I hadn't discussed it when we were coordinating our cover stories at yesterday's debriefing.

"Um... I just..." My brain hurled out the most plausible reason I could manufacture on short notice. "I was so scared. In the bedroom by myself. I opened the door hoping they'd gotten the fire out, and he was... he was... lying there..."

The nightmare struck again full force. The hungry jaws of the fire, the horrible constriction of the breathing mask's seal around my throat...

"I... I grabbed his legs and tried to pull him..."

I wrapped my free arm around my shaking body. Thomas had been long dead by then. He hadn't suffered, hadn't felt the hungry flames consuming his flesh...

“Just breathe for a minute. Nice and slow.” Anderson’s voice pulled me back to the warm safety of my kitchen.

I drew a shuddering breath. “His shoe came off in my hands. He was... his upper body was on fire. I tried to put it out, but... I couldn’t... I guess I just hung onto the shoe...” My voice cracked and I gulped, fighting the memory, smelling the smoke...

...Clinging to the shoe thinking it was Kane’s. Believing I had killed him with a fire I’d started through my own stupidity...

“I really have to go,” I croaked.

“Of course. Thank you for your help, and I’m sorry to make you relive this again.”

When he hung up, I threw my cold toast in the garbage and yanked on my boots and jacket, thankful I’d have Germain’s company for the drive. I really didn’t need another two hours inside my own head.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I apologized as Germain slid into the passenger seat. “The crash investigator phoned and I couldn’t get rid of him.”

“It’s okay, if I’m a few minutes late it won’t matter.”

I put the car in gear and shot him a worried glance, but he sounded sincere and I couldn’t detect any strain in his posture. Still, there was that tiny edge of tension in his voice.

“It sounds important, though,” I prodded cautiously.

He smiled, the attractive laugh lines crinkling around his brown eyes. “It is to me. This is one of the three times a year I get to see my kids.”

“Your k...?” I gaped at him for a second before directing my attention back to the road. “I, um, I didn’t know you were a dad.”

“I’m not a dad,” he replied quietly. “I’m a biological father. I only see Ryan and Tanya on Christmas and birthdays. They call me Uncle Carl.”

“*Why?*” I blurted. “That’s...” I managed to contain myself. “Sorry. None of my business.”

He blew out a long breath. “It’s okay. I know it’s a little weird. But that’s what the judge ruled.”

“He said you couldn’t tell your kids you were their dad?”

“She.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “No, she didn’t say that. She just assigned the visiting rights. But this is best for Ryan and Tanya. They weren’t old enough to remember me when Melanie and I split up, and we agreed it was better if I didn’t confuse them by claiming to be their dad when I only saw them three times a year.”

“I don’t care if it’s only three times a year. Kids need to know they have a dad!”

“They do have a dad. Melanie remarried right away.” He hesitated. “I guess they were probably seeing each other before we divorced. I was away a lot.” He scrubbed a hand through his short black curls, not looking at me. “Anyway. Derek’s an accountant. Nice guy. And Ryan and Tanya have a dad who comes home every night.”

“But...” I knew I should drop it, but I just couldn’t. “They need to know. It’s not fair to them or to you.”

“Melanie will tell them when they’re a little older. They’re only five and three. Right now, they have a stable family life and they love their dad. That’s the best thing I can do for them.”

I clamped my teeth on my tongue and shut the hell up.

After a moment, Germain went on as if to himself. “I should’ve listened to Kane. He told me I should get a desk job when Ryan was born. But no, I had to go and be a big hero for my country.”

The bitterness in his voice made my heart twist for him. "I'm sorry," I murmured.

Germain shrugged. "My fault. I should have been there for my family. I was undercover when Melanie filed for divorce and I didn't even get the papers until weeks later. Then when the custody hearings came up, I was undercover again and couldn't attend. The judge decided I was a schmuck, and it was all over."

He stared through the windshield. "She was right. I was a dumb schmuck."

"Carl, that's not true. You're doing a tough, dangerous job and you've sacrificed so much. You *are* a hero."

"Yeah, that keeps me warm at night." He shook himself and turned to me, his usual smile restored. "Sorry, I didn't mean to dump on you. And I really appreciate the ride. I can hardly wait. Melanie says the kids have been going absolutely crazy about Santa Claus. It's going to be a great visit."

"Merry fucking Christmas," I muttered to the steering wheel.

"Sorry, what was that?"

I shoved a smile onto my face and spoke a little louder. "I said it'll be a very fun Christmas."

Driving away from the sprawling house in its upscale Calgary neighbourhood, I scowled at the sparse traffic. A lump had risen in my throat while I watched the little black-haired, brown-eyed boy in Batman jammies and the tiny girl in a pink spangled dress race out to dance around Germain, tugging him toward the house amid jubilant cries of 'Uncle Carl, Uncle Carl!'

His ex-wife and her husband smiled from the doorway, arms around each other, and as much as I wanted to hate his ex I couldn't find any villains in the scene. They were all trying to do what was best for the kids.

Dammit, that just sucked.

The gloomy sky mirrored my mood and I pulled into the nearest park, hoping a bit of fresh air and exercise would cheer me up. When I stepped out of the car, a raw breeze cut through my parka directly to my bones. I blew out an irritable breath and frowned at my watch.

Still an hour to kill before I was due at Nichele's place.

I squared my shoulders and started walking.

Tapping on the door of the posh downtown condo an hour later, I braced myself for Nichele's usual squeal and bear hug. Instead, my jaw dropped when the door swung open to reveal a distinguished-looking man in a suit and tie, his thick grizzled hair cropped close in a precise cut that flattered its waves.

His faded blue eyes crinkled with his mischievous smile. "Hi, Aydan."

"Wha...?" I gaped at him, my mouth stretching into a widening grin. "Who the hell are you and what did you do with Dave?"

He laughed, and I stepped forward to hug him. "Jeez, Dave, you look fantastic! You've lost a ton of weight! And are you the chairman of the board these days?"

He returned the hug and patted me on the back before drawing me into the apartment. "Hel... heck, no, still the same old dumb trucker." He waved a hand at his sartorial splendour. "This's for Nichele. Part of her Christmas present."

“Aydan!”

There was the squeal I’d been expecting.

Nichele rocketed down the hall to throw her arms around me. “Girl, how the hell are you? It’s so great to see you!”

“It’s great to see you, too!” I extricated myself from her embrace to examine the elegant gown that flattered her curvy figure. “Shit, you guys didn’t tell me this was a black-tie brunch!”

Nichele giggled. “Like you would’ve dressed up. Not. But I didn’t know.” She gave Dave an adoring glance. “This is totally a surprise. And he still won’t tell me where we’re going, he just said to wear my best dress. And look at him!” She stepped over to cuddle up to Dave, stroking his lapels. “Armani. Mmmmm. There’s nothing sexier than a man in Armani.”

Dave’s ears turned crimson but he grinned, sliding his arms around her. “You’re always going on about it, so I figured I better get some.”

I laughed. “Hey, while you two are getting some, I’ll just go grab lunch somewhere else.”

“Smartass!” Nichele released Dave and grinned at me. “Come on, I’ll get you a beer.”

“Just one.” I followed her into the kitchen and accepted the icy bottle. “I have to drive in a couple of hours.”

“No, you can stay as long as you...” Nichele broke off, eyeing us suspiciously. “Wait, did you cook this up with Dave?”

“Nope, I’m as much in the dark as you,” I assured her. “All I know is Dave called me last week to let me know you guys have to leave at three-thirty.”

“But...” Her smile faded. “You’re not coming with us? But this is our Christmas *thing*. You and me, hanging out on Christmas Day. It’s a *tradition*.”

I shot a glance at Dave's worried face.

"And here we are, hanging out on Christmas Day." I toasted her with the beer bottle. "But I'm bagged and I want to get back to Silverside tonight, so I was planning to leave while there was still a bit of daylight."

"Oh. Okay..." Nichele's smile came back and she gave me a quick squeeze. "You do look tired. In fact, you look like hell, girl. For God's sake get some sleep when you get home. You always work too hard."

"I look like hell because I'm starving. When do we eat?"

She laughed, and the conversation turned to our usual banter.

"Ah, that was great!" I eased back in the chair and massaged my belly. "But I can't believe the two of you sat here all dolled up eating scrambled eggs and bacon and hash-brown casserole."

Nichele grinned. "You know that's all I can cook. And Dave can barely boil water."

Dave shrugged. "Never needed to do anything else." He winked at Nichele. "Know the best fast-food joints all through Canada and the States though."

She shook a reproving finger at him before shooting me a conspiratorial grin. "But he eats healthy when he's on the road now. He's a changed man."

"Right," Dave agreed, deadpan.

"And speaking of men..." Nichele turned an avid gaze on me. "Please tell me you've been getting busy with Hot John."

"Um." I tried to will the heat away from my cheeks.

"Gotta go." Dave scrambled to his feet, his ears aflame. "Gotta check on... uh... something..." He backed away.

“Wait, Dave, don’t go,” I implored. “We’re not having this conversation.”

“Oh, yes, we are, girl,” Nichele assured me with a leer. “I know what that blush means! You did do him, didn’t you?”

“Dave!” I begged, but he had already fled.

### CHAPTER 3

I turned my best poker face toward Nichele and lied my ass off. “Of course I’m not sleeping with John. We’re co-workers. Strictly professional.”

She eyed me quizzically. “So you’re still booty-calling Mister Ugly?”

“Don’t call him that! It’s not his fault his waste-of-skin father broke half the bones in his face when he was five.”

“Kidding.” She patted my hand, looking contrite. “He’s a nice guy. It’s just that he’s so u...” She broke off and tried again. “Does he prefer to be called Arnie or Hellhound?”

“I don’t think he cares. His army buddies call him Hellhound. I usually call him Arnie.” My words came out sounding stiffer than I’d intended.

Nichele’s eyes widened. “Oh-em-gee, Aydan, you actually love him!”

“Yes.” I raised my chin.

She blinked and stared, and I had to swallow my amusement at her discomfiture. Her mouth opened and closed a couple of times before she stammered, “Are, you, um... are you guys, um... going to...?”

I relented and let my smile escape. “No. We’re really good friends and we sleep together sometimes. That’s all either of us wants.”

“Oh, thank God!” She flushed. “I mean... sorry. Um...”

“Forget it, you goof.” I reached over to hug her. “If you actually pretended you liked him, I’d figure the real Nichele had been abducted by aliens or something.”

She blew out a sigh, relaxing into a relieved smile. “Girl, don’t scare me like that! Anyway, I do like him, I just don’t want to think about waking up next to him.” She shuddered. “Eeuw. Now, tell me how good Hot John was!”

“Amaz-” I bit off the word.

Her eyes widened.

Shit. Busted.

“Oooh, Aydan, *seriously?* You’re doing both of them? Oh-em-gee, you bootylicious babe! Tell me, tell me!” Her jaw dropped. “Wait, they’re best friends. Are you doing them at the same time? *Ménage à trois?*”

My vision unfocused for an instant before I recovered from the mental image. “Not at the same time! Jeez, Nichele!”

“You thought about it!” She poked a finger into my ribs, chortling. “You did, you thought about it! Ha-ha! The strait-laced bookkeeper has a secret wild side!”

“I’m not strait-laced!”

She leaned over to pluck contemptuously at my baggy sweatshirt. “Girl, I know nuns who show more skin than you do.”

“Yeah, so?” I tweaked the sweatshirt back into place, secretly giving thanks I’d worn my ankle holster instead of my waist holster.

“So; strait-laced!”

“Strait-laced is an attitude, not a fashion statement,” I said primly.

“Yeah, girl, you just keep telling yourself that,” Nichele teased. “Now, dish!”

“There’s nothing to dish. It never would have happened unless-”

Shit. I couldn't say 'unless we were about to die in a fiery plane crash'.

"Um... it was a one-time thing," I lied. "Anyway, we talked it over afterward and it won't happen again," I added, and seized the offensive. "What about you and Dave?"

"You *talked*? Girl, are you nuts? That man's hot enough to melt panties from across the room!" Nichele squinted at me suspiciously. "What aren't you telling me?"

I brazened it out. "I'm not telling you anything about my sex life, that's for sure. But it looks like you and Dave are getting along pretty well."

She smiled, roses blooming in her cheeks. "Yeah." She dropped her gaze, watching with apparent fascination while her perfectly manicured fingertip traced hearts on the shiny glass tabletop.

My heart warmed at the glow in her smile, and I glanced down the hall to make sure Dave was still out of earshot. "So how's it going with... well, you know, living together? What has it been, two months? You've never lasted this long, even with... um, what's-his-name..." The name eluded me. "Whatever. The love of your life that you kicked out after seventeen days."

Nichele waved a dismissing hand. "He was boring."

"After seventeen days?" She shrugged, and I left the topic for dead. "So... you and Dave...?"

"Oh, we're completely incompatible. He likes country music, for God's sake." She gave a theatrical shudder before continuing, "I'm a stockbroker. He's a long-haul trucker. We have absolutely nothing in common." Her lips curved into a smug smile.

"And..." I prompted, grinning.

She gave a happy little bounce in her chair. “And it’s perfect! When he’s on the road I go clubbing with my friends. By the time he gets home, I’m ready for some cocooning time. We like all the same food and he’s happy if I tell him what to wear, and he’s finally gotten over being weirded out because I make more money than he does-”

“Hey, um...” Dave’s voice drifted from the hallway. “You done your girl-talk?”

I turned to beckon him in. “It’s okay, Dave, it’s safe. Come on back.”

He shot me a relieved grin before turning to Nichele. “You better get ready, honey. We leave in half an hour.”

She bounced up and kissed him thoroughly before vanishing down the hall, leaving him smiling as though somebody had just handed him the moon and stars.

As the bedroom door closed behind her, he turned to me, sobering. “Gotta ask you something.”

His seriousness sent a quiver of trepidation to my stomach. I kept my tone casual. “What’s up?”

Dave shot a cautious glance down the hall before speaking quietly. “That you in the plane fire a couple days ago?”

I froze.

He raised a calming hand and spoke before I could decide whether to lie. “It’s okay, you don’t need to tell me. Was watching the news and saw long red hair when they wheeled the stretcher into the ambulance. Thought it looked like you, but I didn’t say anything to Nichele. Been worried sick.”

“I’m sorry, Dave, you should have texted me or something.”

He shrugged and grimaced. “Didn’t dare. What if Nichele caught me? She doesn’t know about your spy stuff, does she?”

“No.” I struggled with the knowledge that I should deny the whole thing, but this was Dave. I owed him my life.

I sighed. “And I’d like to keep it that way.”

He nodded. “I figured.” Anxiety creased his forehead. “They said five dead; crew and two passengers. Good guys or bad guys?”

My hands clenched into involuntary fists and I swallowed hard. “Two bad, a woman and a guy. The flight crew was innocent as far as I know.”

“Shi... crap.” He pulled me into a quick hug and patted my back before pulling away to frown earnestly. “Listen, Aydan... If you ever need help, you know you can call me, right? Any time. No matter what.”

I swallowed the tightness in my throat. “Thanks, Dave, but you’ve already gone above and beyond. Now you need to settle down and enjoy life. You’ve got more to lose now.”

He glanced down the hall, his face softening. “Yeah.” He returned his gaze to me. “But you’re the one that gave it to me. Any time, Aydan. Remember that.”

I squeezed his hand. “Thanks, Dave. I will.”

We smiled at each other, and before the short silence could get awkward I let go of his hand under the pretext of gesturing at the window. “Wow, look at that snow.”

Dave shot an assessing look at the flakes whipping by outside the glass and his brow furrowed. “Yeah. They didn’t forecast that, but it sure blew up fast. It’ll be bad on the highway. You should stay with us tonight.”

“Hardly.” I gestured at his suit. “Wearing Armani in front of Nichele is like waving fresh meat in front of a tiger. You won’t want any listening ears when she gets you home tonight.”

He flushed and a grin tugged the corners of his mouth, but he persisted. “Don’t want you out on the highway by yourself.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got winter tires, and I have my survival kit and winter gear and sleeping bag in case I get stopped.”

“Yeah, but the ground drift’ll be bad. Can’t get above it in that little car.”

I shook my head at him and headed for the door. “It’s a full-size sedan, and it’s all-wheel drive. It just seems small to you because you’re so used to your highway tractor.” I paused, frowning. “Um, Dave, you know Nichele can’t climb up into the cab wearing that tight dress and high heels...”

He laughed. “Nope, I know. Hired a limo. Gonna let somebody else do the driving so I can have a few drinks.”

“You’re a professional driver and you actually trust somebody else to drive you around?”

Dave winked. “Hel... heck, I was in your back seat while you drag-raced a train. Nothing scares me anymore.”

We were grinning at each other when Nichele emerged from the hallway. She shot us a suspicious glance. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing.” I stooped to lace up my boots. “I was just leaving.”

“Stay here.” Dave’s smile was gone, his bushy brows drawing together. “Believe me, it’s gonna be bad out there.”

“Dave, you drive in weather like this all the time.” I pulled on my parka.

His scowl deepened. “Not the point. You’re not me.”

I leaned over to give him a quick hug. “And I’m sure Nichele is profoundly grateful for that. Thanks, Dave, but I’ll be fine. You guys have fun tonight.”

“Be careful.” Nichele pulled me into a bear hug. “Call me as soon as you get home.”

“I will. Talk to you later.” I made my escape, avoiding Dave’s troubled gaze.

I was second-guessing my decision before I even finished cleaning off my car. Wind-driven snow stung my face while I wielded the brush, and a layer of white had already accumulated on the windshield when I slid behind the wheel only a few minutes later.

I turned on the wipers and stared out at the whirling flakes. A gust of wind shook the car.

Shit, Dave was right. The highway would be bad and getting worse. And I only had an hour of daylight left, just enough to put me in the most desolate part of the trip by dark.

I clenched my teeth and plugged my phone into the hands-free outlet. I wouldn’t spoil Dave and Nichele’s special evening. If the roads were really that bad, I’d go to a hotel instead of driving beyond the populated areas. And anyway, I had my survival gear if I got stopped.

Muttering reassurances to myself, I started driving.

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