

Spy, Spy Away

Book 7 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

“Well, well. If it isn’t Ms. Aydan Kelly. I see your little fraud game is still going nicely.” The middle-aged man gave me a smug smile as he slid uninvited into the chair across from me.

My stomach contracted around queasy fear.

“Hibbert.” I held my voice level. “If that is actually your real name.”

He frowned, projecting righteous affront. “Of course it is.” He drew a gold case from his breast pocket and extended one of his cards with a flourish. “And please, do call me Paul. I was hoping you hadn’t forgotten me.”

Didn’t I wish. I’d glimpsed him several times in the past two months, always giving me that sardonic little nod with a smile that just begged to be punched off his face.

I ignored the card and gave him a flat stare. “What do you want?”

The waitress slid a basket of hot chicken wings onto the table in front of me. “Here you go, Aydan. Do you want some more of that hard drink you keep chugging back?”

I forced my stiff lips into a smile and saluted her with my half-empty water glass. “Thanks. Yes, please.”

As she hurried away, I turned back to Hibbert. “You’re spoiling my lunch. Get lost.”

“Miss Widdenback.” He pulled a hurt face. “Or do you prefer Miss Cherry? Is that any way to talk to one of your loyal fans? Maybe I just want to compliment you on your latest video. That footage with the Chippendales dancer was amazing. You’re very flexible for a woman nearing fifty.” He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a purr. “And you used your lovely long hair so... creatively. I’ve always had a thing for redheads.”

I used every ounce of control to prevent myself from recoiling. God damn Stemp for setting me up with that porn star cover story. Even if it wasn’t really me in the videos, the thought of this slimeball salivating over them made my stomach turn. And I’d be lucky if salivating was all he’d done...

“Stick it up your ass,” I snapped. “And fuck off before I get Eddy to throw you out.”

I glanced over as Eddy slid a fresh beer across the bar to one of the regulars, his eyes twinkling while he engaged in his usual banter.

There was no way I’d involve Eddy. Not when I knew Hibbert had a gun tucked under that well-cut suit jacket.

But Hibbert didn’t know about the baby Glock cuddled in the waist holster under my sweatshirt, either. Better if he thought I was just a helpless female, depending on Eddy to protect me. Nothing like a few little surprises to keep things fresh.

“Ah, yes, Blue Eddy.” Hibbert shot a contemptuous look toward the bar before returning his attention to me. “I’m quaking in my boots. But there’s no reason for you to be so hostile. I’ve come to offer you another business opportunity.”

“I told you in October, I’m not interested.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “That was small potatoes. An insult to a savvy businesswoman like yourself, and I do apologize. It’s clear I

underestimated you. My associates would like to propose a more..." He smiled, the expression doing nothing to mask the hardness in his eyes. "...attractive offer."

The waitress arrived with my fresh glass of water, and I used the interruption to surreptitiously draw a deep breath, willing my pounding pulse to slow.

His associates. The ruthless international circle of spies and arms dealers concealed behind the soft, cute smiles of the stuffed toys they imported. If they discovered I truly was Aydan Kelly instead of Arlene Widdenback impersonating Aydan Kelly, my death would be slow and excruciating.

He leaned closer, pitching his voice below the blues music. "I hope you're still enjoying your work at Sirius Dynamics."

I swallowed the tightness in my throat with a sip of water and gave him my best steely stare.

Undeterred by my silence, he continued. "One of my associates is looking for a friend he's lost touch with. The last time they spoke, his friend was working at Sirius Dynamics. I thought of you immediately."

I heaved a theatrically bored sigh and picked up a chicken wing, letting my gaze drift across the room while I devoured the hot, greasy meat and slurped the spicy sauce off my fingers.

His voice deepened. "That's very sexy."

I froze with my thumb in my mouth.

Eeuw.

Fine. Asshole. Stemp was going to owe me for this.

I held eye contact while I withdrew my thumb slowly, sliding my lips down its length. Hibbert swallowed convulsively as I cleaned the last of the sauce off my fingers with little flicks of my tongue before leaning back with another sigh. "Get to the point."

My voice apparently jarred him back from the realm of fantasy. He blinked and shifted in his chair. "It's a small thing, really."

His gaze locked onto my mouth as I went for another wing, and I jabbed the wing at him instead of biting into it. "You have ten seconds. Ten..."

"All we want is a phone list," he said hurriedly. "Just a photocopy of the company directory."

Ennui dripped from my voice. "Why would I bother?"

"You would be compensated, of course."

I waved my chicken wing in a languid 'go on' gesture.

"Two thousand dollars cash right now." He withdrew a fat envelope from his coat pocket. "Three thousand dollars when you deliver the list."

I sneered, hoping I didn't have wing sauce all over my contemptuously curled lip. "Stop insulting me. You offered me a hundred grand a couple of months ago."

"That was for a considerably different item. Which you didn't deliver."

"I didn't see any hundred grand, either. I don't have time to waste on small-time guys like you. Scram." I waved the chicken wing in a shooing gesture before biting into it, ignoring him and trying to be as unsexy as possible.

"*Small-time?*" He sounded as though he was strangling.

I shrugged, patted my lips with my napkin, and attacked another wing.

When I glanced up again, Hibbert's face was an unhealthy shade of burgundy. He drew a slow breath, and the smile he offered was distinctly lopsided. "Most people... most *smart* people would accept this offer with gratitude. Five thousand dollars for a simple, easily-accessible piece of

paper. And if you deliver, it could be the beginning of a lucrative and beneficial relationship.”

“Get lost.”

“Fine.” He slapped another fat envelope atop the first. “Five now, five when you deliver.”

I eyed the envelopes as if they contained long-dead fish. “You don’t seriously think I’m going to take those with the whole world watching. I’ll think about it and be in touch.” I trotted out my hard-learned spy lingo with secret satisfaction. “If I accept the deal, I’ll expect a dead drop. I don’t work with amateurs.”

“Amateurs.” Hibbert drew another deep breath and cranked on his smile again. “Fine. I’ll expect an answer by noon tomorrow. And don’t even consider mentioning this to anyone if you want to stay alive.” He stuffed the envelopes back in his pocket and stalked out as if he had a hot poker jammed up his ass.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I tottered off to hide in the ladies’ room until my knees stopped trembling.

At last, I crept back to finish my unappetizingly cold chicken wings before heading for the back door. I hesitated in the enclosed vestibule.

My nightmares had finally subsided after two long months, but even with all the therapy and mental effort, I couldn’t shake my lingering paranoia about emerging through a door when I couldn’t see what was on the other side.

I hissed through my teeth. That was probably a good thing. Stemp still thought I was an experienced agent, not a clueless civilian bookkeeper. Maybe a bit of paranoia would help compensate for my total lack of actual spy skills.

I pushed through the door, sidestepping and snapping a quick glance left and right. The glare of sun on snow nearly blinded me after the

dimness of the bar, and the frigid December air stole my breath. I sucked in a lungful anyway and headed for my car, surveying its interior for intruders before I slid into the driver's seat.

I replayed Hibbert's last words while I extracted the bug detector from my waist pouch and eyed its reassuring green light.

A whole two months since my last death threat. Well, it had been a nice respite while it lasted.

I blew out a sigh and grabbed one of Stemp's secured cell phones from the glove compartment.

He answered on the first ring, as usual. "Yes."

"It's Aydan."

"Report."

"Paul Hibbert just offered me ten thousand dollars for a copy of the Sirius Dynamics internal phone list. Apparently Fuzzy Bunny is looking for someone at Sirius. I told him I'd think about it. He expects an answer by noon tomorrow."

"Very well. Briefing at fifteen-thirty, your office."

I hung up without offering or receiving a goodbye and drove to Up & Coming, watching the sparse small-town traffic in case anybody was following me.

When I entered the shop, a snort of laughter escaped me. "Lola! You're a sick, sick woman!"

I scanned for the guilty party, shaking a reproving finger when her grin popped up from behind the shelf where she had been stooping to rearrange a display.

"What?" Her wrinkled pixie face was a study in innocence.

"You! Only you would put a Santa hat on Big John the Wonder Horse," I sputtered, trying to hold onto my expression of fake outrage

while I indicated the huge black silicone penis with its festive miniature... um... headgear.

She widened her eyes at me. "I thought he should have a nice hat to go with his sack."

I succumbed, doubling over to laugh until tears rolled down my cheeks. "Sick," I wheezed. "You're sick. But funny as hell. Ohmigod, my gut. You made me hurt myself." I massaged my aching belly, still giggling feebly. "What does Linda think of your Christmas decorations?"

Lola smirked. "She bowed to my superior marketing skills. When we hid Big John and started displaying all the tame lingerie and candles up front, everybody asked where he was. He's turned into our mascot."

"And a fine upstanding mascot he is, too," I agreed, doing my best deadpan expression.

"Yes, indeedy!" Her wicked grin softened into a smile. "It's good to hear you laugh like that. I was worried about you for a while there."

"Thanks." I suppressed the urge to shuffle my feet and held her gaze with an effort. "The therapy has really helped."

Letting her believe I'd been raped had been the only plausible cover story I could use at the time, but...

I squashed my guilty conscience. It was true that the therapy had helped. That was all she needed to know.

I changed the subject. "What about you?" I searched her face. "Have you recovered from being kidnapped? Are you sleeping all right?"

Lola tossed her head, her spiked hair flashing vivid purple under the display lighting. "It'd take a lot more than that to scare this old broad. If that punk hadn't drugged me, I'd have kicked his sorry ass."

I grinned down at her diminutive figure, choosing to play along despite the faint tremor in her voice. "Kicked his sorry kneecap, maybe. I doubt if you could've reached his ass."

“Ha. I’m meaner than you think. I could have stood on a chair and kicked him in the head.” She looked up at me, her wise eyes seeing too much. “But we were talking about you. You haven’t left your house except to go to work for the past two months.” She slid a motherly arm around my waist and gave me a squeeze. “It’s time to start living again, honey.”

I gulped at the memory of how close I’d come to losing her, and hid my rush of emotion with a grin. “I *am* living. I’ve had a fabulous two months of reading, baking, and working on my ’53 Chevy. I feel like I’ve gotten my life back.”

The life I had dreamed of living before I ever knew about Fuzzy Bunny or Canada’s clandestine operations....

I hid a sigh.

“It’s not healthy for you to spend so much time alone.” She gave me the impish grin that always presaged some form of impending personal humiliation for me. “You should make a play for Big John. I bet you could snag him.”

I snickered. “It’ll be a sad day when I have to work to snag a mechanical boyfriend. Even if he does have his own little Santa hat.”

“Very funny. I meant the real Big John.” Lola waggled her eyebrows. “Go on, Aydan, wouldn’t you like a little hanky-panky with a hunk like him?”

“God, you have no idea.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I backpedaled rapidly. “But I don’t want a relationship. Now’s just not a good time.”

“I know it’s tough to learn to trust again, honey, but don’t let the fear win.” The sympathy in her eyes made my conscience prod me even harder. Before I could come up with an appropriate response, she straightened, her face lighting up. “Hey, Aydan, I just had a great idea!”

“Oh, no.” I flung up defensive hands. “Whatever it is, no.”

“I promise it has nothing to do with wearing any of our merchandise.”

“No dressing up.” I eyed her suspiciously.

“No. In fact, the more I think of it, the more I know you’ll love it! It’s right up your alley!”

“Leave my alley out of this.”

She ignored my recalcitrance. “There’s a self-defence workshop for women at the rec centre this week. Tomorrow, Thursday, and Friday evening; Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Come with me! It’ll be fun.”

“Um...”

“Come on, none of my old-fogey friends will go with me, and I really want to go. I want to learn some self-defence moves.” She adopted a threatening scowl and swung her tiny fists at the air. “I want to kick some ass.”

I clamped down on my smile. “I don’t think you’ll learn much ass-kicking in five sessions. And... um... do you think it would be... um, safe for you?”

Lola straightened indignantly. “I’m only seventy-three! I go to the gym three times a week, and I’m in damn good shape. And besides, weight-bearing exercise is good for preventing osteoporosis. Come with me. It’ll be good for both of us.”

I capitulated before I had to lie to her any more. “Okay, you talked me into it. Sign us up.” I turned away to make for the office before she could think up any other brilliant ideas. “I’m going to get at that bookkeeping.”

My hands trembled when I signed for my fob at the security wicket of Sirius Dynamics a couple of hours later. Clipping the fob on my waistband, I squared my shoulders and strode down the corridor, projecting confidence for all I was worth.

So Hibbert and Fuzzy Bunny were still on my trail. So what. Stemp would probably just tell me to ignore their advances, same as last time. It didn't mean I was going into danger again. I'd be fine. Nothing to worry about.

I repeated my mantra while I climbed the stairs and headed for my second-floor office.

Fine. I'd be fine. I wasn't in any danger...

When I turned the corner into my office, a burst of adrenaline jerked my hand toward my holster.

CHAPTER 2

An instant later, I recognized the stocky bearded man lounging on my couch, feet propped on my coffee table.

“Carl!” Relief weakened my knees and I blew out a shaky breath as Germain rose, smiling. I hurried over to give him a quick hug. “You scared the shit out of me, but it’s good to see you!”

He returned my squeeze. “Good to see you, too. You look great.”

“Thanks.” I grinned as I stepped back. “You look thoroughly disreputable.”

That wasn’t exactly true. He looked dangerously sexy, his black hair grown out into unruly curls that accented his black brows and keen brown eyes, his muscular frame displayed to advantage in a snug black T-shirt and cargo pants.

He rasped a hand over his whiskered chin, the laugh lines crinkling around his eyes. “I just wrapped up an undercover op. Shave and a haircut are the first things on my list.”

“What are you doing here? I thought you were assigned to Calgary.” I nodded toward the couch. “Sit, get comfortable.”

He sank into the chair instead. “I was supposed to be heading back to Calgary, but Stemp caught me right after my debriefing and asked

me to meet you here at three-thirty. That's all I know so far." He glanced at his watch. "We've got a few minutes. Can you update me a bit while we're waiting?"

I slouched onto the couch, stretching out my legs. "What do you know so far?"

"My last update was back in July."

"Okay..." I cast my mind back to the summer. "God, so much has happened since then. Spider is still on the team. Smith turned out to be a spy named Kasper Doytchevsky, and he's dead now..."

I declined to elaborate at the sight of Germain's raised eyebrows, still feeling the kick of the gun in my hand, seeing the blood and shattered bone...

"There's a mission report on that," I said firmly. "You can read it later. You never met Sam Kraus, did you?"

"No."

I sighed. "There's another mission report on that. The short version is that Sam is the owner of the civilian research branch of Sirius Dynamics, and also the guy who developed the micro-miniaturized network key that gets me invisibly into the brainwave-driven virtual reality network. Problem was, he didn't invent it for the good of the country. He was going to use me to hack and decrypt digital information so he could sell it, but I caught him at it."

Germain grinned. "Sounds like you've been busy. I presume he's in custody now?"

"Yes." I grimaced. "But he cut a deal with Stemp a couple of months ago. He's been back on my project under heavy supervision ever since. Dr. Honey Travers is supervising Sam's work. You might meet her today; I'm not sure if she'll be sitting in. Oh, and she prefers to be called Jack."

Germain leaned back in the chair to cross his feet on the coffee table again. “Masculine sort?”

I chuckled, anticipating his reaction when he saw her. “Not exactly. And of course, John is still on my project.”

“How’s he doing? I heard he got shot a couple of months ago, but I couldn’t call him while I was undercover.”

“He’s fine. As far as I know. He’s not limping anymore, anyway.”

I squirmed, searching for another topic of conversation. For the past couple of months, I had successfully avoided John Kane except for our necessary contact at work. He had responded by treating me with the same friendly professionalism he offered everyone, making no attempt to contact me outside of work or converse about anything other than our daily duties. So that was good.

Just fine.

Excellent...

I drew in a breath of relief when Spider’s beanpole figure appeared in the doorway. His youthful face lit up.

“Carl!” He bounded in, shooting out a skinny arm to pump Germain’s hand. “Wow, awesome! Long time, no see! How are you?”

“Webb.” Germain chuckled and returned the handshake along with an affectionate slap on Spider’s bony shoulder. “Good to see you again. I’m fine. You?”

“Great! Are you here to do Kane’s requalification?”

“Yes, I was supposed to do that later in the week, but Stemp asked me to sit on in this briefing as well.”

“Um... requalification?” I frowned at the two men.

“Yeah.” Spider turned to face me. “You know, the annual testing and requalification for agents. Kane was due in January but he has to requalify after his injury anyway, so Stemp moved it up. He’d probably

have done it sooner, but Germain wasn't available." He frowned. "I'm surprised you haven't had to do yours yet."

Apprehension tightened my throat. "Um... what exactly would that involve?"

Germain frowned. "And why would she have to?"

Spider turned to Germain, his smile lighting up the room. "Didn't she tell you? Aydan's been promoted to agent!"

Germain's white grin split his dark whiskers. "That's great news! Congratulations, Aydan!"

"Um, thanks..." I shot a pleading look at Spider. "So about this testing..."

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!" Kane's deep baritone interrupted me as he strode in.

"If it isn't the feeble old fart himself! Hope you're ready to get your ass kicked." Germain gripped Kane's extended hand and the two thumped each other on the shoulder, grinning and jostling in a friendly trial of strength.

Kane towered nearly six inches taller than Germain, but the breadth of their powerful shoulders was an even match, making Germain look like a square wall of muscle next to Kane's magnificently proportioned build. I dragged my gaze away from the tasty spectacle as Charles Stemp arrived, swinging the door shut behind him.

Not that I intended to start calling him Charles. Hell, it had only been two months since I'd stopped mentally addressing him as 'Dickhead'.

He directed a piercing gaze toward me and I hurriedly rerouted my thoughts. God, I'd swear those snake-like eyes could see right through my skull.

"Will Sam and Jack be joining us?" I blurted.

“Later.” He eyed the four of us with his customary absence of expression. “This briefing is strictly need-to-know. Ms. Kelly has informed me that Paul Hibbert, whom we believe to be one of Fuzzy Bunny’s business brokers, has contacted her hoping to obtain a copy of the Sirius Dynamics internal phone listing. This has the earmarks of recruitment, which could prove extremely advantageous to us in infiltrating their organization. I had hoped to set up something of the sort in the new year. This timing forces our hand somewhat, but the opportunity is too good to pass up.” Stemp’s dispassionate scrutiny stripped me to the bone. “Ms. Kelly, Dr. Rawling informs me that he is satisfied with your progress.”

I said nothing, my voice throttled by the icy lump of fear expanding in my chest.

Stemp’s gaze snapped to Kane. “And you claim to be back to optimum fitness. Are you mission-ready?”

Kane’s expression remained composed as usual, but his grey eyes kindled with predatory fire. “Absolutely.”

“Good.” Stemp’s nod took in Kane, Germain, and me. “Kane, Ms. Kelly, you’ll both complete your standard physical qualification tomorrow morning at zero nine hundred, followed by your firearms qualification. Kane, Germain will conduct your advanced weapons and hand-to-hand combat qualifications after that. Ms. Kelly, tomorrow you’ll inform Hibbert that you’ll provide the phone list.”

Paralyzed, I sat trying to breathe while he continued. “Thanks to Ms. Kelly’s research over the past several months, we’re closer to a comprehensive picture of the extent of Fuzzy Bunny’s operations. We’ve successfully terminated a few espionage and arms deals, but we haven’t had sufficient evidence to show involvement of any of their major players.” He raised a philosophical shoulder. “Every bit helps. If we can insert an agent, we’ll be that much closer.”

His tone darkened. “Meanwhile, some of the intel we gained during those ops indicates they have either developed or procured a new weapon which is rumoured to be silent and capable of causing instant death without a visible wound. It’s unclear whether it’s for mass military deployment or close-quarters use. We don’t have any other details.”

A sick silence ensued.

“So if they are in fact recruiting Ms. Kelly, it may give us a timely tactical advantage,” Stemp concluded. “I’ll provide all of you with mission reports and analysis of everything to date. Be prepared to meet tomorrow at thirteen-hundred for strategic planning.”

He turned his impassive gaze on me. “Depending on how quickly their recruitment proceeds, you may end up devoting considerable time to undercover field work rather than the network surveillance you’ve been doing to date. With that in mind, I’ve had Drs. Kraus and Travers recreate Tammy Mellor’s network key, and I have recruited Ms. Mellor to replace you.”

“But...”

Stemp’s voice drowned out my dry croak as he turned to speak to Germain. “I’ll provide reports so you can get full detail, but here are the high points. The network key that Ms. Kelly uses to decrypt files and hack networks was one of eight in the world, created by a group of scientists calling themselves the Knights of Sirius. Dr. Kraus is the last surviving member of that group. The keys are specially encoded to the brainwave patterns of the woman using the key and to a counterpart of the key used by another person who controls her mind while she’s in the network. That made it possible for the Knights to acquire and decrypt data without the key-holder’s knowledge.”

My heart tried to batter its way through my ribs. Shit, I had bumbled through my first assignment as an agent through sheer dumb

luck, but sending me undercover to look for a goddamn death ray was like expecting a first-grader to write the sequel to 'War and Peace'.

I would inevitably fail, dooming myself and my entire team to torture and slow, horrible death...

Germain interrupted my spiralling thoughts. "Wait, so somebody has been controlling Aydan's mind in the network all this time?"

"No, Ms. Kelly can't be controlled inside the network." Stemp shot me a grim smile. "It proved fatal to the man who tried."

Hot acid surged into my already-queasy stomach. Bert Cartwright, the second-last life I'd taken. Six dead at my hands in less than a year. The body count was burned into my brain.

God help me.

Stemp was still talking, his words floating at the edges of my mind. "Ms. Mellor is one of the eight women, but she is unaware of any of this since she has never entered the network without being under mind control. She will believe she is simply acting as a super-user to power our virtual reality simulations. I'll assign someone with the appropriate security clearance to control her."

Spider's uncertain voice pulled my attention back to the conversation at hand. "But... we'd control her mind? Without telling her?"

"Of course." Stemp didn't let impatience creep into his voice, but his impassive expression became, if possible, even more deadpan.

"But..." Spider's face scrunched into consternation. "But what about her rights? If we just... hijack her mind without her permission, then we're just using her like... like... We're no better than the Knights."

"That's not a relevant comparison," Stemp said smoothly. "We are protecting national security, our agents and clandestine operations, and Ms. Mellor at the same time. As long as she is unaware of the true nature

of our department, she can live freely without any of the restrictions and dangers Ms. Kelly faces. This is the best possible solution.”

Spider subsided, looking unconvinced, and I didn't bother to point out that poor Tammy Mellor would be at exactly the same risk of abduction, torture, and death as I was; the only difference would be that if she got captured, she couldn't tell what she didn't know. Stemp was covering everyone's ass but hers.

Old habits die hard. My brain automatically added 'dickhead' before I could stop it.

Settle down.

Stemp's job was to make the difficult decisions. He had undoubtedly weighed national security and the safety of dozens of personnel against the questionable morality of the situation, and I had to agree that logic was on his side.

But I didn't have to like it, dammit.

“What makes you think she'll agree to work for you at all?” I asked.

Stemp turned his expressionless gaze on me. “Ms. Mellor was devastated when her Knight died. As you said yourself, he was her whole world. In the past two months, I have provided her with counselling sessions, moved her into a furnished apartment, and arranged for a temporary caregiver until she was able to orient herself in her new surroundings. I also sent a couple of agents to befriend her and provide subtle influence if necessary.” His reptilian features betrayed none of the smugness he must be feeling. “Needless to say, Ms. Mellor is extremely grateful and eager to help us in any way she can.”

Revulsion twisted my guts. “You used her! Took advantage of a blind, helpless, socially isolated woman and manipulated her like... like...”

Like he'd manipulated me.

Rage half-strangled my words. “You fucking *dickhead!*”

His expressionless façade didn't alter. "In my office, Ms. Kelly. Now."

CHAPTER 3

I marched down the hall ahead of Stemp, trying to hold onto my anger. Bastard. Using and manipulating a helpless blind woman...

Uncomfortable logic prodded my conscience. Tammy Mellor was utterly alone in the world, thanks to the family who had given her up to Sirius Dynamics at age eight, nearly forty years ago. Stemp had provided her with therapy, housing, transitional care, social contact, and a job. Sure, he had an ulterior motive, but he could just as easily have provided none of those things and forced her to work for him anyway.

Goddammit...

His office door clicked closed behind me, and I blew out a sigh as he strode past me to take a seat behind his desk.

I spoke before he could. "I'm sorry. I was out of line. You did the best you could for Tammy. I'll apologize in front of the others, too."

"That won't be necessary." He inclined his head toward the guest chair. "Please sit."

I sank into the chair, bracing myself for a lecture.

I tensed when he reached into his desk drawer, but relaxed again when he extracted a bug detector and laid it between us on the desk, its

indicator light glowing reassuring green. He steepled his fingers and studied me over top of them. The silence lengthened.

Just when my nerves were about to snap, he spoke. “What was the real purpose for your outburst?”

“Um...”

I eyed him in confusion. What the hell was he asking?

He leaned back in his chair, holding me with his flat amber gaze. “Except for those times when you believed I’d harmed one of your friends, the only time you have publicly insulted me is when you need to speak to me urgently and privately. Is that the case, or do I need to remind you of our policies regarding respectful communication?”

I couldn’t suppress a sigh. “You don’t need to remind me.”

God, nothing like hurling names as if I was in second grade. Grow up already. Before I’d gotten snared in this godawful spy’s life, I’d have bitten off my tongue before I’d have insulted a co-worker, let alone the director of the department.

“So...?” Stemp eyed me with thinly disguised impatience.

With trembling fingertips, I massaged the incipient headache tightening around my temples. “I can’t do this.”

“Do what?”

“This mission. Pretending to work with Fuzzy Bunny. I can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

My fear burst out in its usual angry disguise. “Because I’m a fucking dumb civilian bookkeeper, not a spy! I don’t have a fucking clue what to do, they’ll spot me right away and then they’ll torture all the classified information out of me, and everybody else will be in danger because of me! I can’t do this! I won’t even pass your qualification tests!”

His silence expanded to fill the room. I clenched my fists around the arms of the chair, my heart pounding in my ears.

At last he spoke. “I notice you said you ‘won’t pass’, not you ‘can’t pass’.”

“I *can’t*, for shit’s sake! I’m just a bookkeeper.”

He blew out a short breath. “Ms. Kelly, we both know that’s not true.”

I resisted the urge to batter my brains out on his desk. “It’s *true*, for fucksakes! Hook me up to the lie detector and you can see for yourself.”

He slumped lower in his chair, massaging his temples as if his head hurt, too. “I get the point. I know you can’t compromise your cover.” He eyed me wearily. “Can’t you just squeak by with a passing score? Everyone knows you work out frequently and you’re a good shot. It would be plausible. There’s no need to actually fail the tests.”

My voice scraped out between my clenched teeth. “It’s not like I have a choice. I’m telling you...”

“I know,” he interrupted. He held my gaze. “I opened myself to some undesirable scrutiny when I promoted you to an agent’s role in the absence of any formal qualifications or testing. I would consider it a personal favour if you would pass this examination.”

My jaw creaked under the strain and I drew a slow, deep breath, easing the tense muscles. Yes, he had put his ass on the line for me, even though he’d had some excellent reasons not to.

Holding my voice level, I asked, “What do I have to do?”

“It’s just the standard physical and firearms qualification. Bare minimum.”

I unclenched my teeth. Again. “But what does that include? And anyway, whether I pass or fail the qualification isn’t the point. The point is if you put me undercover in Fuzzy Bunny, I’ll blow it all to hell and take everybody else down with me.”

Stemp rose. “Ms. Kelly, we believe Fuzzy Bunny is attempting to recruit you, specifically. You are the only person who can do this, and despite your convincing adherence to your cover, I know you’re capable. Unless there’s something else you want to discuss privately, we need to get back to the briefing.”

He strode out, and I had no choice but to trail after him on trembling legs.

When we re-entered my office, Spider was staring at the toe of his running shoe while he scuffed it back and forth, alternately ruffling and smoothing the nap of the carpet. He glanced up, his gaze sliding away to perch in the corner of the room as a flush rose on his cheeks. Kane and Germain broke off their conversation to turn standard-issue neutral cop faces toward us.

Before the tension could increase any more, I spoke. “I owe Director Stemp an apology, and I want to apologize to all of you, too. I was acting childish. I’m sorry for what I said, and I’m sorry for making everyone uncomfortable. It won’t happen again.”

“Thank you, Ms. Kelly, but as I said in my office, a public apology is unnecessary,” Stemp replied. “We all know you’ve been recovering from some difficult experiences.”

As he swept the others with his gaze, I was relieved to see them relax, the air pressure lightening in the room.

“I’ve asked Drs. Kraus and Travers to join us...” Stemp began. A tap on the door interrupted him, and he glanced over to nod at the stunning blue-eyed blonde who leaned into the room, giving us a smile that would make birds sing, flowers bloom, and grown men fall helpless at her feet.

“...at sixteen hundred,” Stemp finished, unperturbed.

I turned toward Germain, hiding my gleeful anticipation of his reaction. “Carl, this is Dr. Honey Travers, Jack for short. Jack, Carl Germain.”

“Hi, Jack. Nice to meet you.” Germain rose with his usual pleasant smile and offered his hand as if meeting brilliant and voluptuous scientists was an everyday occurrence.

“Hi... Carl.” A pretty flush stained Jack’s flawless complexion, her full lips trembling around his name for an instant before her usual poise returned. “It’s nice to meet you, too,” she added as she shook hands. “And this is Dr. Sam Kraus.” She ushered forward the short, roly-poly man who had hung back in the doorway.

Germain’s expression smoothed into watchful appraisal as he nodded. “Dr. Kraus.”

“Please call me Sam.” Sam shot a pleading glance in my direction. “Hi, Aydan.”

“Hi.” I couldn’t quite summon up a smile to hide the chill of betrayal that still lurked in my heart. I settled for a non-committal twitch of my lips, relieved when Stemp spoke again.

“The doctors have been working on another version of the network key that allows Ms. Kelly access to the network. Today they have a prototype to test. Dr. Travers?”

Jack stepped forward, looking unaccountably nervous. Opening her small briefcase on the coffee table in front of me, she lifted out the familiar band of electrodes and settled it around my forehead.

She slipped a tiny box out of her pocket and handed it to me. “Just go into the network and stay there for a few seconds. If that goes well, we’ll try a sim, and then maybe some decryptions. But nothing outside our firewall for this first trial.”

“Okay.” I settled back on the sofa, closing my eyes.

“Wait!” Stemp’s bark jerked me upright, my eyes popping open. I eyed him with confusion as he continued, “Kane and Germain, go into the network first. Wait for Ms. Kelly to enter. If anything unusual happens, get her out the portal by any means necessary. Clear?”

Both men nodded, and Kane shot a narrow-eyed glance in Sam’s direction. “Do you expect anything unusual?”

“No, no, of course not.” Sam’s pudgy fingers combed his snowy beard. “Of course not. No, this is just in the interests of... safety...” He trailed off and backed a couple of steps away from Kane’s steel-grey stare.

Kane transferred his attention to Jack. “Jack? What’s your take on this?”

“I don’t see any reason why this should be any different than Aydan’s usual access,” she soothed.

Kane held eye contact for another second before transferring his attention to me, his voice softening. “Whenever you’re ready, Aydan. We’ll be there for you.”

Despite my attempt to suppress my reaction, the echo of affection in Kane’s voice warmed me. I sighed and leaned back on the couch. Forget it. Keep it professional. Safer for everybody.

Kane and Germain exchanged a nod and they both settled into immobility in their chairs, their eyes taking on the thousand-yard stare that indicated they’d entered the brainwave-driven network.

When I mentally stepped into the white void of virtual reality, I smiled at the two muscular avatars encased in combat body armour, submachine guns nestled in the crooks of their bulging arms.

“Are you all right?” Kane demanded, his gaze raking my face.

“Fine. Thanks.” I peered up into the blank whiteness. “Hey, Jack, am I supposed to feel any different?”

“No.” Her reassuring voice filtered through the external interface. “You shouldn’t feel any different at all.”

“Okay. How long do you want me to stand here?”

“Just until I get a baseline reading...” Jack sounded abstracted. “Just a minute...”

Kane and Germain bristled with readiness, scanning the void in all directions while I shuffled my feet, feeling foolish. A few long moments later, Jack spoke again.

“All right, try a sim now.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Yes, do your mountain simulation. I have baseline data for that one.”

“Okay.” I materialized the virtual corridor and was about to head for a room when Kane stepped in front of me.

He jerked his chin at Germain. “I’ll lead. Germain will cover our six.”

They took their places and we moved along the corridor, Kane scouting ahead while Germain brought up the rear, both with their weapons unslung and ready.

Dammit, why all the caution? If Jack had just tossed me the key and said ‘Here, try it’, I wouldn’t have worried at all. I held my face expressionless while nerves twitched in my stomach.

Inside the sim room, I eased out a long breath and concentrated on the sun and spruce-scented air of my favourite mountain top. It sprang into being in an instant, the wind singing its eternal lullaby through the trees lining the long misty valley. My worries floated away to the distant horizon while diamond-bright spangles glittered on the blue satin of the lake a thousand feet below...

“Aydan!” Kane’s voice jerked the tension back into my shoulders. “Can you give us something a little more defensible here?”

He and Germain stood facing outward on opposite sides of me, their weapons sweeping semi-circles around our exposed perch at the summit. A glance at the hard muscles in their jaws indicated that they didn’t find the vista nearly as calming as I did.

I sighed and materialized a sheer rock wall behind us.

Both men relaxed visibly, placing their backs to the wall and continuing to scan the mountain and the sky above as if expecting an attack at any moment.

Another sigh leaked out before I could stop it. That constant vigilance was what made them the excellent agents they were. Unlike me, the dumb civilian who would undoubtedly cause them to die horribly...

The gut-wrenching screams of a man in unspeakable agony floated up from the valley below, rapidly gaining volume. Bulging muscles tensed beside me.

Kane shot a split-second glance in my direction before snapping his attention back to the valley. “Aydan? Are you doing that?”

I swallowed hard, willing the memory away. “Sorry. It’s okay. Nothing to worry about.”

Mountains. Sun. Wind. Open spaces.

Slow yoga breaths. Calm.

Concentrate, dammit.

The screams faded, leaving me trembling with reaction.

“You can come out now.” Jack’s sultry voice was a welcome sound.

Too wound up to navigate the corridor again, I dissolved the mountain sim and folded sim-space to place all three of us in front of the

exit portal. Kane jerked his chin toward it, still watching the void around us, and I stepped gratefully through.

I opened my eyes in physical reality, frowning. "What the hell?"

Judging by my more-or-less unobstructed view of the ceiling, I must be lying on my back. A ring of worried faces hovered above me.

"Don't move yet. Just lie still." That was Jack.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"You lost consciousness. You were out for about thirty seconds." Jack's cool fingers pressed against the pulse point on my wrist. "How do you feel?"

"Fine."

I sat up despite her attempt to press me back onto the sofa. The room whirled once before settling into reassuring stability, and I shook my head experimentally. Nothing untoward happened, so I rose and stretched, elation swelling into my heart.

"Why are you smiling?" Jack peered into my face. "Sit down until I've finished my diagnostics."

I sat obediently, my grin spreading wide enough to make my cheeks protest.

"It didn't hurt." A laugh bubbled up and overflowed my lips. "Don't you get it?" I seized Jack's wrist and shook it gently for emphasis. "It didn't *hurt!* It was painless!"

Her smooth forehead crinkled into a frown. "You were unconscious. That's not an acceptable trade-off."

"Only for a few seconds. And it didn't *hurt.*" I resisted the urge to leap up and do a victory dance. "This is great! What did you change from the original key?"

Jack shot a troubled glance at Sam. "We've made a number of changes. And we're nowhere near done testing. Don't celebrate yet."

I tamped down my happiness as best I could, but I couldn't quite wipe the smile off my face. "So let's test! What else do you need me to do? Should I try some decryptions next?"

"No..."

Jack frowned at Sam, who studied the floor, his fingers toying with his beard. When he dragged his gaze up, he eyed Kane fearfully before speaking to me. "You may not like... um... this next part..." He averted his eyes from Kane's frown and extended a hand toward me instead. "Aydan, you know I never meant you any harm, don't you?"

Trepidation crept up my spine on icy feet.

Kane's hard voice made us both twitch. "But you did harm her. Repeatedly."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Sam gave me an imploring look.

"Spit it out, Sam." My voice was as hard as Kane's, and Sam's throat worked as he swallowed, his trembling hands knotting together in front of him.

"I, um..." Sam's gaze darted to Jack's remote expression and glacier-blue eyes before settling on a point just below my chin. "We, um... we need you to go back into the network using your original key. Um... under my mind control."

CHAPTER 4

A heavy silence blanketed my office. Sam stood alone in the group, his hands clenching and then releasing to slide down his pant legs as though wiping sweat from his palms. A fine dew of perspiration glistened on his forehead.

“I’m not happy about this, either,” he blurted. “You nearly killed me last time. I could die...”

His words faded into a gulp as he apparently realized some members of the team might welcome that outcome.

Stemp remained expressionless, but Kane and Germain eyed him as if viewing some pale and slimy creature slithering from a cesspool.

“No!” Spider’s cry was pure dismay. “Aydan, no! Don’t trust him!” He shot a wide-eyed glance at Jack. “There has to be another way!”

“I’m afraid not,” she said slowly. “But we’ll put as many safeguards in place as possible.” She inclined her head at Kane and Germain. “That’s why you’re both here.”

“But it won’t help, we know it won’t!” Spider sprang to his feet, raking his fingers through his hair to leave it standing in untidy peaks. “He just makes her invisible and then he can do whatever he wants and we’ll never know...”

At last I managed to unlock my throat without letting a scream escape.

“No, it’s okay, Spider, you’ll know.” My voice came out in a dry croak, and I cleared my throat before speaking again. “My visible avatar goes silent and stops moving when he takes control.” I turned to lock eyes with Sam. “More to the point, I’ll know.” I did my best threatening growl. “You won’t fuck with me, will you, Sam? Because I won’t hesitate to fry you like I fried Bert Cartwright.”

The greasy smoke of a different cremation strangled me for an instant, but I wrestled the memory into submission. Just put on a good show. I won’t have to hurt him if he’s too scared to try anything in the first place...

Sam blanched gratifyingly. “I... of course I wouldn’t, Aydan, you know I wouldn’t... I’d never...”

“Good.” I hid my fear in a decisive tone. “Let’s do it, then. Jack, do you need me to do anything specific?”

“No, your role this time will be to let Sam control you.” Her words sent a wave of claustrophobic terror gushing through my veins, and I clenched my fists and fought the adrenaline with a slow, deep breath. Then another.

Calm. Stay calm.

“Just breathe.” Kane knelt beside the sofa, his grey gaze holding me above the sea of fear. “Just breathe,” he repeated softly. “We won’t let it go on for any longer than absolutely necessary.”

Damn Dr. Rawling and his goddamn therapy. I was better at hiding my feelings before he got started on me.

“Thanks. I’m fine.” I ignored the heat climbing my face and turned to Jack. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“All right.” She eyed me unhappily. “You’ll go into the network using your key as usual. Then Sam will take control...”

I breathed.

“...but he’ll only walk you down the virtual corridor to the door of the file repository. That’s it. Then he’ll release you.”

I managed a weak nod.

Stemp’s voice cut the silence like a razorblade. “If he deviates from the plan in the slightest, you have full authorization to use deadly force. Kane, Germain, likewise.” He drew a small gun, his reptilian features impassive. “I’ll supervise Dr. Kraus’s physical body here in the real world.” His flat eyes evaluated Sam as if measuring him for a coffin. “I’m sure we’ll have no problems.”

Sam gulped audibly and sank into a chair, his face ashen.

I clenched my fist around the tiny electronic device Jack handed me.

Fine. I was fine. Nothing bad would happen. Just a short test. Nothing, really. Only a few moments. I’d be fine.

“We’ll go in first and wait for you.” Kane took a seat beside Germain and a moment later their vacant eyes told me it was time to go.

Deep breath.

Fine. I’d be fine...

The void bloomed into existence, ropes already binding my hands. Bars thickened around me, blotting out the light...

“Stop! Aydan, stop!” The cage yielded under the assault of Kane’s powerful shoulders. Germain slid through the gap, his arms spread to hold back the bars, his muscles bulging and knotting with the effort.

“Aydan, stop, you control this!” Kane’s voice penetrated my blind panic, and a moment later both men staggered at the sudden cessation of their effort when my prison evaporated into smoke.

“Sorry,” I panted. “Sorry. I’ve got it under control now.” My heart hammered in my chest. I hunched over to rest my elbows on my trembling knees, grappling for control over the jerky gasps that racked my body.

“Just breathe with me,” Kane murmured. “In. Out. Nice and slow.”

I straightened, embarrassment heating my face again. “I’m fine.” I willed the panic away. Fake it ‘til you make it. “Okay, Sam, let’s do this.”

When the sim turned syrupy around me, I screamed.

Screamed again and again, unable to stop myself while my visible avatar stood motionless and smothered in silence, its face frozen in a macabre mask of serenity.

With every fibre of my being I fought the need to lash out at the inexorable force that carried me away from my avatar, down the corridor toward the file room.

Everything as planned. Don’t fight. It’s fine. This is necessary.

The screams wouldn’t stop.

Despite my efforts to comply, I went rigid, resisting the invisible presence that rode me. The force intensified and I battled it unrestrained, all my will absorbed in clinging to the last shreds of sanity that would prevent me from immolating Sam in the sheer defensive terror of a trapped animal.

The release was so abrupt I tumbled to the floor of the virtual corridor, my suddenly-audible screams tearing the silence. Scrabbling frantically for purchase, I launched myself to my feet in pell-mell flight.

“No! Aydan, no! Stop!” Kane’s words made no sense.

As I dove for the portal, he and Germain sprang forward, their arms locking around me.

“Stay calm, we’re getting you out!”

Screaming and thrashing against their restraining grasp, a tendril of comprehension reached me at last.

Out.

They were getting me out.

I went limp.

A moment later, the usual pain lanced through my skull when they carried me through the portal.

Back in my physical body, I jerked into a ball, hugging my pounding head. The remaining adrenaline of the panic attack dissipated in sobbing heaves of breath punctuated by my violent swearing.

When the pain subsided enough to allow coherent thought, I groaned and curled tighter on the sofa, wishing I could compress myself enough to vanish between the cushions.

Less than an hour into the briefing and I'd already freaked out like a hysterical child three times. That had to be some kind of personal record. How much more embarrassment could I heap on myself?

Well, hell, the possibilities were endless. Maybe I could top it off by peeing my pants or throwing up. Or doing both simultaneously.

"Aydan?"

I blew out a breath and uncurled to sprawl face down on the sofa for a moment before dragging myself upright. "I'm fine. Sorry, I was just stupid. I panicked."

I pried my eyes open and my heart contracted sharply at the sight of Sam's motionless body on the floor. My voice came out in a dry whisper. "Shit, is he dead?"

Stemp looked up from where he knelt at Sam's head. "No. Should he be?"

"No." I dared to breathe again. "Is he conscious?"

Sam groaned and struggled into sitting position, his normally ruddy face as pale as his snowy beard. “Why did you fight me?” he croaked. “You knew what we were planning to do. You agreed.”

“I’m sorry.” Shame heated my face. “I’m really sorry, Sam. I just panicked and I couldn’t help it. It was all I could do not to kill you.”

“...oh.” His voice dropped to a tiny quaver. “Thank you, then.” He crept to his feet and dropped into his chair again, wiping sweat off his forehead with a shaking hand.

“I’m really sorry,” I said again to no one in particular. “What do we need to do next?”

“If you’re up to it, we should proceed with the next test as soon as possible,” Jack said.

I straightened my spine, ignoring the snivelling of my apparently-not-so-inner child. “Okay. What do I have to do?”

“Take the new key.” Jack passed it over, and I relinquished the original with relief. At least I could skip the pain this time.

“We’re going to repeat the last test...” she began. I shot a look at Sam, but he looked suspiciously sanguine. “...and this time Spider will be your controller,” she finished.

“Wha... no!” I lurched forward on the couch, my heart leaping into my throat. “No! No fucking way! I’m not risking Spider’s life. Not for anything.”

“I won’t control Aydan’s mind. That’s sick!” Spider’s cheeks flushed scarlet, his eyes snapping.

“I’m sorry, but it’s necessary.” Jack’s beautiful face was pale but determined. “Spider, this is only a one-time test. You won’t be controlling Aydan on an ongoing basis. And Aydan, there’s no reason to believe this will be any riskier for Spider than it was for Sam.”

“I damn near killed Sam! I was barely holding on! I won’t do it! No fucking way!”

“I know you won’t hurt me.” Spider’s voice trembled, but he met my gaze, his hazel eyes clear. “I trust you.”

“No! No, no, no, goddammit...” I cut myself off with the realization that I was on the verge of adding a temper tantrum to my roster of childishness.

“Just no,” I finished with as much dignity as I could muster under the circumstances. “Besides, how can Spider even do it? You said my key was customized to one user and one controller.”

“That’s not exactly accurate.” Jack glanced at Sam. “It’s actually a matched pair of keys. One is customized to you, and that’s the one you’ve been using all along. I didn’t realize that there’s another key, a controller key, that matches it.”

“Wait, so there have been two keys all along?” I glared at Sam. “You were hiding the controller key all this time, you-”

“Y-yes,” Sam stuttered. “B-but it didn’t matter to the operation of your key when you were going into the network by yourself,” he added hurriedly.

Jack broke the brittle silence. “So anyway, your new key is customized to you just like the old one, but its matching controller key is customized to Spider.”

“But... how?” Spider looked lost. “I didn’t... Wait. Last week when you said you needed me for some tests...” His expression crumpled into hurt. “You lied to me!”

“I’m sorry, Spider, it wasn’t a lie, we just couldn’t tell you all the details...”

“Enough.” Stemp’s flat voice cut across Jack’s apology. “Do the test.”

Jack handed Spider a tiny case like the one I clutched in my fist, and he stared at the minuscule cube on his palm, his brow furrowed.

“No,” I snapped. “I’m not going to do this.”

Stemp’s hard voice brooked no argument. “This is not a discussion. If you didn’t kill Kraus, you won’t kill Webb. You’re wasting time. Do it.”