

I STAND IN THE doorway of the twins' room and watch them sleep, peaceful and innocent, through crib slats that remind me of bars on a prison cell.

A night-light bathes the room in a soft orange glow. Furniture crowds the small space, far too much of it for a room this size. Cribs, one old, one new. A changing table, stacks of diapers still in their plastic. The bookcase Matt and I assembled ourselves, ages ago. Its shelves now sag, overloaded with the books I could recite by heart to the older two, the ones I've been vowing to read more often to the twins, if only I could find the time.

I hear Matt's footsteps on the stairs and my hand clenches around the flash drive. Tight, like if I squeeze hard enough, it'll disappear. Everything will go back to the way it was. The past two days will be erased, nothing more than a bad dream. But it's still there: hard, solid, real.

The hallway floor creaks where it always does. I don't turn. He comes up behind me, close enough that I can smell his soap, his shampoo, the smell of *him* that's always been oddly comforting, that now inexplicably makes him more of a stranger. I can feel his hesitation.

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‘Can we talk?’ he says.

The words are quiet, but the sound is enough to stir Chase. He sighs in his sleep and then settles, still curled into a ball, like he’s protecting himself. I’ve always thought he’s so much like his father, the serious eyes, taking everything in. Now I wonder if I’ll ever truly know him, if he’ll keep secrets so heavy they’ll crush anyone close to him.

‘What’s there to say?’

Matt takes a step closer, puts a hand on my arm. I move away, enough to free myself from his touch. His hand lingers in the air, then falls to his side.

‘What are you going to do?’ he asks.

I look at the other crib, at Caleb, on his back in his footed pajamas; cherubic blond curls, arms and legs splayed like a starfish. His hands are open, his pink lips open. He has no idea how vulnerable he is, how cruel the world can be.

I always said I’d protect him. I’d give him the strength that he lacks, make sure he has every opportunity, keep his life as normal as possible. How can I do that, if I’m not around?

I would do anything for my kids. *Anything*. I uncurl my fingers and look at the flash drive, the little rectangle, non-descript. So small, but with so much power. Power to fix, power to destroy.

Rather like a lie, when you think about it.

‘You know I don’t have a choice,’ I say, and I force myself to look at him, my husband, the man I know so well, and at the same time not at all.

*Two Days Earlier*

## Chapter One

‘BAD NEWS, VIV.’

I hear Matt’s voice, words anyone would dread, but a tone that’s reassuring. Light, apologetic. It’s something unfortunate, sure, but it’s manageable. Anything truly bad and his voice would be heavier. He’d use a complete sentence, a complete name. *I have some bad news, Vivian.*

I hold the phone to my ear with a raised shoulder, swivel my chair to the other side of the L-shaped desk, to the computer centered under gray overhead bins. I guide the cursor to the owl-shaped icon on the screen and double-click. If it’s what I think it is – what I know it is – then I only have a bit longer at my desk.

‘Ella?’ I say. My gaze drifts to one of the crayon drawings tacked to the high cubicle walls with pushpins, a pop of color in this sea of gray.

‘A hundred point eight.’

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. We’ve been expecting it. Half her class has been sick, falling like dominoes, so it was only a matter of time. Four-year-olds aren’t exactly

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the cleanliest bunch. But today? It had to happen today?

‘Anything else?’

‘Just the temp.’ He pauses. ‘Sorry, Viv. She seemed fine when I dropped her off.’

I swallow past the tightening in my throat and nod, even though he can’t see me. Any other day and he’d pick her up. He can work from home, at least in theory. I can’t, and I used up all my leave when the twins were born. But he’s taking Caleb into the city for the latest round of medical appointments. I’ve been feeling guilty for weeks that I’ll have to miss it. And now I’ll be missing it and *still* using leave I don’t have.

‘I’ll be there in an hour,’ I say. The rules say we have an hour from the time they call. Factoring in the drive and the walk to my car – it’s in the outer reaches of Langley’s sprawling parking lots – that gives me about fifteen minutes to wrap up work for the day. Fifteen minutes less leave to add to my negative balance.

I glance at the clock in the corner of my screen – seven minutes past ten – and then my eyes shift to the Starbucks cup beside my right elbow, steam escaping from the hole in the plastic lid. I treated myself, a splurge in celebration of the long-awaited day, fuel for the tedious hours ahead. Precious minutes wasted in line that could have been spent digging through digital files. Should have stuck to the usual, the sputtering coffee maker that leaves grounds floating at the top of the mug.

‘That’s what I told the school,’ Matt says. ‘School’ is actually our day care center, the place where our youngest three spend their days. But we’ve been calling it school since Luke was three months old. I’d read it could help ease the transition, lessen the guilt of leaving your baby for eight, ten hours a day. It didn’t, but old habits die hard, I guess.

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There's another pause, and I can hear Caleb babbling in the background. I listen, and I know that Matt's listening, too. It's like we're conditioned to do so at this point. But it's just vowel sounds. Still no consonants.

'I know today was supposed to be a big day . . .' Matt finally says, and trails off. I'm used to the trailing off, the evasive conversations on my open line. I always assume someone's listening in. The Russians. The Chinese. That's part of the reason Matt's the first one the school calls when there's a problem. I'd rather him filter some of the kids' personal details from the ears of our adversaries.

Call me paranoid, or just call me a CIA counterintelligence analyst.

But really, that's about all Matt knows. Not that I've been trying in vain to uncover a network of Russian sleeper agents. Or that I've developed a methodology for identifying people involved in the highly secretive program. Just that I've waited months for this day. That I'm about to find out if two years of hard work is going to pay off. And if I stand a chance at that promotion we desperately need.

'Yeah, well,' I say, moving my mouse back and forth, watching Athena load, the cursor in the shape of a timer. 'Caleb's appointment is what's important today.'

My eyes drift back to the cubicle wall, the bright crayon drawings. Ella's, a picture of our family, stick arms and legs protruding straight from six round happy faces. Luke's, a bit more sophisticated, a single person, thick jagged scribbles to color in hair and clothing and shoes. *MOMMY*, it says in big capital letters. From his superhero phase. It's me, in a cape, hands on my hips, an *S* on my shirt. Supermommy.

There's a familiar feeling in my chest, the pressure, the

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overwhelming urge to cry. *Deep breaths, Viv. Deep breaths.*

‘The Maldives?’ Matt says, and I feel the hint of a smile creep to my lips. He always does this, finds a way to make me smile when I need it most. I glance at the photograph of the two of us on the corner of my desk, my favorite from our wedding day, almost a decade ago. Both of us so happy, so *young*. We always talked about going somewhere exotic for our ten-year anniversary. It’s certainly not in the cards anymore. But it’s fun to dream. Fun and depressing at the same time.

‘Bora Bora,’ I say.

‘I could live with that.’ He hesitates, and in the gap I hear Caleb again. More vowel sounds. *Aah-aah-aah*. In my head, I’m calculating the months Chase has already been making consonant sounds. I know I shouldn’t – all the doctors say I shouldn’t – but I am.

‘Bora *Bora*?’ I hear from behind me, faux-incredulous. I put my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and turn. It’s Omar, my FBI counterpart, an amused expression on his face. ‘That one might be hard to justify, even for the Agency.’ He breaks into a grin. Infectious as ever, it brings one to my own face, as well.

‘What are you doing here?’ I say, my hand still covering the mouthpiece. I can hear Caleb babbling in my ear. O’s this time. *Ooh-ooh-ooh*.

‘Had a meeting with Peter.’ He takes a step closer, perches on the edge of my desk. I can see the outline of his holster at his hip, through his T-shirt. ‘The timing may or may not have been a coincidence.’ He glances at my screen and the grin fades ever so slightly. ‘It was today, right? Ten A.M.?’

I look at my screen, dark, the cursor still in the shape of a timer. ‘It was today.’ The babbling in my ear has gone quiet. I

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roll my chair so that I'm turned, just a touch, away from Omar and remove my hand from the mouthpiece. 'Honey, I have to go. Omar's here.'

'Tell him I said hi,' Matt says.

'Will do.'

'Love you.'

'Love you, too.' I set the phone down on its base and turn back to Omar, who's still sitting on my desk, denim-clad legs outstretched, feet crossed at the ankles. 'Matt says hi,' I tell him.

'Aaah, so *he's* the Bora Bora connection. Planning a vacation?' The grin's back, full force.

'In theory,' I say with a half-hearted laugh. It sounds pathetic enough that I can feel color rise to my cheeks.

He looks at me for a moment longer, then thankfully down at his wrist. 'All right, it's ten-ten.' He uncrosses his ankles, crosses them the opposite way. Then leans forward, the excitement on his face unmistakable. 'What have you got for me?'

Omar's been doing this longer than I have. A decade, at least. He's looking for the actual sleepers in the U.S., and I'm trying to uncover those running the cell. Neither of us has had any success. How he's still so enthusiastic never fails to amaze me.

'Nothing yet. I haven't even taken a look.' I nod at the screen, the program that's still loading, then glance at the black-and-white photograph tacked to my cubicle wall, beside the kids' drawings. Yury Yakov. Fleshy face, hard expression. A few more clicks and I'll be inside his computer. I'll be able to see what he sees, navigate around the way he does, pore through his files. And hopefully prove that he's a Russian spy.

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‘Who are you and what have you done with my friend Vivian?’ Omar asks with a smile.

He’s right. If it wasn’t for the line at Starbucks, I’d have logged in to the program at ten A.M. on the dot. I’d have had a few minutes to look around, at least. I shrug and gesture at the screen. ‘I’m trying.’ Then I nod toward the phone. ‘But in any case, it’s going to have to wait. Ella’s sick. I need to go pick her up.’

He exhales dramatically. ‘Kids. Always the worst timing.’

Movement on the screen draws my attention, and I roll my chair closer. Athena’s finally loading. There are red banners on all sides, a slew of words, each signifying a different control, a different compartment. The longer the string of text, the more classified. This one’s pretty darn long.

I click past one screen, then another. Each click is an acknowledgment. Yes, I know I’m accessing compartmented information. Yes, I know I can’t disclose it or I’ll go to jail for a very long time. Yes, yes, yes. Just get me to the information already.

‘This is it,’ Omar says. I remember he’s there and glance at him out of the corner of my eye. He’s looking away purposefully, studiously avoiding the screen, giving me privacy. ‘I feel it.’

‘I hope so,’ I murmur. And I do. But I’m nervous. This methodology is a gamble. A big one. I built a profile for suspected handlers: educational institution, studies and degrees, banking centers, travel within Russia and abroad. Came up with an algorithm, identified five individuals who best fit the pattern. Likely candidates.

The first four turned out to be false leads, and now the program’s on the chopping block. Everything rests on Yury.

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Number five. The computer that was the hardest to break into, the one I had the most confidence in to begin with.

‘And if it’s not,’ Omar says, ‘you did something that no one else has been able to do. You got close.’

Targeting the handlers is a new approach. For years, the Bureau’s been trying to identify the sleepers themselves, but they’re so well assimilated it’s next to impossible. The cell is designed so that sleepers don’t have contact with anyone but their handler, and even that is minimal. And the Agency’s been focused on the ringleaders, the guys who oversee the handlers, the ones in Moscow with direct ties to the SVR, Russian intelligence.

‘Close doesn’t count,’ I say quietly. ‘You know that better than anyone.’

Around the time I started on the account, Omar was a hard-charging new agent. He’d proposed a new initiative, inviting entrenched sleepers to ‘come in from the cold’ and turn themselves in, in exchange for amnesty. His reasoning? There had to be at least a few sleepers who wanted to turn their covers into reality, and we might be able to learn enough from the turned sleepers to penetrate the network as a whole.

The plan was rolled out quietly, and within a week we had a walk-in, a man named Dmitri. Said he was a midlevel handler, told us information about the program that corroborated what we knew – handlers like himself were responsible for five sleepers each; he reported to a ringleader who was responsible for five handlers. A completely self-contained cell. That got our attention, for sure. Then came the outrageous claims, the information that was inconsistent with everything we knew to be true, and then he disappeared. Dmitri the Dangle, we called him after that.

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That was the end of the program. The thought of publicly admitting there were sleepers in the U.S., of admitting our inability to find them, was already barely palatable to Bureau seniors. Between that and the potential for Russian manipulation – dangling double agents with false leads – Omar’s plan was roundly criticized, then rejected. *We’ll be inundated with other Dmitris*, they said. And with that, Omar’s once-promising career trajectory stalled. He fell into obscurity, plugging away, day after day, at a thankless, frustrating, impossible task.

The screen changes, and a little icon with Yury’s name appears. I always get a thrill out of this, seeing my targets’ names here, knowing we have a window into their digital lives, the information they think is private. As if on cue, Omar stands up. He knows about our efforts to target Yury. He’s one of a handful of Bureau agents read into the program – and its biggest cheerleader, the person who believes in the algorithm, and in me, more than anyone else. But still, he can’t access it directly.

‘Call me tomorrow, okay?’ he says.

‘You got it,’ I reply. He turns, and as soon as I see his back, heading away, I focus my attention on the screen. I double-click the icon and a red-bordered inset appears, displaying the contents of Yury’s laptop, a mirror image that I can comb through. I only have minutes until I need to leave. But it’s long enough for a peek.

The background is dark blue, dotted with bubbles of different sizes, in different shades of blue. There are icons lined up in four neat rows on one side, half of them folders. The file names are all in Cyrillic, characters that I recognize but can’t read – at least not well. I took a beginning Russian class years

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ago; then Luke arrived and I never went back. I know some basic phrases, recognize some words, but that's about it. For the rest I rely on linguists or translation software.

I open a few of the folders, then the text documents inside them. Page after page of dense Cyrillic text. I feel a wave of disappointment, one I know is nonsensical. It's not like a Russian guy sitting on his computer in Moscow is going to be typing in English, keeping records in English, *List of Deep-Cover Operatives in the United States*. I know that what I'm looking for is encrypted. I'm just hoping to see some sort of clue, some sort of protected file, something with obvious encryption.

High-level penetrations over the years have told us that the identities of the sleepers are known only to the handlers, that the names are stored electronically, locally. Not in Moscow, because the SVR – Russia's powerful external intelligence service – fears moles within its own organization. Fears them so much that they'd rather risk losing sleepers than keep the names in Russia. And we know that if anything should happen to a handler, the ringleader would access the electronic files and contact Moscow for a decryption key, one part of a multilayer encryption protocol. We have the code from Moscow. We've just never had anything to decrypt.

The program's airtight. We can't break in. We don't even know its true purpose, if there is one. It might just be passive collection, or it might be something more sinister. But since we know the head of the program reports to Putin himself, I tend to think it's the latter – and that's what keeps me up at night.

I keep scanning, my eyes drifting over each file, even though I'm not entirely sure what I'm looking for. And then I see a Cyrillic word I recognize. **друзья**. *Friends*. The last icon in the last row, a manila folder. I double-click and the folder

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opens into a list of five JPEG images, nothing more. My heart rate begins to accelerate. Five. There are five sleepers assigned to each handler; we know that from multiple sources. And there's the title. *Friends*.

I click open the first image. It's a headshot of a nondescript middle-aged man in round eyeglasses. A tingle of excitement runs through me. The sleepers are well assimilated. Invisible members of society, really. This could certainly be one of them.

Logic tells me not to get too excited; all our intelligence says the files on the sleepers are encrypted. But my gut tells me this is something big.

I open the second. A woman, orange hair, bright blue eyes, wide smile. Another headshot, another potential sleeper. I stare at her. There's a thought I'm trying to ignore, but can't. These are just pictures. Nothing about their identities, nothing the ringleader could use to contact them.

But still. *Friends*. Pictures. So maybe Yury's not the elusive handler I was hoping to uncover, the one the Agency devoted resources to finding. But could he be a recruiter? And these five people: They must be important. Targets, maybe?

I double-click the third image and a face appears on my screen. A headshot, close-up. So familiar, so expected – and yet not, because it's here, where it doesn't belong. I blink at it, once, twice, my mind struggling to bridge what I'm seeing with what I'm *seeing*, what it means. Then I swear that time stops. Icy fingers close around my heart and squeeze, and all I can hear is the whoosh of blood in my ears.

I'm staring into the face of my husband.