

Tell Me No Spies

Book 4 of the NEVER SAY SPY series

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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.

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CHAPTER 1

I suppressed a curse and furtively shifted the concealed holster to a more comfortable spot at my waist, rearranging my sweatshirt over it. A tension headache pounded sullenly at the base of my skull.

The vibration of my phone made me start, and I snapped a glance over my shoulder before I snatched it up.

I could barely hear the whisper on the other end. "Aydan, can you stall him for a few more minutes?"

"How long?" I hissed. "What's wrong?"

"We just need a few more minutes to get everybody into position."

"I'll try." I punched the disconnect button with more force than absolutely necessary. Why the hell did I let myself get sucked into this?

I knotted my fists in my hair and tugged, but quickly desisted when the door latch released behind me. Trying to look relaxed, I leaned back in the chair and stretched my legs out. The security guard glanced my way and I gave him a quick smile, heart thumping.

At the sound of footsteps, I turned my smile toward my quarry as I stood. "All finished?"

"Yes." He stretched, grimacing. "Long day." He made for the door.

"Hang on a second," I blurted.

"What?" He shifted from foot to foot, obviously eager to leave.

"Um..."

Goddammit, what could I say to stall him? My mind was completely blank. The silence began to stretch. His forehead creased ever so slightly and his eyes darted toward the door.

Think, think, dammit!

Absolutely no inspiration came to mind.

Shit!

I did my best sheepish laugh and slapped my forehead. "Forgot what I was going to say. Sorry, you're right, it's been a long day."

He let out a short laugh and turned away again. "See you."

As he disappeared out the door, I whisked my phone out and hit the speed dial. Still attempting nonchalance, I wandered out of the building, raising a farewell hand to the security guard.

The phone rang interminably at the other end while I muttered, "Pick up, dammit, pick up!" When I finally heard the whisper on the other end, I snapped, "He's on his way!"

"Crap! Can you get here before him?"

"I'll try."

When I was sure nobody was watching, I launched myself into a silent sprint toward my car.

I lunged into the driver's seat and swore violently when the door slammed on my long hair and nearly dislocated my neck. I wasted precious seconds opening and closing the door to free myself. The tires chirped on the still-warm asphalt as I stomped on the gas.

Minutes later, my car skidded to a halt in the gravelled alley and I dashed through the twilight to let myself in the back gate. I spun at the last second to catch it before it banged behind me, then flew across the yard. As I reached the top step, the door to the darkened house opened. A disembodied hand yanked me inside.

My eyes hadn't adjusted to the dimness, and I allowed myself to be towed rapidly through the house. A jerk on my arm made me duck behind

the sofa just as the scrape of the front door key sounded, loud in the listening silence.

Light and noise erupted, and Spider recoiled with a shout, his gangly arms flailing in shock.

“Surprise!” Linda flung herself at him, hugging him as he staggered back against the wall. “Are you surprised?”

Spider’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly a few times. “Yeah...” he finally quavered. “Yeah... I’m surprised all right.” His dilated eyes focused on me. “Aydan! You were in on this all along! I’m going to-”

I raised my arms in mock surrender. “Be nice, Spider. You wouldn’t beat up an old lady, would you?”

“Old lady, my foot,” he retorted. “I couldn’t beat you up if I tried.”

“Hey, speak for yourself with that old lady stuff,” his mother tossed over her shoulder. “Forty-seven isn’t old! That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.” She pulled Spider down to kiss him noisily on the cheek. “Happy birthday, Clyde, honey.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He beamed at the rowdy crowd in the living room. “Thanks, you guys. You scared the heck out of me, but thanks.”

Linda tugged at him and he awkwardly stooped from his beanpole six-foot-two to give her a quick kiss. His cheeks turned pink when whoops and catcalls burst out.

Linda shot a devilish glance at the assembled friends and family, and wrapped her arms around his neck as she stretched to her full almost-five-foot height. Pandemonium reigned while her theatrically passionate kiss went on and on. Finally Spider disengaged himself, his face scarlet.

“Isn’t there some cake or something?” he mumbled, staring at the floor. Laughter filled the room, and the crowd’s attention shifted when one of his sisters brought in the cake. As the discordant chorus of “Happy

Birthday To You” rang out, he and Linda sneaked another kiss, their eyes sparkling.

I leaned back against the wall, grinning.

“Talk about the long and short of it. They look just like Ray and me together.” Spider’s mom smiled up at me. “Thanks for acting as the decoy.”

I laughed and rubbed at my headache. “You’re welcome. I’m glad it worked. They are cute together, aren’t they?” I chuckled again, regarding short, plump Gladys Webb beside me and Spider’s tall, lanky dad across the room. Like father, like son.

I accepted my piece of birthday cake and lingered a few more minutes, trying to appear sociable while I sweated profusely. As soon as I could politely excuse myself, I did a fast fade out to the mercifully cool evening air on the back deck.

I was leaning on the railing and sipping a glass of water when Spider came out and leaned beside me.

“Thanks for letting Mom and Linda rope you into this,” he said.

“I didn’t have much choice. Linda by herself is bad enough. The two of them combined are an unstoppable force.”

He returned my rueful grin. “I know. But with two older sisters, I’m used to dominant females. You haven’t met them yet, have you? Why don’t you come back inside and I’ll introduce you to everybody?”

I sipped water, stalling, and he mistook my hesitation. “I know you don’t really like crowds. It’s okay if you just want to sneak away.”

“Thanks, Spider, but that wasn’t really what I was thinking. I like your mom, and I’d like to meet your dad and sisters, but I’m cooking in this sweatshirt, and I can’t take it off because I wore my waist holster today. Damn October weather, it was cold this morning and then it turned hot.”

“Oh.” He eyed me uncertainly. “Couldn’t you just leave your gun in your car?”

"I could. But I'm not supposed to. And it'd be Murphy's Law that I'd need it the one time I took it off."

"I guess. I hope you won't need it tonight, though."

"I'm sure I won't." I patted him on the shoulder. "Go enjoy your party."

He had just disappeared inside when his father's bony silhouette appeared in the doorway. He advanced on me, hand outstretched.

"I'm Ray Webb, Clyde's dad. You're the only tall woman with long red hair here, so you must be Aydan Kelly."

"Guilty." I shook his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to finally meet you, too. Clyde talks a lot about you."

"Spider talks a lot, period. But he's the bright spot of my days at Sirius Dynamics," I added quickly. "He's a great kid. And scary smart."

Ray winked. "Like his dad."

"So I hear."

I knew Ray by reputation only, as a civilian researcher at Sirius. He was brilliant, eccentric, and nowhere close to the security clearance that would allow him to know about my work. I hunched over the railing again, making sure my loose sweatshirt concealed my gun.

"So you do bookkeeping for Sirius Dynamics?" His gaze was a little too piercing, and I felt my eyes slither sideways despite myself.

"Yes," I replied, with perhaps a shade too much emphasis.

"But you work with Clyde."

I could tell he was trying to puzzle out why a bookkeeper would hobnob on a daily basis with a computer analyst.

"Yes... I do some computer work, sometimes, too."

Ray's face brightened. "Really? What's your area of expertise?"

Shit. All I needed was to get into a technical discussion that would reveal how little I really knew about modern computer systems.

"I... help out with some of the network stuff," I hedged.

“In the secured facility,” he prompted. “I saw you going in there a few weeks ago.”

Shit, shit, shit!

“Uh, sometimes, yeah. But that was for some, um, bookkeeping stuff for one of the special projects. I have to work down there when I’m doing bookkeeping. Um, for the special projects, I mean. Because they can’t bring stuff upstairs.”

He contemplated me for a few moments. “Don’t take this wrong, but you need a better cover,” he said at last.

I blew out a breath through my teeth and resisted the urge to yank a couple of handfuls of hair. “I’m just a bookkeeper, Ray, okay?”

“Okay. But you should come up with a more convincing story.”

“I wish I could, but I’m really just a bookkeeper.”

He opened his mouth and closed it again as one of Spider’s sisters poked her head out the door. “Come on inside, Dad. Clyde’s going to open his presents.”

I sucked in a breath of relief. “I really have to run now. It was nice talking to you. Tell Spider I said happy birthday.”

I scuttled out to my car and fell into the driver’s seat, groaning and rubbing my pounding temples in the friendly darkness. Christ, I needed to get better at that. Spider’s dad was brighter than most people, but it was only a matter of time before others started asking the same inconvenient questions.

CHAPTER 2

Sprawled under my car the next afternoon, I let fly with a few colourful expletives when some of the blackened oil poured over the badly-placed frame member and missed the drain pan. I jerked and barely avoided smashing my forehead on the chassis when a male voice startled me.

“Everything okay?”

“Shit!” I scuffled across the concrete on my back, heart pounding, and peered out from underneath the Saturn at my neighbour, Tom Rossburn.

I blew out a long breath, thankful it was him and not somebody trying to kill me. I'd left my gun in the house when I changed my clothes. Stupid. I should know better by now.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you,” he said.

“It's okay. Could you hand me that roll of paper towels, please?”

He glanced at my oil-stained hands and tore off a couple of sheets.

“Do you need more?”

“No, that's fine. Thanks.” I squirmed back under the car and wiped up the mess, doing a bit of deep breathing in an attempt to dissipate the unnecessary adrenaline.

When I emerged again, he gave me his attractive crooked smile.

“Do you need a hand?”

“No, I’ll just let it drain for a few minutes and then button it up.” I wiped my hands on the paper towel he offered and surreptitiously checked him out, enjoying the view.

The colour of his denim shirt accentuated his sky-blue eyes, and the rolled-up sleeves revealed tanned, sinewy muscle. Even from a couple of feet away, he smelled like sun-baked cotton and sweet, fresh hay. He hadn’t turned around yet, but I knew from previous dedicated observation that the rear view of those faded jeans and cowboy boots was drool-worthy, too.

I did my best to project casual neighbourly interest. “I saw you up there with the truck earlier. How’s it going?”

“Fine. I just dropped by to let you know I finished loading the bales from your eighty.”

“Thanks!” I beamed at him. “I’m so glad you could do that for me. Let me know what your expenses were.”

He waved a hand. “Forget it.”

“No, we had a deal. Split the expenses, split the profits when you sell the bales. And I still think you should take more than half. You’re doing all the work.”

“But it’s your land,” he objected.

I propped my fists on my hips and frowned at him, and his crooked grin came back. “Okay. I’ll write it out and drop it off tomorrow.”

“Good. Thanks.” I wiped my hands again on my coveralls and headed for the beer fridge that was just one of the many things I loved about my deluxe garage. “Do you want a beer?” I pulled out a cold one and waved it in his direction.

“No, I better not. You go ahead though.”

I unzipped the hot coveralls and shimmied out of them gratefully. As I tipped a long swallow of ice-cold beer down my throat, I caught Tom surveying my clingy shorts and tank top with undisguised appreciation.

“How’d you like to go out for drinks tonight instead?” he asked.

“..Um.”

In the last couple of months, I’d been more and more tempted to discard my “look, don’t touch” policy with him. I gave myself a mental slap to the head. Down, girl!

“I.. uh.”

Goddammit, what would a few drinks matter? We were neighbours after all. I should at least make an effort to be friendly.

“Sure. That sounds like fun.” I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth, but it was already too late. Tom’s face lit up, and he gave me a full-on grin.

“Great, I’ll pick you up at six-thirty?”

Still time to back out. Remember some pressing engagement. Do it, dammit. Say no. Say it now.

“Okay. See you then.”

Shit. I’m an idiot.

At twenty after six, I locked up the house and sank into the chair on my front porch with a sigh. Several times during the day, I’d stood with my hand poised over the phone, ready to call Tom and cancel. And each time, I’d turned and walked away.

I knew I should have called it off. Never mind that, I knew I shouldn’t have accepted in the first place. What the hell was I thinking?

As Tom’s truck drove up the lane, I hurried down the steps and met him on the gravelled turnaround I’d deliberately built outside the range of the surveillance cameras that blanketed my house.

The weathered lines around his eyes crinkled with his smile as I hopped up into the big 4x4. “I’m really glad you could come,” he said. “I

thought we could go over to Blue Eddy's, if that's okay with you. They have a live band tonight."

"Oh... yeah... that sounds great," I responded brightly, trying to silence the voice in my head that kept repeating, "Bad idea! Bad, bad idea!"

His smile lost a few watts. "We could go somewhere else if you'd rather."

"No, I love Eddy's," I assured him. "The Saturday bands are always good, and the food's far better than the Silverside Hotel."

Which was true. Those were the only two licensed establishments in the tiny town, and Eddy's was practically my second home. That was the problem. We'd be seen together.

Duh. Kinda like a date.

I'm definitely an idiot.

My heart was beating a little faster than necessary when we walked into Blue Eddy's. The band wasn't due to start until eight, so my usual table in the corner was still free. I made a beeline for it and slid into my favourite chair, my back to the wall while I surveyed the rest of the bar. Tom sat opposite me, one eyebrow arched quizzically.

"Hi, Aydan!" The waitress gave me a smile, and her eyes darted between Tom and me. Shit, by morning the entire town would know we'd been out together. I suppressed a sigh. "Do you want a beer?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks, Darlene."

Her eyes lit up.

Shit. She knew I never drank if I was driving, so now she had proof that we were together. On a date.

Busted.

“Is everything okay?” Tom was watching me with a faint crease between his brows.

I summoned up a smile. “Of course.”

“It sounded like you groaned.”

I shook off my mood and forced a laugh. “No, that was my stomach growling,” I lied. “I’m looking forward to some food and that beer.”

He relaxed and smiled back at me, and soon we were laughing and chatting with our usual easy camaraderie. I glanced up as Darlene arrived with our food, and froze.

Tom turned in his seat to follow my sight line, and we watched Kane stride into the bar. Head and shoulders taller than most of the patrons, he was easy to spot. As usual, he wore dark jeans and a black T-shirt that stretched across his broad shoulders and hugged his muscular arms. He made his way through the crowd, seemingly oblivious to the female heads turning to check out his killer body, strong, square face, and short dark hair shading to grey at the temples.

I swallowed hard when his gaze swung over to our table. His face smoothed into an unreadable mask, and he nodded politely in our direction before turning to take a stool at the bar, his back to the wall.

I thanked Darlene and dragged my attention back to Tom. He was frowning again. “That’s John Kane, isn’t it? The guy who...” he hesitated almost imperceptibly. “...you work with?”

“Yes.” I changed the subject and concentrated on Tom, my food, and my second beer. I couldn’t help watching Kane out of the corner of my eye, and I relaxed when he finished his meal at last and left soon afterward.

A few beers and some excellent music later, Tom and I emerged laughing into the parking lot. As we strolled away from the lights of the bar, I caught Tom’s arm. “Wow, look at that big cheddar-cheese moon! Doesn’t it make you think of Halloween?”

He didn't reply right away, and I tore my attention away from the moon to glance up at him. Warning bells went off in my slightly tipsy brain when he smiled at me.

"No, I wasn't thinking of Halloween," he said.

"Oh." I let go of his arm as if it was red-hot, but he caught my hands gently before I could step back.

"I haven't heard a Harley around your place for a while," he said.

"Um. No, not recently."

"Are you still involved with Arnie?"

I ignored the sudden pang and kept my tone light. "Yes, but he's been busy lately."

His callused hands tightened a fraction on mine. "I think you're better off without him."

"You just got a bad first impression. He's actually a really nice guy."

Tom grimaced. "Yeah, there a lot of nice guys nicknamed 'Hellhound'."

"It's just wordplay on his last name." I made a none-too-determined effort to extricate my hands. Standing so close, his clean outdoorsy male scent was threatening to overwhelm my common sense. His grip on my hands was warm and strong.

His voice dropped to an intimate murmur as he looked into my eyes. "My 'friends with benefits' offer still stands. If you're interested."

'Interested' didn't exactly cover the magnitude of what I was feeling. I did my best to hide my internal struggle. I was still trying to formulate a reply when he leaned in and kissed me.

I was fighting a desperate battle against the urge to take him up on his offer right then and there in the middle of the parking lot when the sound of Kane's voice made me jerk away with a gasp.

“Aydan, I’m sorry to interrupt, but we need you at the office.” He didn’t sound sorry at all. He sounded... dangerous.

“Oh.” My gaze ping-ponged between Tom and Kane. They were both expressionless, but I sensed the tension in them as they locked eyes.

“It’s eleven-thirty on a Saturday night,” Tom said evenly. “I’m sure it can wait.”

“It can’t.” Kane’s deep voice was hard. “Aydan, let’s go.”

I turned to Tom. “I’m sorry, I have to go. Thanks a lot for tonight. I had fun.”

I was turning to leave when he caught my arm lightly. “Aydan, you don’t have to go with him if you don’t want to.”

Kane eyed Tom’s hand on my arm. The small hairs lifted on the back of my neck, and I pulled away quickly.

“I do have to go, actually.” I blurted out the first semi-plausible explanation that came to mind. “We’re right in the middle of an audit, and we have a deadline. We’ve been waiting on some information, and I told John to call me as soon as he had it.”

“Oh.” Tom’s eyes narrowed and his hands clenched into fists as he assessed Kane looming beside me. After a couple of long seconds, he squared his shoulders and gave us a curt nod. “Okay. If you say so. Good night, Aydan.” He hesitated. “Call me if you need a ride home. No matter what time it is.”

“Thanks.” The word came out on a whoosh of breath I hadn’t realized I was holding when he turned toward his truck.

I trotted after Kane as he stalked to his black Expedition. We got in, and he sat staring through the windshield for a moment. When he spoke, his normally even voice had a distinct edge. “What the hell was that?”

My temper flared, and I wrestled my voice under control before responding. “A mistake. Obviously.”

“I thought you told Rossburn you weren’t interested in him.”

“I did.”

“So what the hell was that?”

“A mistake. I made a mistake, okay? He’s my neighbour, he’s been doing a lot of work on my farm this summer, I was trying to be friendly and he got the wrong idea.”

“You didn’t seem in a hurry to tell him that.”

I clamped my teeth together on my irritation and concentrated on releasing the fist that I’d clenched unconsciously. “I... He took me by surprise. I would’ve dealt with it.”

“You need to deal with it tomorrow. Tell him you’re still scr...” he bit back his first choice of words and continued, “...seeing Hellhound.”

I blew out a breath between my teeth. “I did. He knows Arnie hasn’t been around in the last couple of months.”

In my peripheral vision, I saw Kane turn to look at me, and I glared straight ahead out the windshield.

After a short silence, he spoke again. “I thought you two were hot and heavy.”

“And I thought it was none of your business,” I gritted. “And speaking of ‘none of your business’, what the hell were you doing lurking in the parking lot in the middle of the night anyway? Looking for some cheap thrills?”

“I was doing my job,” he ground out. “I’m a spy, not a goddamn voyeur. If you’re going to make out in public, you can’t blame me for having to watch. And it’s a lucky thing I was here. What would you have done when he started getting really friendly and found your gun?”

I was biting my tongue to hold back angry words when he shot a scowl at my snug T-shirt and jeans. “You are wearing your gun, aren’t you? Dammit, Aydan, tell me you’re wearing your gun! Tell me your judgement isn’t that clouded...”

“Jesus Christ! Yes! I’m wearing my gun! It’s in my ankle holster. And he wasn’t going to get any friendlier because I’m not goddamn *stupid* enough to take a chance like that! And I told you, I made a fucking mistake, which happens occasionally to mere mortals like me...”

I paused only long enough to suck in a furious breath. “... unlike you, who would *never* make an error in judgement, like, oh, I don’t know, sneaking into my house in the middle of the night and *fucking my brains out* after we agreed we couldn’t get involved...”

Kane tensed in his seat, staring out the windshield, and I realized I’d gone too far. I was about to offer an apology when he jerked around to face me, and I flinched when his hands flew toward me.

One of his fists knotted in my hair as he yanked me close and kissed me hard. My half-raised hands were trapped between us, and I shoved against his powerful chest as I jerked away far enough to yelp, “What-the-”

“Don’t fight me,” he growled, and pulled me into another demanding kiss.

I made a half-hearted attempt to push him away, but his hands and lips felt too good. The tiny part of my mind that retained some logical thought advised me this was a Very Bad Idea, but I cheerfully ignored it.

I kissed him back hungrily and let hot need overwhelm me while I groped his hard muscles with shaking hands. God, after two months of deprivation, I was ready to combust just from the sizzling memories. I clutched at him as he pulled my T-shirt free of my jeans, his hands burning against the skin of my back. His teeth closed lightly on my earlobe, and I gasped open-mouthed against him, drowning in lust.

Through half-closed eyes, I caught a flash of movement out in the parking lot and moments later Tom’s truck roared away.

The heat of anger displaced my desire as I stiffened in Kane’s arms.

“You can stop now,” I snapped. “He’s gone.”

CHAPTER 3

Kane released me and drew back, his grey eyes black in the semi-darkness. We stared at each other for a few moments, and I broke the silence first.

“You can be a real asshole, can’t you?”

“Aydan...”

The anger drained out of me at the look on his face, and I blew out a long sigh that was half-groan. “Never mind.” I slumped forward and pounded my forehead gently against the dashboard. “Christ, what a clusterfuck. I’m such an idiot. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not an idiot.” His voice was soft. “I know how hard it is to do without...” He trailed off. “Everybody slips up sometimes. As you pointed out,” he added ruefully. “I’m sorry, too. The last couple of months have been... tough. I overreacted.”

“Thanks.” I met his eyes tentatively. “Friends again?”

“Always. You know that.” He hesitated. “Speaking of friends... I don’t mean to pry, and you can tell me to go to hell if you want, but... what happened between you and Hellhound?”

I massaged my aching temples. “Nothing. I just haven’t seen him since August, and I don’t want to push it. We were... pretty vulnerable with each other when we thought you’d died, and you know how he feels about getting attached.”

“The same as you,” he said quietly.

I glanced away from his steady eyes. “Uh, yeah.” I squirmed a little in the seat.

Since August, I’d been pretending he’d never uttered the L-word. I really didn’t want to have that conversation again, especially with my lips still burning from his kisses. Along with the other parts of my body that were still smouldering.

I ignored the subtext and stuck with the stated topic. “I hope he... I hope it works out. He was... he’s a good friend.”

“Arnie doesn’t abandon his friends,” Kane assured me. “He’s just been busy lately. I called him a couple of times, but I haven’t seen him, either.”

“Oh.” My heart lightened, and I changed the subject to conceal my relief. “Shouldn’t we be heading for the office? Were you just blowing smoke, or is there really something urgent?”

“Yes.” He started the Expedition, and I eased my stress out in a long, secret sigh.

Relief morphed rapidly into worry as we pulled out of the parking lot. “What’s wrong? How bad is it?”

He shot me a quick glance. “Don’t worry, I don’t think it’s life-threatening. If I hadn’t already known you were in town tonight, I likely would have left it until tomorrow morning.”

My shoulders attempted to climb up around my ears. “You don’t *think* it’s life-threatening? I told you, if it’s urgent, call me. No matter what time it is. You know how I’d feel if something bad happened to somebody because I wasn’t there to decrypt a message.”

Kane sighed. “Aydan, you can’t work 24/7. There will always be something else that has to be decrypted. You haven’t had a full weekend in two months.”

“Yeah, but...”

He pulled into the parking lot across from Sirius Dynamics and fixed me with a severe look. "But, nothing. I'm your handler. When I say you need a rest, you need a rest. Stemp will have my head on a platter if you burn out."

"That's pretty rich coming from a guy who hardly eats or sleeps while he's on a mission."

I thought I detected a tinge of bitterness in his voice when he replied, "That's different. I'm supposed to be an agent." He gave his head a quick shake as if to rid himself of a thought, and continued, "You're not. You're a civilian. Aren't you?"

"Yes! Don't start that again. I'm a civilian. I'm not an undercover agent. I'm just saying..."

"Come on," he interrupted. "We're not getting anywhere with this conversation. We need to get this done so you can go home and get some sleep."

I grimaced and hopped out of the truck to follow him into Sirius.

We collected our security fobs from the guard behind the bulletproof window, and Kane made for the heavy steel door that led to the secured area. As he stooped for the retinal scan, I came to stand beside him.

"I'll just come down with you," I told him. "We won't be long, will we?"

The door released with a muffled click, and he straightened and gazed down at me. "When did you get over being claustrophobic?"

"I'm too tired to panic tonight."

He studied me for a second. "No. Go on up to your office. If you're that tired, I don't want to take a chance."

I shrugged and trailed off down the hallway as he stepped into the cramped time-delay enclosure that always gave me the willies. Not for the

first time, I thanked my lucky stars I had Kane for my handler. I'd never take him for granted again.

Up in my second-floor office, I collapsed yawning onto the small sofa. I was hunched over rubbing my temples when Kane's voice startled me. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Just a headache."

He surveyed me, his brow furrowed. "How long has it been since you *didn't* have a headache?"

"I don't know. Whatever." I held out my hand for the tiny box that contained the world's most secret and valuable technology. "Let's just do this."

Kane frowned down at me. "Do you want some ibuprofen?"

"No, I've tried that. Nothing touches it." I wiggled my outstretched fingers. "Give."

He reluctantly handed me the network key. "Wait," he rapped out as I leaned back on the couch and closed my eyes.

"What?"

"I'll come into the network with you, since Webb's not here to monitor. Just in case you have problems in the sim." He sat in the chair across from me. "Okay, let's go."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on entering the white void of virtual reality. As I stepped into it, Kane's avatar popped into existence beside me, and we strode down virtual hallways to the file repository.

Inside, I scowled at the stack of files. Damn, they were piling up again.

"Do you know which one it is?" I asked.

Kane grimaced. "No. You're the only one in the world who can decrypt any of these. I don't know one from the other. But when I got the call, the analyst said you should look for a timestamp of nine twenty-three p.m."

“Okay, thanks.” I flipped through the files, rubbing my head with my free hand as I searched.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah, fine,” I mumbled, still sifting through the stack. “But I’d be so much happier if I could just go back to being an ordinary bookkeeper instead of a military secret.”

“Believe me, I wish you could, too,” Kane said.

Something in his voice made me pause in my search. I shot a glance his way, but his face was composed as always. “I guess you must be going a little stir-crazy just sitting around here all the time,” I ventured.

He twitched a shoulder, and my attention shifted as I discovered the file.

“Here we go,” I said, and plopped into a virtual chair to begin decrypting.

At last, I looked up, rubbing the kinks out of my neck. “Did that make any sense to you?” I inquired.

Kane focused a predatory grin on his virtual terminal. “Yes.”

I watched him work for a few minutes, his gaze riveted to the screen while he typed rapidly with his two index fingers. Despite my exhaustion, I smiled at his single-minded focus. He was so dedicated, so ready to lay his life on the line to protect national security. I was proud to be part of his team, and lucky to be working with him.

And he must be hating every minute of it.

Before I came along, he’d been a field agent. Now he’d been stuck behind a desk for two months, with no relief in sight. No wonder he was getting cranky. I sighed, wishing there was a better solution than wasting his talents babysitting me.

He glanced up at the sound. “I’m sorry, I just need to get this tied up, and then I’ll take you home.”

“It’s okay. I’m just going to work on some of these other files while I wait.”

I held back a groan and opened the next file in the stack. The encrypted words swam in front of my tired eyes, and I blinked hard, trying to focus. The print crawled on the page. Like bugs.

I sprang up and bit back a yell as hundreds of black beetles skittered over my hands and scuttled under the files that lay on the virtual table. Kane was instantly on his feet. He reached me in two quick strides and his powerful arm wrapped around my waist.

“Let’s go,” he snapped, already hustling me out the door of the virtual file room.

“It’s okay.” I tried to get him to slow down, but he continued to rush me toward the network portal. “It’s okay,” I repeated. “I just lost my concentration for a second there.”

“Out.” He stopped at the portal and guided me gently through.

Pain slammed through my head. Its familiarity did nothing to diminish its impact, and my violent profanity was edged with an embarrassing whine of self-pity. I shut up as soon as I was capable of controlling myself, but my eyes stayed clamped closed while I breathed through my teeth.

Kane’s big, warm hands enveloped my head as he began to massage the pain away.

“Oh, God, I love you,” I moaned.

His hands stilled for a bare instant before resuming. “You love God, or you love me?” he asked.

I couldn’t think of any way to backpedal gracefully. I cravenly ignored his question and groaned some more instead, silently berating myself for my poor choice of words.

At last, I straightened and opened my eyes. “Thanks.” He stooped to survey my face, and I avoided his gaze by dropping my head forward to

rub the back of my neck. “You might as well go back into the network and finish up. I’ll stay out until you’re done.”

“All right. I’ll only be a few more minutes.”

When I looked up, he had re-entered the virtual reality network and his physical body sat propped motionless in the chair, his eyes staring blankly at nothing. I shuddered, horrid memories replaying while I compulsively watched the rise and fall of his chest. He was only in the network. He wasn’t dead.

I glanced at my watch and suppressed a whimper. A quarter to two. My head throbbed slowly and I slid down to rest it against the back of the couch. I thought of Tom, and groaned aloud.

He was such a nice guy. How long would it take before he finally decided I was a flaky, pathetic slut and gave up on me? I knew I couldn’t risk any explanation without endangering him, myself, and everyone in Kane’s team. Oh, not to mention national security. No pressure.

Tom’s lean, honest face and sky-blue eyes floated in front of me, and I smothered another groan of self-pity. If not for the stupid network key and my stupid decryption abilities, I’d be living the life of my dreams out on my new farm, with a handsome cowboy neighbour thrown in as a special bonus. He was my own age. Widowed, like me. And he liked cars. And he was a good kisser. Not in the same class as Hellhound, but that wasn’t really a fair comparison. Arnie was in a class by himself.

My mind drifted, and I smiled up into Arnie’s ugly face. As his lips touched mine, I decided it was lucky he wasn’t handsome, or he’d be utterly devastating. I found him irresistible just as he was...

He deepened the kiss, his magic tongue teasing me. Heat coursed through my body, and I jerked with shock at the sound of Kane’s voice.

“Aydan. Sorry to wake you. Come on, let’s go.”

I dragged gritty eyes open as he reached a hand down to help me up. Jeez, lucky I hadn’t been holding the network key when I went to

sleep. It'd be embarrassing as hell to try to explain why I'd apparently been using a top-secret brainwave-driven government network to create porn. Starring me.

I followed Kane down the hallway, silently cursing my life.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, I bolted upright in bed at the sound of my doorbell. I squinted blearily at the clock as I crawled out of bed, whining. Eight o'clock. God, less than five hours of sleep.

I staggered into the walk-in closet with half-closed eyes and grabbed the first thing that came to hand, an ugly lightweight robe I probably should have thrown out years ago. As I stumbled through the kitchen, I yanked my fingers through my hair, trying to tame some of the night's tangles.

With a yawn that threatened to turn me inside-out, I opened the door, and the wind snatched at my robe. I made a frantic grab and quickly secured it, but not before it became abundantly obvious I didn't own any night clothes.

Heat rushed to my face as I met Tom's paralyzed stare. "Sorry," I mumbled, suddenly finding my floor fascinating.

"Uh," he said. "No... No need to apologize. I'm sorry, I thought you'd be up..." He trailed off.

"It turned into a late night last night..." I dribbled to a halt myself, knowing what he was thinking and knowing that denying it would only cause more complications. I scrubbed a hand over my face, wishing I could shrink and vanish between the cracks in the floorboards.

"I, uh, I brought the expenses you asked for." He held out a folded piece of paper. I took it mechanically, not meeting his eyes. "Aydan..." he hesitated. "Can I come in?"

“Oh! Um, yeah.” I backed away from the door. Jeez, I have all the social graces of an inept chimpanzee. No, wait; chimpanzees actually have a fairly sophisticated social structure...

I tried not to grimace as I dragged my groggy mind back to the subject at hand. “Sorry. I’m not quite awake yet.”

He strode in and sat in one of my kitchen chairs without invitation. I closed the door and hovered for a second, looking anywhere but at his face. “I’m, um, I’m just going to go and put some clothes on...”

I fled for my bedroom. Christ, maybe I could find some dignity, too, while I was at it.

I threw on the ratty jeans and sweatshirt that lay on my chair and dragged the brush through my hair, trying not to look at my baggy-eyed reflection in the mirror. God, if I hadn’t accidentally flashed him, my appearance this morning would have been enough to make him lose interest on the spot. Too bad he hadn’t been looking at my face.

I groaned and considered drowning myself in the bathroom sink, but the logistics defied me. I trailed reluctantly back toward the kitchen instead.

When I arrived, Tom was slouched in the chair, his long legs outstretched, booted feet crossed, arms folded over his chest. He looked up as I entered, and I steeled myself to meet his eyes. He wore a neutral expression, and we regarded each other for a moment before I turned to the fridge.

“I need to eat. Do you want anything?” I busied myself pulling out milk, fruit, bread, and peanut butter.

“No, thanks, I’ve eaten.”

He sat in silence until I took my place across from him at the table and started munching my grapes.

“Aydan, can we talk?”

I suppressed a sigh. "Sure. What's on your mind?" As if I didn't know.

"Are you all right? Are you... safe?"

"Mmm?" I froze, staring at him, before I remembered to swallow my mouthful. "Of course."

His blue eyes searched my face. "Last night you were nervous all evening. When Kane showed up at the bar, you kept watching him as if you were afraid. And then he was waiting for you in the parking lot. Is he stalking you?"

"No, of course not."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Then what is he holding over you? Every time he says 'jump', you ask 'how high'. And last night..." He paused. "I came back to make sure you were all right. I saw you in the truck with him. He was so rough with you, and it looked like you were fighting him."

His face darkened, and I did my best not to wince as he added almost under his breath, "At first, anyway..." He frowned at me. "I didn't know whether you needed help or not."

"No," I said quickly, hoping to end the conversation there. "I was fine..."

I fumbled for something smooth and tactful to say, failed, and gave up as heat rose in my cheeks again. Nothing like going out with one man and ending the evening by making out with a different one. Talk about cheesy. Even though I hadn't technically been on a date with Tom. And dammit, making out with Kane hadn't been my idea. And...

Tom leaned across the table and took my hand, interrupting my internal rationalizations. "Aydan, if he's making you do things you don't want to do, you can tell me. Let me help you."

I looked into his earnest face and sighed. "Tom, thanks, but I'm fine. John doesn't have any hold over me."

I saw the disbelief in his eyes and pulled my hand away to rub my aching head. God, I'd been up for less than ten minutes, and I had a headache already. That must be a friggin' record. I was too tired to come up with any convincing lies, so I went with as much of the truth as I could tell.

"John and I... we have a... complicated relationship, that's all. We're attracted to each other, but he wants a more serious relationship than I can give him. It makes things tense between us sometimes. That's all."

"So he was forcing you." His sky-blue eyes turned to ice. "That dirtbag. Aydan, I'm so sorry, I should have..."

"No!" I clutched a couple of handfuls of hair and tugged, trying to salvage an explanation that would reassure him. "Nothing happened between us last night, he... I think he just wanted you to see he was staking a claim..." I shut up, realizing I was reinforcing the 'deranged stalker' label. I tried again.

"There actually was some urgent stuff at work. We drove over there, worked until nearly three, and then he brought me home. That's all. He would never force me or hurt me."

"That's what you said about Hellhound, too, and I don't believe that, either." He frowned at me across the table. "Aydan... You deserve better. Why are you wasting your time with these violent men?"

I swallowed a groan. "I know you're trying to help. But just let me be your dumb, flaky neighbour who makes bad relationship decisions, okay? Just let it go. Please?"

His eyes narrowed as he searched my face. "I know you're not dumb or flaky. And when Kane's not around, you're happy and relaxed with me." He took my hand again. "Tell him it's over. Tell him you're with me now. Let me deal with him."

“Tom.” I met his eyes squarely and hardened my heart. “Let it go. I told you months ago there can’t be anything between you and me, and that hasn’t changed. If we can still be friends, I’d like that, but that’s all it can be. You need to let me make my own mistakes with Arnie and John and anybody else I choose. You can’t protect me.”

He leaned back in the chair and regarded me with obvious frustration. “I can’t protect you if you won’t let me. Why...”

The sound of scattering gravel made us both glance out the window to see Kane’s mean black BMW motorcycle skid to a stop outside.

Tom’s brows snapped together. “He’s watching you constantly, isn’t he? Aydan, you don’t have to live like this.”

Kane’s heavy footsteps thudded on the veranda, and he burst through the door without knocking, wearing an expression as black as his leather jacket. Tom shot to his feet and the two men eyed each other, Kane’s stormy grey to Tom’s icy blue.

Kane gave me a look from under lowered brows. “Aydan, we need you at the office again. Urgent.” His gaze raked over Tom. “Sorry, you’ll have to leave now.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed and a muscle jumped in his jaw. “She’s not going with you this time,” he said quietly.

Kane’s face smoothed into expressionless calm as he placed his helmet on the table. When he straightened, his arms were loose and his posture relaxed, his weight on the balls of his feet. Anyone would think he was completely unperturbed, unprepared for an attack. I knew better.

I put a hand on Tom’s arm, feeling the rigid muscle through his soft shirt. “It’s okay, Tom, I need to go and work on that audit some more.”

“No, you don’t.” Tom took a step forward, placing himself between Kane and me as he locked eyes with Kane. “I don’t like the way you treat Aydan. And I don’t want you stalking her anymore. That stops now.” His voice was quiet, but hard as iron.

The corner of Kane's mouth twitched up in a small, humourless half-smile. His eyes never left Tom's. "Aydan makes her own decisions. Why don't you ask her what she wants?"

I felt the muscles bunch in Tom's arm. "You're obviously threatening her. She'll say what you tell her to say."

"Tom!" I swung around in front of him and got up in his face. "Stop. He's not threatening me. This is none of your business. Let it go."

He spared me a fleeting glance before meeting Kane's stare again. He spoke without looking at me. "I'm making it my business."

Tom tried to move me aside as he took another step toward Kane, and cold fear pulsed through my veins. He wasn't going to back down. And as brave and strong as Tom was, I knew Kane could destroy three Toms with his bare hands. I'd seen him do it.

Pent-up tension exploded out of me. "Tom! It's none of your business! I don't want your help!" I pushed him toward the door. "It's time for you to go. Now. Goodbye."

He took an involuntary step backward as I shoved him again. "But, Aydan, you..."

"Go," I interrupted. "Goodbye."

My heart wrung as confusion and hurt filled his eyes. Then his face hardened and he gave a curt nod before turning on his heel. The door banged behind him.

Kane's combat-ready posture eased into his normal stance as he surveyed my face. "Are you all right?"

"I..." I stared at him helplessly for a moment before dropping into a chair to let my aching forehead fall onto the table with a thump. "I can't do this anymore," I whimpered into the tabletop.

I heard him pull up a chair beside me, and his arm was gentle around my shoulders. "Tell me what happened. Talk to me."

I leaned into him, taking a little comfort. He brushed my hair back, his fingertips lingering on my cheek. "Tell me."

I determinedly squelched the urge to throw my arms around him and hide my face in his broad chest until everything else went away. I blew out a long sigh and pulled back instead.

"I just can't do this anymore. Ray Webb was asking awkward questions about what I'm doing at Sirius. And I can't keep hurting people like that." A spasm of guilt shook me at the memory of Tom's face. "I just can't."

Kane took my hand and held it gently. "Aydan, I know you can do what needs to be done."

"I can kill criminals if necessary. But I can't... won't hurt innocent people."

He sighed, and his eyes were old and tired as he replied, "Sometimes that's necessary, too." He frowned as I opened my mouth to argue, and spoke over me. "Who's Ray Webb?"

"Spider's dad. I was over at their place on Friday night for Spider's surprise birthday party."

"Oh." Kane regarded me with a troubled expression. "Aydan, I know you're not going to want to hear this, but you need to stop getting so involved with people. You can't afford to get close in our line of work."

His face twisted as he said it, and I knew he was remembering our conversation of a couple of months ago. "I'm sorry, I know you already know that," he added. "But we all need to be reminded sometimes." He lifted a wry eyebrow, and I gave him a bitter smile in return.

"I know. But we need to do damage control. That's twice in two days I've had problems. I don't know what to do."

"What exactly happened?"

I explained both encounters to him in detail, and he sat back in his chair, frowning. "Let me think about it for a while. Just lie low in the mean time."

I suddenly recalled the reason for his visit, and jumped to my feet. "How urgent is the decryption? Do I have time for a shower, or should we go right now?"

He rose, too. "There's no decryption. This time I really was stalking you." He smiled at my expression. "Don't worry, the stalking was in a professional capacity. After last night, I had a feeling you might have problems with Rossburn. I told the analysts to call me if they saw him on the surveillance cameras."

"Oh." I looked up at him, wondering how much of his attention was duty and how much was personal, disguised as duty.

As if reading my mind, he blew out a long breath. "I thought it would be best if I looked jealous. We may have to pretend to be involved as a cover, though I'd like to avoid it if at all possible. It causes too many complications down the line."

"Okay." I followed him to the door, and found myself standing too close for comfort when he turned.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll figure it out."

"Thanks. See you." I tried to control my face while I ogled him from close range. Those damn riding chaps did it to me every time. A faint whiff of gun oil and leather reached me as I jerked my gaze up from his well-endowed crotch, and I swallowed hard. I could almost taste his skin again, feel that hard-muscled shoulder under my teeth. Could almost feel that magnificent...

"Call me if you need me," I added. My voice came out sounding husky, and I realized I'd licked my lips unconsciously.

I lost what little breath I had left when Kane's eyes darkened. His hand moved as though he would reach for me, but he gripped the

doorknob instead, his knuckles whitening. He stepped quickly out the door and closed it behind him without a backward glance.

He revved the bike, and I watched him spray gravel and disappear down the lane before I collapsed into my chair again, knees trembling. Goddamn, he was hot. And if I didn't keep my hands off him, Sirius Dynamics would take him down right along with me when the time came.

Life just wasn't fair.

CHAPTER 5

I trailed into Sirius Dynamics on Monday morning with a significant lack of enthusiasm. When I realized my office was already crowded, I jerked to a halt in the doorway, surveying the occupants.

Kane and Spider were present, as expected. I kept my expression neutral at the sight of Charles Stemp, Sirius's civilian director of clandestine operations.

Stemp looked up as I entered, his reptilian features unreadable as always. "Ms. Kelly, you have a new team member, effective immediately." He indicated the fourth man in the room. "He will be joining your team in an attempt to analyze the unique interaction of your brain with the network key's circuitry."

My cynical inside voice finished the unspoken sentence: "...so we can figure out how to decrypt things for ourselves and kill you as soon as possible." I shrugged off the thought. Same old, same old.

Stemp continued as I reached to shake hands with the newcomer, "This is Dr. Sam Kraus."

A shock of recognition paralyzed me with hand outstretched, mouth gaping. My stunned gaze took in the short, roly-poly white-haired man smiling at me. The red shirt and full, curly white beard. The twinkling, vividly blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

My voice emerged as a feeble croak. "...Santa Claus?"

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