

The Spy Is Cast

Book 2 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.

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CHAPTER 1

The ring of the phone made me swear. Extricating one arm and half my face from the toilet tank, I stumbled over the tools strewn on the floor. On the fourth ring, I snatched up the receiver with a dripping hand just as my answering machine kicked in.

“Hang on,” I advised the caller, waiting for the message to finish playing. I held the phone to my ear with my shoulder and dried my hands on my baggy jeans while I waited.

“Hello?” I inquired when the line was clear.

“Is this Aydan Kelly?”

“Speaking.”

“Aydan, it’s Clyde Webb calling...”

“Spider!” I interrupted, smiling. “How the hell are you?”

He sounded pleased. “You remembered!”

“Of course I remembered. You never forget your first.”

“Your first what?” he asked warily.

“The first guy you hit ‘til he pukes. I still feel bad about that.”

He laughed. “It’s okay, it wasn’t your fault... but, uh... about that...” His voice took on a wheedling note. “Aydan, how would you like to go to a gala affair? Dining and dancing, fabulous food and drink, rubbing shoulders with the cream of society?”

I looked down at my sweaty T-shirt and grubby jeans. “Um, Spider, I think you’ve got the wrong number.”

“No, I haven’t,” he insisted. “It would be a thank-you for all you did for us back in March. You deserve a luxurious evening out!”

“Spider...” I paused, trying to be tactful. “I hate dressing up. I hate crowds. I hate making small talk with strangers. And I hate to remind you, but I’m the same age as your mother.” I thumped my forehead with my free hand. I don’t really do tact well.

“Oh, I wasn’t asking you to go with me. Although I’d be proud to go with you,” he added gallantly.

I laughed. He was such a nice kid. Well, twenty-something. Not really a kid.

“Okay, what’s this about, then?” I asked.

“I’m asking you to go with Kane.”

“What, you’re Kane’s social secretary now? Tell him he can ask me himself. He’s a big boy.”

I grinned, remembering tall, muscular John Kane with salacious appreciation. He was definitely a big boy. Too bad I’d never gotten the opportunity to find out exactly how big.

“Oh, he doesn’t know I’m asking you,” Spider replied.

“Whoa, hold on, Spider. What’s really going on?” I asked, instantly suspicious.

“I can’t tell you over the phone,” he confessed. “I was hoping you’d be able to meet me. It’s important.”

I churned my free hand through my tangled hair, pulling the elastic out of my ponytail and yanking the knots out of the curly bits at the nape of my neck. “Important, as in ‘national security’ important?”

“I really can’t talk about it over the phone,” he repeated.

I sighed. “Okay. Where and when do you want to meet?”

“Can you meet now?”

“Why, are you standing on my front step?”

“No,” he replied sheepishly. “I meant, how soon can you get here?”

“I presume ‘here’ means your office in Silverside?”

“Yes. Sorry, I’m just... Can you come? I hate to bother you, but it’s...”

“Important. Yeah, I got that. Okay,” I agreed reluctantly. “It’ll take me about half an hour to get there, though. Unless you really want me to show up in the same clothes that I wore to fix the toilet.”

“Um, no.” He sounded uncomfortable. “Business attire would be better.”

“What the hell, Spider?” I demanded. “Business attire? Since when?”

“Just... can you? Please?”

“Okay, for you. I’m on my way.”

I hung up the phone, frowning. The disorganized and stilted conversation was so unlike Spider that a tingle of apprehension made me hurry to my closet.

I scowled at my business clothes, hanging clean and pressed, neatly organized by colour.

I really hate dressing up.

I swallowed a growl and stripped off my dirty clothes, yanking on a pair of slim cream-coloured pants and a short-sleeved green blouse.

Doing a quick mirror check, I flapped my hair up and down in an attempt to dry some of the sweat, and reassured myself the blouse adequately camouflaged the extra ten pounds around my waist. Someday I’d lose that.

Right.

I dragged a brush through my hair and decided to leave it loose. If Spider thought I needed to dress up, it probably meant I’d be meeting

somebody important. My long red hair was my best feature. Well, mostly red. The grey wasn't too noticeable yet.

I put on a pair of flat shoes and stuffed my waist pouch inside one of my enormous handbags. Normally, I wear the waist pouch everywhere, but even I don't have enough chutzpah to defy the fashion police and wear it with business clothes.

On my way across the yard, I slicked on a bit of tinted lip gloss, managing to keep it in the general vicinity of my lips.

Despite my growing sense of urgency, I let my steps slow while I enjoyed the view. I'd moved onto my farm in March when everything was winter-brown, and the greens of July were still a delightful novelty. I let my eyes rest on the long vista of rolling farmland and took a deep breath of country-fresh air before hurrying into my beloved four-car garage, patting the hoods of my automotive friends as I passed.

My faithful '98 Saturn waited in the last bay, and I skimmed my fingertips over its front quarter panel as I made my way to the driver's door. The local body guy had done an excellent job. You'd never know there had been a bullet hole in it.

Turning off my gravel road onto the pavement, I headed for town, curiosity warring with nervousness. The last time I'd gotten involved with these guys, it had cost me in blood. Spider's agitated demeanour hadn't reassured me one bit.

In the tiny town of Silverside, I navigated through the two-block business district and turned into the semi-residential area that housed Spider's and Kane's shared office. Pulling up in front of the small house, I swallowed a faint queasy sensation.

In the summer, the yard was mowed and well-tended. Perennial shrubs framed the house and accented the modest sign that read 'Kane Consulting' and 'Spider's Webb Design'. It looked welcoming and benign. I wasn't fooled.

I took a deep breath before walking up to the front door. Tapping the knocker, I stuck my head inside. The shared office space in the converted living/dining area was empty, but I went in anyway, calling out a hello.

Spider appeared from down the hallway, his tall, skinny body and lanky limbs clad in a dark suit, blue shirt, and tie. My mouth fell open.

“Who are you and what have you done with Spider?” I ribbed him.

He grinned and twitched his shoulders in a nervous shrug. “Aydan, it’s great to see you. You look great. As usual.” He gave me a quick, awkward hug. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “You?”

“Great!”

I frowned. “I keep hearing the word ‘great’. Why does that make me nervous?”

He shuffled his feet. “We need to go into our meeting now. Would you like something to drink?”

“Just a glass of water, please.” My trepidation cranked up a notch while I waited for him to return from the kitchen. Something was definitely up.

He handed me the glass and ushered me down the hallway to the converted bedroom that served as a meeting room. I paused in the doorway, surveying its two occupants.

One dark suit, white shirt, quiet tie. One military uniform, loaded with braid.

Oh, shit.

When I stepped cautiously into the room, both men rose. Neither was as tall as Spider’s beanpole six-foot-two, but they shared an almost-palpable air of authority. While Spider made the introductions, I assessed them, trying to figure out what this was all about.

“General Briggs, I’d like you to meet Ms. Aydan Kelly,” Spider mumbled without making eye contact. The general stepped forward, stretching out his hand, and I received a firm, dry handshake.

He was a fit-looking man with piercing blue eyes, his short grey hair in a precise cut. His seamed face gave the impression of too much time outdoors rather than advancing age. I placed him in his late fifties at a guess. His ramrod-straight posture made him seem tall, but in fact he stood only about an inch taller than my five-foot-ten.

“And this is Mr. Charles Stemp,” Spider introduced the other man. Stemp extended his hand, too, his movements as sinuous as a snake. He looked fit as well, and very tanned. His short-cropped sandy hair was almost the same colour as his skin, and his eyes were an odd shade of light brown, almost amber. His monochrome colouring and flat, expressionless eyes reminded me of a rattlesnake. Jeez. No wonder Spider was nervous.

“Mr. Stemp is the civilian director of our INSET team,” Spider explained, referring to the counter-terrorism unit to which he and Kane ostensibly belonged. “General Briggs is Kane’s commanding officer.”

That was where things got a little more complicated. In lighter moments, I had nicknamed Kane ‘James Bond’.

Spider drew me further into the room. “Have a seat,” he invited. I perched warily, wondering why the big guns were here. The others resumed their seats as well.

“Ms. Kelly,” the general began. “So nice to meet you at last.”

I wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so I put on my best pleasant smile. “It’s nice to meet you, too, General Briggs.”

“Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice,” he continued. “This meeting is rather overdue, and I apologize for the long delay. Our country owes you a debt of gratitude, and we would both like to offer you a

sincere thank you for your assistance in March. Your bravery and self-sacrifice did not go unnoticed.”

I squirmed. “I appreciate the kind words, but I didn’t really do anything. I was a dumb civilian in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’m just glad everything worked out all right.”

The general’s eyes bored into me. “I read the reports. I beg to differ. You uncovered a potentially disastrous security breach. You withstood torture to protect our national security. You saved the life of one of our top agents.”

I shook my head. “It sounds good when you say it like that, but really, it was your team who pulled it all out of the fire. I was just along for the ride.”

He smiled. “That may be true, but the entire operation would have failed without your unique talents.”

“The whole thing was pure dumb luck on my part,” I muttered. “Your team did all the work.”

“I’m glad you’re loyal to the team,” Stemp said, his voice betraying no emotion whatsoever. “How would you like to help them again?”

Warning bells clamoured in my brain. “Help them how, exactly?” I asked slowly.

“We are chronically understaffed,” the general explained. “We have a situation in which a female agent is required, and we have none currently available. The mission would entail almost no risk. In fact, you would probably find it quite enjoyable. We thought of you because of your excellent performance this spring, and because you already have the sufficient security clearances.”

I hid my surprise and suspicion in a casual tone. “When did that happen? I’m just a bookkeeper. A civilian. I don’t recall doing any applications for security clearances.”

“You were thoroughly investigated in March,” Stemp replied. “And your knowledge of our secured facilities and clandestine activities in effect gives you a top-level clearance. You already know more than many of our agents.”

“Oh.” I attempted to rub the frown away from my forehead. “Exactly what do you want me to do?”

“John Kane will be attending a formal function in Calgary the day after tomorrow.” General Briggs picked up the narrative. “While there, he will be researching the layout and security of the venue in which it is held. A man doing this alone would be too obvious. He needs a female companion to attend with him.” The general gave me an encouraging smile. “I’m told the food and entertainment will be quite magnificent.”

“I’m not sure Kane would want me tagging along,” I objected. “I don’t have the first clue about spy stuff. I’d probably put him in danger just through my own ignorance.”

“You would be fully briefed, of course,” Stemp said. “We would also compensate you for your time. And there would be an allowance for your wardrobe and accessories for the event.” He added that last bit as though it was an irresistible inducement.

I did my best to control my face. He really thought I’d want to go if he bought me a new dress. Poor deluded man. Little did he know I’d happily pay him if he’d let me go in jeans and a sweatshirt.

I shrugged. “If Kane thinks it’s a good idea, I’ll go with him. I’ll help if I can. But if he thinks he’d be better off without me, then I don’t want to be foisted on him.”

“Excellent.” The general nodded with obvious satisfaction. “Please come here for your briefing tomorrow morning at ten o’clock. You should be prepared to leave for Calgary immediately afterward so that you have time to purchase whatever you need for the following evening.” He rose. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Ms. Kelly.”

I recognized a dismissal when I heard it. I got up and shook hands again with him and Stemp, and turned to leave the room.

“I’ll see you out,” Spider said, his first words since the introductions. We went down the hall together, and he followed me out onto the front step.

“What the hell, Spider?” I demanded. “Those two big brasses came here just to blow sunshine up my ass and ask me on a date? I don’t think so. What’s really going on?”

He shook his head. “Later.”

“Will they be here for the briefing tomorrow?” I asked.

“Yes.” He regarded me tensely, and I could see I wouldn’t get anything more out of him.

“Okay.” I sighed. “See you tomorrow at ten. Do I have to dress up again?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 2

I had just slid behind the wheel of my car when my cellphone rang. I swore as I rummaged through the unaccustomed handbag, and managed to snatch out the phone to punch the talk button before the caller went to voicemail.

The female voice on the other end sounded vaguely familiar. "Hi, is this Aydan Kelly?"

"Speaking."

"Hi, Aydan, it's Linda Burton calling."

I shuffled rapidly through my mental files and came up empty. She continued quickly, "You probably don't remember me. I'm a nurse at the hospital. We met back in March..."

"Oh!" I interrupted. "Sorry, of course I remember you, Linda. How are you?"

"I'm... actually a little desperate."

"Oh...?"

"I saw your card tacked up on the bulletin board in the post office. You're a bookkeeper, aren't you?"

I felt my shoulders relax. "Yes."

"Are you taking on new clients?"

I sat up a little straighter. "Yes! Do you need help?"

I heard a whoosh of breath at the other end. "Yes!" she replied gratefully. "I own a business with my grandmother. We've been trying to

do our own books for the last few months, and we just can't handle it anymore. When can you meet? The sooner the better!"

I shot a satisfied glance down at my clothes. For once in my life, I was appropriately dressed for a meeting on short notice. "Do you have time right now? I just happen to be in town."

"Oh, yes! Let's meet for coffee at the Melted Spoon. Granny and I can be there in ten minutes."

"Sounds good. See you there." I hung up, feeling smug.

When I strolled into the tiny café a few minutes later, the mouth-watering smell of fresh-ground coffee filled my senses. I perused the menu board, impressed at the number of espresso variations. While I waited, the counter clerk passed a steaming grilled panini sandwich to a customer, the sharp smell of roasted peppers mingling with the coffee scent.

I chose an herbal tea and sat down at a vacant table to wait for Linda and her grandmother. Minutes later, they arrived, Linda as perky and petite as I remembered. The woman who accompanied her was tiny and delicate, and I could see a family resemblance in the fine bone structure. Her spun-sugar white hair and pink ruffled blouse made her look like a porcelain old-lady doll.

Linda waved hello, and they went to the counter to order their beverages. When they returned, I got a whiff of caramel from Linda's latte. Her grandmother carried a demitasse of what looked like black tar. The almost-scorched smell of espresso overpowered my herbal tea completely.

Linda made the introductions. "Granny Ives, this is Aydan Kelly. Aydan, Granny Ives."

"Lola," her grandmother corrected, reaching over to shake hands. Her voice was throaty, sounding larger than I'd expected from such a tiny woman.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I greeted her. “Linda mentioned the two of you were in business together, but we didn’t talk details. Why don’t you give me an overview?”

“We’ve had the business for about four years now,” Lola told me. “We sell online, and the phone service is profitable as well.”

“We’re also trying to get started with a POS program,” Linda put in.

“By POS, I presume you mean ‘Point of Sale’,” I said.

Delicate little Granny Lola snorted. “No, when I say POS, I mean ‘Piece of Shit’.”

I laughed out loud. I had a feeling I was going to like Lola.

“It’s been nothing but trouble, and it’s still not working right,” she continued. “We’re trying to get it to talk to our accounting program to bring the sales totals in automatically, and it won’t play nice.”

“Well, it sounds like I need to take a look at it,” I said. “I’ve persuaded a POS or two to cooperate in my time. Sometimes all you need is a bigger stick.”

Lola and Linda exchanged glances and laughed. “Oh, we have no shortage of big sticks,” Linda assured me impishly.

“What’s the name of your business, and where are you located?” I asked.

“Our business is called Up & Coming. We’re just around the corner in the mini-mall. Do you want to walk over and have a look at the system?”

“Sure,” I agreed. “Let’s go.”

We chatted easily during the short walk. Linda and I had hit it off at the hospital when we’d first met, and I was already enjoying Lola’s audacious attitude.

We strolled up to the mini-mall and inside the enclosed breezeway, visiting like old friends. Linda removed a ‘Back in ½ hour’ sign from the

storefront and unlocked the door for us. I stepped inside, involved in conversation with Lola, before glancing around the store for the first time.

I burst out laughing. It was a sex shop.

“Up & Coming’, you’ve got to be kidding me!” I chortled. “In a small town like this? Where everybody knows what everybody else is doing?”

“Everybody knows who everybody else is doing, too,” Lola said slyly. “Actually, we do a booming business in mail order. We route our deliveries through Toronto in plain brown wrappers. But you’d be surprised how many people just walk in.”

I gazed around. “My God, please tell me somebody left their thermos on the shelf by accident,” I said, pointing to a black monolith.

“That’s ‘Big John the Wonder Horse’. People usually buy him as a gag gift,” Linda said. “I think,” she added doubtfully.

“We’ve got a great selection of products,” Lola said. “Lingerie over here, toys and electronics there, books and videos on that wall, flavoured products over here...” She pointed out each section. “And we’re getting some excellent new things, too,” she enthused. “We’ve just gotten a line of body pillows and furniture.”

She reached up to a shelf and lifted down a body pillow, standing it up beside her. Sure enough, the label read ‘Bawdy Pillow’. It was an enormous stuffed penis, almost as tall as she was.

I snickered. “Reminds me of my ex-husband.”

“Why, was he well-endowed?” Lola asked, bouncing her eyebrows suggestively.

“No, he was a big prick,” I deadpanned to their guffaws. I reached over and poked the pillow. “It’s a little soft for my taste.”

“Oh, I can fix that,” Linda giggled. She reached over and activated a switch at the base of the pillow. The penis gradually stiffened and straightened up. “It’s got an air bladder and a compressor in it,” she explained over my howls of laughter.

I eyed the rest of the 'Bawdy Pillow' line, still giggling. "I bet the boob cushions are popular. Do you sell them in pairs?"

"Sometimes in triples." Lola bounced her eyebrows again.

I flung up my hands in surrender. "Too much information. So don't tell me, let me guess. Your bookkeeper moved away in December, and the remaining one doesn't want your business."

"How did you know?" Linda demanded.

"I took over doing the books for Blue Eddy's Saloon in March. Your strait-laced bookkeeper doesn't want his business either. Are there any other dens of iniquity where I should visit and drop off a business card?"

"You've gotta admit, we're more fun than a church picnic," Lola said with satisfaction. A phone rang in the back room. "Oh, that's my 1-900 line, I've gotta go." She hurried into the back and I heard her pick up the phone. "Hi, honey, this is Lola," she purred in her throaty voice. "Guess what I'm wearing."

I turned to Linda. "It's a small town. Do people really not know that Granny Lola is the sex goddess on the other end of the 900 line?"

Linda laughed. "Some don't know. Some just pretend they don't know. Some know and don't care. Some get totally turned on by knowing. But we get mostly outside callers from our website and phone listing."

I shook my head, still chuckling inwardly, and followed her into the small office behind the counter.

The point of sale program turned out to be just as contrary as Lola had warned, and I spent the next two hours utterly absorbed in figuring out its quirks.

On the drive home, my mind returned to mulling over the meeting with Spider. There was definitely more to this situation than I'd been told.

There was no way two of the top brass needed to be there in person when a phone call would have sufficed for our short meeting.

And Spider was really buffaloed, though I couldn't tell whether it was by the brass themselves or something else as well. Stemp and the general were a pretty intimidating pair, so maybe that's all it was.

I trailed thoughtfully back into the house and stripped off my business clothes, sighing with relief as I donned my grubbies again. My mind still churning, I went back to fishing in the toilet tank and absently retrieved and re-attached the broken valve chain.

Recalling my last spy-related experience, I spent the evening figuring out what to take with me and trying to pack as efficiently as possible.

I snorted. Planning for the unforeseen was impossible by definition.

I slept restlessly that night and rose early to pack the last of my things into my backpack and get on the road. When I arrived at the office, Kane's black Expedition was already parked in front. I glanced at my watch, realizing I was ten minutes early. Even at that time of the morning, the sun was warm, and I started to sweat as soon as I turned off the air conditioning.

Screw waiting. I plucked my already-damp blouse away from my back and headed up the walk.

I stepped into the office just in time to hear Kane's deep baritone voice raised in the back meeting room. "Absolutely not! That's completely unacceptable!"

Oops. I was starting to ease my way back out the door when Spider appeared from down the hallway, catching me red-handed. I gave a guilty start and a feeble smile.

"That doesn't sound good," I whispered.

He frowned and shook his head. "Aydan's here," he called down the hall. The rumble of male voices ceased.

"Bring her in," someone responded.

I followed Webb's suit-clad back down the hallway, wondering what on earth I was getting myself into. If they were discussing me, it sounded as though Kane was about to veto the whole thing. Good. Maybe I could avoid dressing up after all.

When we entered the meeting room, Stemp, Briggs, and John Kane were seated around the table. Briggs and Stemp were as formally dressed as the day before. Kane wore a snug black T-shirt and dark jeans.

Black always made him look delicious, with his clear grey eyes and short dark hair shading to silver at the temples. His muscular arms were crossed over his broad chest, and he was frowning. I was shocked at the tired lines etched in his face.

The men rose as I entered, Kane towering over the other two. His square face softened into a smile as he reached for my hand. "Nice to see you again," he rumbled, his eyes crinkling into the sexy laugh lines I remembered so well from four months earlier.

"You, too," I replied, returning his gentle hand squeeze. I nodded to Stemp and Briggs, and we all sat.

Stemp leaned forward, his reptilian gaze fixed on Kane. "This is the best possible solution," he said, obviously continuing the argument I'd overheard. "This provides you with a viable cover story, as well as a second set of eyes and ears and a built-in detector."

Kane shook his head, his massive shoulders flexing as he planted his hands on the table. "Aydan has given enough to this country. She's a civilian. It's not fair to ask her to get involved in this again."

Briggs spoke with finality. "Ms. Kelly's participation is not at issue here. She has already agreed to do this. You have your orders."

Kane's face hardened.

"Hold on," I interjected. "I only agreed to do this on the condition that Kane approved it. He clearly doesn't want me. If I'm a liability to him, the deal's off."

"Ms. Kelly," the general addressed me, his voice unyielding. "We need you. You agreed to help us. This mission will go ahead as planned."

"Aydan," Kane said quietly. "Are you sure you want to risk this?" His eyes searched my face, and I frowned.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I was told yesterday there was almost no risk associated with this. I was hoping to find out more today."

Kane's shoulders bunched as he loomed threateningly over the table in Webb's direction. "You didn't tell her?" he grated.

"I... had orders," Spider stammered. His eyes darted between Kane's glower and Stemp's smooth, deadly face. His trapped gaze skittered toward me. "I'm sorry."

Alarm shot through me as Kane lunged to his feet. "Sorry doesn't cut it!" he barked.

He took a deep breath, visibly calming himself. When he turned to me, his voice was even, but I could read the tension in his posture. "Aydan, these people have lied to you. There may not be risk to any other agent we might send, but there is substantial risk to you. The reason I'm going to this event is that we believe there's a connection to Fuzzy Bunny."

I didn't realize you could actually feel your own face going pale. A burst of adrenaline made my head feel light, and my lips were cold and stiff when I uttered the first words that came to mind.

"Oh, shit."

“Kane!” Briggs snapped. “You are dangerously close to insubordination!”

“Yes, sir,” Kane growled. With the small part of my mind that wasn’t racing with fear, I noted it sounded more like agreement than obedience.

I forced my breathing to steady, slowing my whirling thoughts. Fuzzy Bunny. The deadly international corporation that dealt in arms, drugs, espionage and laundered money. Their incongruous cover as an exporter and manufacturer of children’s toys. They hadn’t been kind to me in March. My body had healed, but the thought of attracting their attention again filled me with dread.

I took a deep breath and controlled my voice so that when I spoke, I sounded almost casual. “Don’t they think I’m dead?”

“Yes,” Spider reassured me. “We’re positive of that. That was the last report Sandler sent them before you ki... before he died.”

Stemp leaned forward, fixing me with his flat eyes. “There’s no reason to believe you would be identified at tomorrow’s event. And we need you, specifically. Even if we had another female agent available, she wouldn’t be able to do what you can do.”

I eyed him, heart thumping. “Which is what, exactly?”

“Access a brainwave-driven virtual reality network using a password-cracking key hidden inside an attractive necklace.”

I recoiled against the back of my chair. “Oh, no. No, no, no. Been there. Done that. Got the T-shirt. Can’t get rid of the fucking T-shirt.”

I shuddered, pushing away from the table. Men around the table. Bad memories. Barely realizing what I was doing, I stumbled to my feet and backed away.

“Aydan, you’re safe.” Kane’s voice was deep and forceful. “It’s over. You don’t have to do this.”

I shook my head vigorously, snapping back to the present and shaking off the repugnant flashback. I straightened and took a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. Chin up.

Kane and Webb both regarded me with troubled eyes. Stemp watched impassively, his immobile posture reminding me of a coiled snake. I held down a shudder. That was one creepy guy.

General Briggs leaned forward in his chair, his piercing blue gaze scanning my face. "I understand that accessing the network comes with some difficult memories for you," he said quietly. "But if our suspicions are correct, and if there is another network at this venue, your ability to detect and access it could protect others from what you experienced. And it could safeguard many other innocent lives."

I stood for a couple of long moments while his words sank in before letting my breath out slowly and releasing the fists I hadn't realized I'd clenched.

"You're right, of course. Sorry. It was just a shock." I sat down in the chair again and interlaced my fingers to still their trembling. "Okay. So what's the plan?"

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