

MY MIND

SKANDAL

IS MINE

LINDSAY SMITH

ALONE



ROARING BROOK PRESS · NEW YORK

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Published by Roaring Brook Press
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Limited Partnership
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010
macteenbooks.com
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Lindsay.

Skandal / Lindsay Smith.—First edition.

pages cm

Sequel to: Sekret.

Summary: "In the sequel to SEKRET, Yulia and Valentine have escaped Russia to live in Washington DC where they are working with CIA psychics, including Yulia's increasingly erratic father"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-62672-005-3 (hardback)—ISBN 978-1-250-07369-3 (trade paperback)—ISBN 978-1-62672-006-0 (e-book) [1. Spies—Fiction.

2. Psychic ability—Fiction. 3. Adventure and adventurers—Fiction.

4. United States. Central Intelligence Agency—Fiction. 5. Washington (D.C.)—History—20th century—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.S65435Sk 2015

[Fic]—dc23

2014040757

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First edition 2015
Printed in United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For Jason,
who makes everything sharper, brighter, better*

CHAPTER 1

WASHINGTON, DC, APRIL 1964

“YULIA ANDREEVNA CHERNINA.” The general’s mouth stretches around the rubbery Russian vowels as he reads from the file before him. “Did I get that right?” He smiles at me like any mistake would be my fault, somehow. “We are here to determine whether someone of your . . . *background* is fit to serve the United States of America in her constant battle against tyranny.”

Background. Yes. A tidy little euphemism—I’m finding English has lots of those. What he’s asking is whether I’m a communist psychic sleeper agent sent to America to ignite a revolution, but these are ugly words, and America is not a place for ugliness. The America I’ve lived in for the past three months is impeccably clean. It’s shot through with colors and smells and sounds I never could have imagined when I lived in the Soviet Union. And tyranny—tyranny is not encouraged like in the KGB that once controlled me, but something to be stamped out wherever America finds it. By using skills like mine, America can unmask tyranny everywhere. My psychic powers make me a microscope that

reveals a festering colony of bacteria on a seemingly clean surface.

The general clears his throat as he flips through my file. Muted sunlight from the oval window behind him casts him in shadow, along with the rest of the panel members seated at his side. “You are a product of the KGB—the Committee for State Security—and its psychic espionage program. Your father, Andrei, testified before this committee that he participated in the genetic research arm of this program during World War II under Stalin’s direction, correct?” He doesn’t wait for confirmation, from me or the rest of the committee. “And our intelligence indicates that your mother has resumed that research now.”

Everything spoken in English sounds muffled by gauze. I can only process it so fast; I can only take in so many words before I have to shake them out to make room for more. But the translation lag softens the blow of what he’s actually said: that my mother is the enemy now.

I lean toward the microphone, flinching as it shrieks with feedback. “That is correct, comra—sir.”

“Then you understand why you’re here today. You realize the grave threat posed by the Soviets and their psychic espionage program. You would agree that General Rostov, head of the KGB First Directorate, must be stopped.”

My stomach churns. The soda fountain milkshake I had with lunch feels heavier than polonium in my gut. “Yes,” I say, though it sounds too faint. Yes, I want to stop Rostov, the man who used me as a weapon to root out dissidents and spies. But I worry that these Americans will see my mother’s fate as tied up in his.

“Glad to hear it.” The general’s face splits in a smile. “We’ve

already heard the testimony of your father and Valentin Sorokhin, as well as your tutor, Staff Sergeant Davis, who has deemed your language skills sufficient now to join them in their work. But there are a few things I want you to clarify in person.”

My eyes dart toward Winnie Davis, my English teacher, on call if the language becomes too dense. She leans casually in the room’s corner, brown arms crossed over her crisp Air Force blues. With a smile, she nods at me. She isn’t psychic, and I can’t read her mind from this distance, but it’s the same smile she gives me when I’m practicing English with her. *You’ve got this. Keep going.*

“I am happy to . . . make . . . assistance.” I cringe before I’ve finished saying it. I’m not cut out for word games, much less spy games.

“You believe that you possess psychic powers,” the general says. I think it’s a question, but I don’t trust my ears. Sometimes I think only thoughts and memories speak the truth to me, and even those can be twisted until I don’t know what to trust. He waits a few moments, the air thickening between us. “Well? Go on. Tell everyone what I’m thinking.”

I stare back at his shadowed face. “It is easiest for me if I touch you,” I say.

Nervous laughter ripples around me until the general shushes it with a wave of his hand. His motions are effortless—downright lazy, compared to the crushing, impatient energy of Rostov, the KGB officer I once worked for. “That’s right. ‘Reads thoughts and memories through contact,’” he reads from the dossier, then stretches one hand before him toward the edge of the table. “Permission to approach the panel.”

I swallow and stand up.

His knuckles are hairy and rough; my fingers hover above them, barely permitting contact. It's been a long time since I've done this. Three months, to be precise; three months ago, I sucked up memories and emotions through my fingertips until I couldn't hold any more, then pushed them all out at once in a torrent of pain. Because I did so, I was able to escape the KGB with Valentin—we fled the Soviet Union to join my father and his new CIA friends—but I've kept my hands to myself since then, or at the very least, refused to look any deeper than the surface, memories collecting on me like a film of nervous sweat.

Perhaps I should be grateful for my gift. But I don't want to be a weapon anymore, capable of causing pain. I don't want to be viewed as an instrument for torture or for condemning average people to death for their thoughts, like I did back in Russia. Rostov used me to hunt dissidents and traitors; he tried to use me to launch a nuclear war, and nearly succeeded. I don't want that kind of power lying in wait just beneath my skin.

But I don't want Rostov to succeed even more.

I let my thoughts sink into the general's skin. A marching band bursts from the contact, coiling through the hearing room, weaving around me and each of the panel members. Trumpets circle the general. Brassy high notes punctuate the drumbeat pounding into my skull. I recognize the melody from one of Winnie's cultural lessons—"Stars and Stripes Forever" by John Phillip Sousa. *Be kind to your web-footed friends, for that duck may be somebody's mother.* I suspect those aren't the real lyrics, but it made for a fun afternoon, belting about ducks at the tops of our lungs while Valentin hammered out the chords on Papa's baby grand.

"You have a musical shield," I say. To protect against enemy

psychics, he keeps a song forever stuck in his head, covering up his real thoughts. “I cannot look past that.” I lift my hand and the brassy march diminishes.

The general chuckles. “I’m sure you could if you wanted to.”

It’s not a compliment. I take a step back from the panel, sweat sprouting under my armpits.

“Your father can. Mister Sorokhin can. And your old KGB boss—General Anton Rostov—I understand he’s altered *your* thoughts before.”

So has my own father, but I’m not interested in discussing that with this stranger. “My power does not work that way,” I stammer. “And—and if it did, it would not be my place.”

“What if I ordered you to?” the general asks. The woman to his left scribbles furiously. As the general leans forward, the dim sunlight grazes his face—broad, meaty, cut with deep furrows. “Did the KGB ever make you do things that weren’t your ‘place?’” A dangerous grin unfolds. “Did you obey?”

I remember gunshots, ringing through the haze of Rostov’s mind control. I remember my mouth disobeying me, reading out nuclear launch codes as Rostov coiled like barbed wire around my mind.

“That’s a rather complicated question.” Winnie steps forward from the corner, arms unfurling. “Sir.”

“It’s still relevant. War often places us in situations with no right choice.” His head retreats into his broad oxen shoulders. “In Korea, I had to make plenty of those calls. Who lives and who dies. Trust me, Miss Chernina, we will understand.”

My head throbs as a thousand phantom heartbeats push blood through my brain. The young engineer, Natalya, executed for

treason after I ran to her for help. My best friend, Larissa, sacrificing herself so Valentin and I could escape to America with my father. Dozens of people whose brains my father scrubbed—warped, altered, or erased—to find me. Cosmonauts incinerated inside the *Veter 1* capsule—I still don't know if Papa and his team member were responsible for the explosion or not, but if he was, and I could have prevented those deaths . . .

“We did what we had to do,” I say slowly, neither meeting his gaze, nor Winnie's, “to survive.”

Scribble, scribble, scratch.

In Russian, silence is a defensive measure; it's a shovel and a soft patch of earth. But so far, English speakers wield silence like a weapon around me, its threat growing sharper with each word left unsaid. I look down at my bare knees, slow my breathing to match the creeping strings of my mental musical shield, Shostakovich's *Babi Yar* symphony, and wait.

“So, Miss Chernina. Tell us more about your decision to defect to America.”

“It was more a decision to leave Russia, at the time.” The scratching pencils rise in cadence; my armpits now rival the Vasyugan Swamp. I look to Winnie, but she's turned away from me. Was that the wrong answer? “But—but once Papa told me about his life here, I knew this was where I wanted to be.” The words gush out of me with frantic abandon. If I linger on them too long, they'll trip me up. Better to surge forward. “No waiting in lines, no equality through our shared misery. No one is afraid of their own thoughts. I am . . . myself here.”

One of the women stops scribbling and snickers, unintentionally letting her thoughts bubble over her musical shield and flow

onto the table as I grip its edge. *This kid's accent is straight outta the McCarthy hearings.*

“And why,” the general asks, folding his hands before him, “do you now want to work for the United States government?”

I allow myself a slow smile. Now this, I can answer. “I know what General Rostov is capable of.” Despite my dense rye-bread accent, I know these words perfectly. “He is not satisfied with the stalemate between East and West, and he will destroy whatever he must to spark a new war. He cannot be allowed to continue. No one deserves his—‘flavor,’ is that correct?—of pain.”

Winnie is nodding at me. I want to smile, but fear has me in its rictus. My jaw aches from clenching it so hard.

“An interesting way of putting it,” the general says. “One of our top priorities is dealing with General Rostov and his new allies around the world.”

“One of,” I echo.

“Let me be clear, Miss Chernina. We welcome the assistance of someone with your skill set.” He eases back in his chair and slides a thick folder out of his stack. “But Rostov is not our only concern.”

My chest tightens like fingers lacing together. I’m afraid I know what’s coming next.

“We cannot ignore your mother’s role in Rostov’s plans. According to our intelligence, he’s tasked her with building a whole new army of mind-reading spies.”

My breath rushes out of me like a punch to the sternum. It was a mistake to come here today—I’m not ready after all. “She’s cooperating because she must. She is protecting my brother.” She was protecting me, too, until I ran away. I push

away the constantly hovering question of how they were punished following my escape. She told me to run, after all. She had to have a plan.

The general tilts his head. “Whatever her motivation, she *is* doing this work. And whatever they’re working on must be stopped. Do you understand this?”

Shostakovich marches through my thoughts with a slow, sturdy drumbeat. “I understand,” I say carefully, “that their work must be stopped.”

The general flips through the folder before him, his smile as thin as a knife. “Then we are in agreement.” He shoves it across the table toward me; black and white photographs flutter free. I bend down, my bad ankle creaking like a rusty hinge, and scoop up the photos. Then nearly drop them.

Crime scene photos. Dead men and women, staring beyond the camera with milky eyes. One victim is sprawled out on the pavement, his hat tilted upward, revealing his stunned face. A woman curls into the corner of a train car. Nothing similar links any of these people that I can tell—race, age, place of death—except they all wear the slippery skin of sudden weight loss and the dark pouches beneath their eyes of too many sleepless nights. And dark trails blaze from their nostrils, their ears.

Something tightens in my gut, clenches hard and ripe and refuses to let go. I’m thankful the images are in black and white, flattening down the gore into less jarring hues.

“What happened to these people?” I ask, hysteria bringing out my guttural Slavic snarl. What I mean to ask is why is he showing me this awfulness—what relevance does it have to our discussion about Mama? But that line of questioning bumps against

a bruised and battered patch in my brain. He thinks Mama is behind this somehow.

And I'm scared he might be right.

The general clears his throat. "These bodies have turned up all over North America and Western Europe over the past six weeks. At first, we were afraid we had a biological attack on our hands. Anthrax, smallpox—every couple of years, we get double agents making a bunch of noise about how the Russkies are bringing back the Plague. But we called in the Communicable Disease Center, and their tests for every known disease came back negative. And the geographical distribution—London, New York, West Berlin, Toronto—made no sense for an epidemic."

My ears turn redder and redder with each multisyllabic word. I wish I didn't have to rely on Winnie. I glance toward her, eyebrows raised in surrender, and she translates in flawless Russian.

"They look like they are the victims of a psychic attack. But there are so many of them." I keep shuffling through the photographs—there must be almost twenty people in here.

"That was our thought, too, after we ruled out biological causes. Then we came across another victim while investigating a possible mole in the State Department. The FBI went to the apartment of the mole's handler and found him inside—just barely clinging to life. That one—that's him, right there."

I suck in my breath as I study the last photograph. The man's spider legs curl under his chin; he lies on his side, blood collecting on the rug beneath him. Diamond-cut cheekbones and a pair of scars across one eye.

"I know this man," I say.

The general's eyes tighten like a camera lens focusing. "One

of our PsyOps team members was with us when we found him. Said he'd never encountered such a powerful psychic before. I think you've got a name for them—psychics like your father?"

"Scrubbers." Psychics who don't merely read minds—they twist and bend thoughts into whatever arrangement they please. They can conjure entire memories out of nothingness or suppress a thought as if it never occurred. "But—but this man. Pavel. He isn't a scrubber." I tap the photograph. "He was one of our guards back in Moscow, just a low-ranking KGB soldier. He didn't have any psychic abilities himself."

The general squashes his lips together. "Tell that to the poor PsyOps team member. Just being around the guy gave him an awful nosebleed, his thoughts were so strong—said it felt like getting an ice pick lobotomy."

My hands are quivering like plucked strings as I drop the stack of photos on the table. I know what he's describing all too well. I've been victim to a scrubber's corrosive wave of psychic energy, wrenching my thoughts around, boring through my skull, filling my head with whatever maddening visions he pleases. Scrubbers are impossible to miss. Pavel couldn't have been one—I'm certain of it.

"You said he was still alive when you found him." I meet the general's gaze, avoiding the dead eyes of the photographs as they stare up at me. "Did he tell you anything?"

"The PsyOps member was too busy trying to keep his brain from dribbling out of his nose to read the guy's mind. But the perp said something before he expired." The general peers down at his file. "'Rostov. Chernina. They've gone too far.'"

The pain in my heart, sharp and piercing, dulls the lesser ache

of my bad ankle. Chernina. Mama. Pavel didn't have the abilities before, I'm certain of it. Could she really do these things—building a psychic army, amplifying their powers far beyond anything we've ever known? If she were only trying to survive, then she'd do the bare minimum necessary to keep herself and Zhenya safe. This has to be part of a ploy to get her and Zhenya out of Russia. But how?

The general glances to the panel members on either side of him, some sort of wordless, thoughtless language passing between their eyes. "Miss Chernina, we are here because we need your help to stop her. To stop . . . this." He sweeps his hand toward the photographs. "We believe the Soviets may have found a way to activate or enhance psychic abilities, and your mother is the logical choice to head such an endeavor, though we don't know what they intend to accomplish with these psychics just yet. The Psychic Operations team needs your skills and your knowledge to prevent whatever they're working toward. I realize this is a lot to ask of you, but I suspect I don't need to tell you how dangerous an army of these . . . 'scrubbers' . . . could be."

What Rostov's working toward. The last I saw Rostov, his brilliant plan was to force the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to start a third world war by launching nuclear missiles at American targets. It may have been a momentary act of desperation, an emotional retaliatory strike for the *Veter 1* rocket explosion. Maybe. But a man like him won't rest until the whole world has bowed to his aggressive version of Soviet supremacy.

"It's only the beginning," the general says. "Rostov has allies around the world, now. Castro, Mao, Kim. Tito and Kadar. Ho Chi Minh." A Who's Who of the Red Menace. Cuba, China,

North Korea, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and North Vietnam. “We’ve caught their agents here and abroad, all of them carrying out the sort of marching orders we’d expect from a man like Rostov. But they’re always a step ahead. We have to learn what they’re working toward.”

But I’m not listening. I’m padding my way through the dark tunnels of my brain, feeling the edges of bruises that’ll never fully fade. Memories my father tried to scrub out; knowledge he and Mama wanted to erase. My parents—both of them—have done awful things before, thinking it was for the greater good. What greater purpose is Mama trying to serve now?

“I’ll do whatever I must to stop Rostov and my mother’s plan,” I say. “But if you mean to hurt my mother, you do it alone.”

CHAPTER 2

“LET’S GO TO DINNER TONIGHT,” Papa says in Russian, the wind shredding his words. “To celebrate your joining the team.” He twists the car’s tuner knob from static to static. “That brasserie down on M Street. You love that place.”

Neither Valya nor I answer. We’ve learned, these past few months, that Papa prefers to talk to himself rather than carry on a genuine conversation. We will go to dinner at his French restaurant, and he will drive us home in this ridiculous British convertible, and he will probably be drunk, so we’ll park half onto the yard, and then he’ll convince Valentin to play piano duets with him, and we’ll sing all night long in the conservatory of his townhouse that’s so massive it *has* a conservatory. Is this what it was like for my friend Larissa when she peered into the future? Did she see life as this inevitable pantomime, this grim certainty?

“Why is Mama helping Rostov?” I ask, screaming to be heard over the static and the wind.

Papa settles on a fuzzy station playing “Surfin’ USA”, then

throttles the stick shift to rocket us around an aquamarine Cadillac. The static scrapes at my thoughts, adding to my tension headache, but Papa's head bobs and he whistles along. Right now he looks more like Mick Jagger than my father in his black turtleneck and buttery leather jacket. His face is too stubbly—Mama would have attacked it with a razor days ago. He's wiry as ever, though a teensy belly peeks over his belt buckle from too many nights of rich food and drink and insomnia and cigarettes, but never smoking inside the house, no, because now his English vocabulary includes phrases like "property value" and "mortgage rates." I wonder if Winnie taught him those.

"Papa?" I ask again. "Why didn't you warn me? What's Mama's plan?"

"Do you want to invite Winnie to dinner?" Papa takes his hand off the stick shift just long enough to swat my knee. "I already told her to meet us there. You don't mind, right?"

I turn toward Valentin in the backseat, but the wind throws my dark hair into my face. When I peel it away, he's regarding me with a sad smile on his bow lips and eyes far away behind his thick black-framed glasses. I'm relieved to see him smiling at all. Last night was one of the bad ones. I awoke to find his nightmares twisting into my ribs, driven there by his scrubber ability—he was too distraught to keep it in check. I ran into his bedroom and curled around him, wishing I could somehow cushion him from the splintered edges of his past.

Valentin's always kept some memories anchored firmly in the depths of his mind. I never pressed him on them; we all clung to our secrets like they were the most precious of jewels when we were controlled by the KGB. But as we were escaping East

Berlin, Rostov's scrubbing ability pierced his mind with a serrated blade. Whatever Valentin kept at bay before has washed ashore, bloated and rotten, refusing to stay forgotten. It torments him, I know, though I see him trying to fight it down. Most days, he suppresses it long enough to do his work for the PsyOps Team, and when he comes home with Papa in the evenings, he can smile and talk and cook and live with me. Today is not such a day.

I thread my arm through the gap between Papa's and my seats and rest my palm on Valentin's knee. No sense shouting over the wind. The tempest of the *Babi Yar* symphony calms, and I push my thoughts against Valya's musical barrier so we can speak without words. *Why didn't you warn me they're going after my mother?*

His mouth presses into a thin line. *They keep me in the dark about her, too. But I couldn't tell you anything until they approved you. It's classified.* He manages half a smile. *Believe me, I wanted to, but rules are rules.*

That's what we'd agreed on, when Valya and I first decided to work with Papa and his new American friends. We'd follow the rules this time around; try to trust our teammates and believe in their goals. We want the same things they do, after all—Rostov stopped and the world safe from people like him, people who'd make our very thoughts a crime.

But paranoia is a feeling, and then a habit, and then a part of me, no easier to extract than a vital organ. *Easy for you to say Itell Valya. They let you start working for them immediately.*

Because I already knew English, Valya says. They wanted to give you time to learn, to feel comfortable here—

My comfort has nothing to do with this. I clench my teeth. *They trusted you from the start, but not me. Why?*

Papa clicks off the radio and laughs—a sharp, brusque sound. Too sharp. “Because of your mother. My poor little girl. You say you’ll help them now, but are you ready to make the hard choices? I don’t know if you’ll ever be ready.”

Oh, so now Papa wants to listen to me, when we’re having a psychic discussion that he shouldn’t be able to hear without using his scrubber skills. “This is a private conversation, and it doesn’t involve you,” I snap at him.

Papa shrugs as we clatter off the bridge and onto solid streets. “Guess it does now.”

Pearly granite monuments splay before us, rooted in hot green grass. Federal workers cross the street in riots of blue and orange; paisley, lace, and velvet; thick corduroy suits. To our left, cherry trees burst like pink popcorn around the rim of the Tidal Basin. Papa whistles to himself as he waits for the light to change, higher and higher, each note jabbing at my growing headache—

“Pull over!” I shout.

Another shrug from Papa; he swerves the car to the left and parks the wrong way along the curb, whistling while I wrestle out of my seat belt and hop from the convertible without opening the door. Bile burns at the back of my throat.

“Yulia?” Valentin calls as I charge into the snow of shock-pink petals with my uneven gait. I wrap my arms around my chest, the long bell sleeves of my black dress hanging limp like deflated balloons. The wind snakes across my exposed thighs. Why did I let Winnie talk me into this ridiculous mod clothing again? *Bozhe*

moi. The heel of one boot snags on a tree root as I bob toward the Tidal Basin's edge.

I wanted this, I tell myself, breathing deep to quiet my roiling stomach. I wanted to run away with Valentin. I wanted America with its nauseating colors and impractical clothes and people who keep one eye trained on me like I'm a communist jack-in-the-box about to spring.

Everything has a price tag in America, and I suppose facing the truth of Mama's work is my cost of admission.

Shostakovich's symphony turns sour as it batters over my thoughts. I do not hate my life here; of course not. I couldn't endure another day enslaved to the KGB, helping General Rostov push the Cold War to its breaking point. I'm no longer his puppet, helping him overthrow Nikita Khrushchev and spread his brand of communism around the world. I did not lie when I agreed to stop his newest plan, and it was always my choice to make. My choice, everything is my choice in the land of the free. But I am not gifted with Larissa's future sight to see how unhappy even good choices can make me.

If I'd peered into the future, would I have chosen this version of Papa—jaunty and reckless and unwilling to discuss Mama? Why didn't he warn me they were hunting her? When I first embraced him again, after crossing over to West Berlin, it felt like we'd never been apart. I knew him like I knew the hollow at the base of his ribcage where I used to rest my forehead. But the Papa who told me bedtime stories and used to be inseparable from Mama feels lost to me. He's an unknown Papa-shaped quantity, unbalancing all my equations.

Yulia. Unlike me, Valentin can press a thought into my head without contact. He stands under a blooming cherry tree behind me with a dusting of pink across his shoulders. *I'm sorry. I should have warned you.*

I step back onto the granite edge of the basin. *Please don't keep secrets from me,* I think, concealing the thought in our shared song, but placing it outside of my shield where Valentin, unconstrained by physical touch like I am, can read it. *I want those days to be over.*

The little dimple on Valentin's chin shows as he tilts his head, the one that's a touchstone for my thumb when I stroke his cheeks. *I'm sorry, Yul. I never meant to hurt you. We haven't talked about your mother in so long, and I was afraid of how you'd handle hearing their suspicions . . .*

Poorly, as it turns out. I squeeze my eyes shut. We haven't talked about a lot of things. Whatever haunting thoughts were knocked free in Valya's mind . . .

You think she has a plan, don't you? He takes a tentative step toward me, stopping shy of the basin.

I raise my head and step toward him.

I'm on your side, Yul. Always. If you want my help . . .

Valya . . . I lace my fingers through his hair. Of course I want to believe him; I want to think he'd do whatever it took to keep my mother safe. But he's right: now is the time to play by the rules. We are the guests, the outsiders, the ones with something to prove. Once I understand her plan, then we can find some way to clear her name from these deeds.

Valentin kisses my eyelids where I've clenched them shut. The tension drains out of me, replaced by that dangerous mix of hope

and peacefulness. I cup his face in my hands and kiss him back. Of course he'll help me with this, too. His soft lips linger against mine for a moment, the world completely silent around us.

"Okay, kids, you can neck later. I'm starving," Papa calls.

Valya squeezes my hand and steers me back toward the car. *I'll do everything I can to help you make your family whole.*



Winnie is already waiting for us on the sidewalk outside the brasserie. She's a perfectly motionless figure in her pleated monochrome blouse and skirt, silent among the Technicolor waves of Georgetown pedestrians in frothy spring frocks, puckered cardigans, seersucker suits. "Did they not teach you how to tell time in the Soviet Union?" she asks Papa, reining in a smile.

He fires off a sloppy salute. "Sorry, ma'am. It won't happen again." He extends his elbow to Winnie; she rolls her eyes and shoves past him, but her smile's gaining ground.

Valentin takes my arm in his as we duck into the dark wooden brasserie. "You're right, as always," he murmurs, lips right at my ear. His voice thrums in my veins. Particles vibrating, heating up, melting away my earlier heartache. "I should've told you about their suspicions. But no more secrets. Whatever you need to do, I'm here to help you."

I know Valya still has secrets of his own, but I smile and squeeze his hand.

A bell over the door jangles to announce us. "Welcome to Brasserie Bonaparte." The maître d' looks up from his stand with a smile that quickly dissolves. "Ah. Um. I'm sorry, sir." His gaze

darted to Winnie before ping-ponging back to Papa. “I’m afraid we can’t . . .” His jaw muscles work a nervous jig beneath his jowls. “Our other customers wouldn’t like—You see, it’s standard for all businesses in Georgetown—” He leans toward Papa. “I’m afraid we don’t serve her kind.”

Winnie straightens to her full height. “And what kind might that be?” Her voice frays into the upper register. “Servicewomen? Or colored girls?”

The *maitre d’* staggers back as the room shudders and shifts. A jolt of electricity stands my arm hairs on end and turns the screws in my brain. The dark wood paneling warps around me, drinking up my thoughts until I’m left with a dull, fuzzy hunger in my gut. I stumble forward, tethered only by Valentin’s grip.

The room settles like a ship righting itself; the lights dim, then return. Winnie blinks, hand raised, index finger extended, then carefully lowers her hand as if she’s forgotten whatever she was about to say.

The *maitre d’* stares through me, trying to place my face, then forces a smile to his rubbery lips. “Welcome to the Brasserie Bonaparte! May I offer you a table for four?”

“A private dining room,” Papa says, still smiling. “Bring up a bottle of your best cognac—extra old.”

The *maitre d’* grabs four menus and leads us through the restaurant. Columns of smoke and the scent of dark wines rise from each table we pass; the diners’ heads whip around to chase us as we progress through the honeycomb dining nooks. Specifically, to chase Winnie. But as soon as Papa strides past, a blanket of calm settles over them, and they turn back to their *confit* and *coq au vin*, chattering about North Vietnam or the new Elvis film.

The maître d' leads us into a glassed-in dining room, burgundy velvet curtains covering all the windows. "I'll be right back with that cognac." His nose nearly scrapes the floor as he bows.

"Papa?" I narrow my eyes as the door clicks shut. "Was that really necessary?"

"You'd rather Winnie not be able to eat with us? No harm done." He settles onto the low wooden bench.

"You'd rather I what?" Winnie asks, one eyebrow cocked. But the air ripples again and her expression wanes. "I . . . I'm so sorry. I forgot what I was saying."

"You were telling me all about your day, Sergeant." Papa props his chin in his hands.

I glare at him for a few moments longer, but he's forgotten me already. I study him while he listens to Winnie—his stylish jazz club frames and sloppy crew cut and twitchy grin. The Papa I knew in Russia took no risks. He kept his mind empty and his record spotless. I remember walking through Moscow with him once and my hand, clutched in his, slipped from its too-big glove and instantly he was lost to me. I couldn't divine his face from any of the hunkering Russian men around me, their eyes dulled and deferent, their stock boiled-wool coats upturned to guard against wind and wayward stares. He was factory-stamped, assembled on a conveyor belt; only at home with Mama and Zhenya did he expose any personality at all, and even then only after a few drinks. Is this the real Papa exposed before me, or is it another camouflage he wears?

Rostov said Papa was a remote viewer when he was younger—like Sergei, General Rostov's son, he could summon up a place from photographs and then move around it like a ghost. One

remote viewer on our old team learned to manipulate objects like a ghastly hand reaching from the other side of the world to shuffle papers, move rocks, close doors. Sergei learned to push his thoughts into others' heads through his viewings. I can force emotions out, now, in addition to drawing them in. And Papa—

What chain of events turned him into a scrubber? Was it always there, and he hid it from the KGB? But Papa doesn't merely change thoughts like other scrubbers; Papa has mastered the art of suppressing memories, and when I was younger, he erased all knowledge of my powers from my mind. Even now, there are soft patches on my brain that mask memories from our old life. Maybe Papa was always the reckless man I found in East Berlin, tossing a Molotov cocktail through a café window.

"A toast," Papa says, smiling at me. "The family that spies together . . ." He trails off and clinks his glass against mine.

Lies together? Dies together? Convenient of him to leave out that we're spying on our *own* family. I gulp down the cognac and let its fiery trail match my mood. I feel Mama's and Zhenya's absence around our table like phantom limbs; how can we celebrate now, when we have so far to go until we're whole once more?

"Cheer up, buttercup." Papa ruffles my hair. "We need you in tip-top shape to stop whatever Rostov's up to now."

And Mama, I think. Whatever Mama's up to now. But her name never passes his lips; whether he thinks she's on our side or not, he never seems to think of her at all.

After several rounds of roasted game hens and foie gras and truffled snails, my Soviet ration-sized stomach and bladder have reached their upper limits and I excuse myself to the restroom. Only one room, for men and women both. I jiggle the

handle—locked. I slouch against the wall like an American teenager while I wait. Black and white photographs line the wall opposite me: Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart and dozens more faces of politicians, movie stars, artists I recognize from Winnie's tutoring, all posing with the brass Josephine Bonaparte statue at the bar. Immortalized by an impassive camera lens. If only my power were so simple—snapshots frozen in time, nothing more. No messy emotions and secrets and pain piling up without release.

I shove my hands into my armpits and wait.

The door swings open; the bathroom's occupant stops himself just short of crashing into me. He reeks of wine and mothballs. His tweed jacket swallows him like a crumpled wrapper, and his shirt hangs loose from his waistband. He backs up with a grunt, then stares hard right at me.

Sallow skin, the color of bile. Blisters at the corners of his lips and red rimming his eyes. Hair standing up every which way, except for a greasy mustache that droops down. He looks mere hours from ending up in the general's stack of crime scene photos.

A warning shot fires through my mind. I have to touch him—no matter how afraid I am of him, of myself, of whatever I might find. I take a step forward, reaching for the door with one hand but the other grasping for him—

A shockwave rips through me, all my threads of thought fraying apart in the blast. The picture frames rattle against the wall and the door shakes loose from my hand. I double over as steel wool scours through my brain and creamed potatoes attempt to reach back up my throat.

And then it's gone—the sensation, and the man with it. In the distance, the bell over the front door tinkles.

I charge back to our room and throw the door open. “Papa, I think one of the—”

But the *maitre d'* is hovering over the table, smiling vacantly as he collects a folio stuffed with cash. “And a good evening to you as well, *mademoiselle*,” he says to me before backing out of the room.

That burst just now. I close my hand over Valentin’s. *Was that Papa? You?*

A muscle twitches along Valentin’s jaw. *Your father was adjusting our bill.*

Whatever tension had been inflating in my chest empties. I sink onto the bench beside Valentin. This is my old paranoia, wriggling under my skin like shards from broken glass.

We are not being followed. We are not being targeted.

The most dangerous man in the restaurant is the one who brought me here.

CHAPTER 3

DURING THE DAY, my mind is working in sixth gear: spinning and spinning on thousands of English words and phrases and nuances; soaking up and sorting through countless cultural detrita. Elvis Presley and Pepsodent and *The Sword in the Stone*. Elizabeth Taylor. Things go better with Coke. The genetic research journals Winnie forces me to painstakingly translate. During the day, my brain is cluttered up with so much information that it can't discern what's important; it can't clear out a space to pick at those raw-wound memories Papa tried to suppress, recently torn open, lying in wait beneath it all.

But at night, when sleep clears it away, the four-note symphony Zhenya used to hum threads through my mind and ushers those memories out of the wings.

Mama and Zhenya and I are walking through Gorky Park, a delicate layer of ice crackling under our soles. We take each step with purpose and watch our feet, as if by keeping a close eye on

them, we can shame them into not slipping. It is much too cold for this; were it not for Zhenya, we'd be bundled up by the furnace, sipping the ultra-strong *zavarka* tea from the samovar and reading Chukovsky's children's poems. Instead, we are shivering, swaddled up like eggs packed for shipping, all alone in the park.

"Look," Mama says, gesturing to the snow bank on the left of the path. "Look at the beautiful feather!"

It's half-crusted in ice as she pulls it from the snow, and as long as her forearm. Dark gray striations interrupt the drab brown shade. "It's ugly," I say. Zhenya tugs at my hand, momentum pulling him forward along the path. He does not care one bit about the feather, or anything that interrupts him from his walk. He whistles four notes, steel-sharp in the winter air.

Mama kneels down in front of us and watches us with crystalline eyes. Wind rattles through the bare birch trees of the park; in the distance, we hear the low toll of the Novodevichy Monastery bells.

"Do you know the story of the firebird?" Mama asks, her breath white and dazzling as it leaves her mouth.

I burrow my chin into my scarf. "Yes." I'm sure I've heard it before, and I want to finish our walk and go home. I want to throw my arms around Papa's shoulders and warm up in our posh Party home near Rubleyka.

"I don't think I've told it to you before." She holds the feather out in front of me. "Pay attention—this is important."

I groan; Zhenya tugs back toward the sidewalk, but Mama holds firm.

“Once upon a time, a hunter stumbled into the realm of Koschei the Undying while chasing a beautiful bird covered in all the hues of flame. He caught the firebird, but she begged and pleaded for her life. The hunter hated to lose such a prize, but he had a kind heart, so he relented, and the firebird left him a single feather as thanks. ‘What use do I have for a single feather?’ the hunter grumbled, and tucked it into his belt. But it was too late for the hunter; Koschei the Undying, evil sorcerer that he was, already knew the hunter was on his land.”

I am leaning forward now, imagining how it might feel to hold a fiery feather in my hand and watch it shimmer with red and gold.

“The hunter had fallen in love, you see, with one of Koschei’s princesses, kept locked up in his realm, and sought to free her from Koschei’s grasp. But when he battled Koschei, he found that Koschei could not be killed. The hunter lay wounded and dying, clutching the firebird’s feather, heartbroken because he’d never know the princess’s love.

“But when he held the feather, it summoned the firebird to him. She told him the secret to defeating Koschei—she told him where he kept his soul, so the hunter could go destroy it. He smashed the egg that held Koschei’s soul, and Koschei was Undying no more. The hunter and the princess lived happily ever after.”

Mama runs the feather against the side of my face. “Do you understand, then, the firebird’s lesson?” she asks.

Zhenya is busy picking his nose, so I answer for both of us. “Sure. You think if we hold onto this feather, someday the bird it fell off of will show up and help us defeat an evil sorcerer.”

“No.” Mama tosses the feather back into the snow and hoists Zhenya to his feet. “I’m telling you to pay attention. Because no matter how tiny, how weightless, how inconsequential something may seem, you never know when you can use that knowledge or that thing. One day it might just save your life.”

CHAPTER 4

THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY'S headquarters, unlike the very public KGB building looming over the heart of Moscow, is shrouded in trees in northern Virginia and padded with horse stables and palatial French mansions. Papa drives us for what seems like forever along the cliffs overlooking the Potomac to reach it. "Remember," he tells me as we wind through the forest, "this location is secret."

And then we pass the gatehouse swarming with men with machine guns.

The building itself is more Soviet than I'd expected: squat, cobbled from concrete slabs, swerving and contoured in that space-age style. Closed-circuit cameras whine as they twist from the awning to follow our approach. Valentin closes his hand around mine while Papa strides ahead of us, whistling again, his flared trousers skimming the steps.

I swallow my breath as we enter the gleaming main corridor. Marble everywhere—blue, gray, and white. The Agency's seal—an

eagle (only one-headed, unlike our mutant double-headed Russian eagles) clutching a shield to its breast—winks at me in silver trim from the center of the floor. To my right, brass stars spangle the marble wall in perfectly even lines.

Papa swings his arm toward the wall of stars. “The Memorial Wall,” he says in English. “Each star is for an agent who has died in the line of duty.”

The line of duty, I suspect, includes battling Russian spies.

“Well, I’m off. Have fun, you crazy kids.” Papa looks at me for a moment. I wish his lips to press against my forehead. There was a time in my life when he couldn’t stop fawning over me—when he walked me to grade school every morning and scooped me into his arms whenever he came home. I thought it was the real Papa, leaking out of the standard-issue Soviet man for a brief moment before pouring himself back in. But now, with no one to hide himself from, he merely turns and walks down the hall, whistling to himself.

The security guard hands me a badge to dangle around my neck—my photograph, with my full name and nationality typed beneath it. They’ve added a superfluous *j* to the English spelling of my name. *Yulija*. Now everyone’s going to butcher the pronunciation.

Valentin holds up his own badge. “Valentine,” he says. Like the American holiday. We laugh nervously, a quick snorting sound. His fingers brush against the nape of my neck as he helps me slide my badge into place, leaving a warm trail of our shared music on my skin. I’m not alone. As disorienting as our new life is, I can survive here.

“Miss Chernina!” A fluted column of a woman, rich olive skin

melting into a tweedy Jackie Kennedy–style skirt and blazer, clips toward us on heeled oxfords. “Cindy Conrad. Call me Cindy.” She pumps her right hand toward me like a piston. I shake, but her strength far exceeds mine, and my hand flails in hers as her raucous blues music shield spills onto me. “It’s not my real name. Come along; I work with the girls separately in the mornings.”

I seize Valentin’s wrist, leaning back from Cindy. “Wait—why are we separated?” I meet Valentin’s eyes. “I’d be more comfortable if Valentin were to—help translate, or explain—”

Cindy smirks. “That’s very sweet. But we do things rather differently here than you might be used to, and part of that is keeping the genders separated. For propriety’s sake, you know.” Another dainty laugh. “What do you think this is—a public high school?”

Valentin squeezes my hand. “I’ll be right down the hall if you need anything. *Tebye obyeshayu.*” *I promise.*

Cindy trails a warm perfume from her like a censer as we wind through the CIA’s bowels, her caramel-colored bun bobbing high above everyone else. Though I can tell she’s slowed her pace to accommodate my limp, we’re still moving at a decent clip. I’m amazed how much noise these marble halls contain, circling a lush courtyard where young cardiganed secretaries lounge and smoke and drink from Styrofoam coffee cups. Everyone’s talking to someone as they trot from one corridor to the next, sometimes frantic, sometimes giddy. But everyone I brush against—down to the dowdy old woman stocking a breakfast cart—hums with a different melody.

“Everyone has a musical shield?” I ask Cindy, taking care to add an upward inflection to make it a question. Winnie told me

my accent makes everything sound like I'm conducting an interrogation.

"We have many psychic safeguards in place—standard training for all CIA employees. He may be a real pistol to work with, but your father has been a godsend for our operational security, let me tell you!" She glances back at me. "You sound like quite the firebrand yourself. I heard about the number you did on Rostov and his 'Hound' back in Berlin. We'll be needing more of that resourcefulness."

There's a current running through the building, a hum just on the horizon of my hearing like an electrified fence. It's similar to the vibration in Papa's townhouse, the by-product of living with two scrubbers. But no one we pass seems to be the source; aside from Cindy, I don't sense that prick and tingle of psychic prowess.

"I don't know how much your father and Valentin have told you about our work here. Hopefully not much, since it's highly classified!" She says it with a smile, but I suspect she's not joking. "Last year, we partnered with the Department of Education to include a psychic battery and examination in their high school testing—that's how we found your teammates. They're all around your age. We do have a few older operatives who volunteered their unique services for America. By and large, though, our program is new, which makes it exciting. We haven't yet gotten regulated to death." Her gaze rakes across me. "I've seen all kinds of psychics, but I've never met anyone with an ability quite like yours."

My touch—she means my touch. I cement my hands to my sides. "Did you also . . . 'volunteer your services'?" I ask, hoping

to shift attention away from me. She looks like the ‘Ivy League Spooks’ Winnie’s warned me about. They come from New England money and New England colleges—they have wealth coded into their DNA as surely as psychic powers are coded in mine. They created the Central Intelligence Agency seventeen years ago, after World War II, to put their college educations to good use. I start fabricating a backstory for Cindy. Finishing school and horseback-riding lessons and dinner parties with the Kennedys. College degree, a rare thing for women in America, I hear. Clapboard beach homes on—what did Winnie say again?—Martha’s Vineyard. The Hamptons.

Cindy smiles again—it’s like a camera flash going off—and herds me into an elevator. “They found me telling fortunes in a New Orleans brothel.”

“Brothel,” I echo. I’m not sure if Winnie and I went over this word, but I think it has something to do with soup.

“A whorehouse,” she says, not missing a beat. “I had the mystical voodoo priestess shtick down pat. Good money, too, until I told the wrong mob boss he was going to die.” The elevator doors slide open. “Our office is right this way.”

I clamp my dangling jaw shut. So much for Ivy League Spook. I watch Cindy’s measured, flawless stride down the corridor, looking for any hint of whatever sort of girl deals with prostitutes and mob bosses, but it’s all 18 karat-plated confidence and command. I admire her for the transformation she must have undergone, but her seemingly effortless ability to suppress her past also tightens a fear in me, like a clock’s spring winding up.

Our “office” looks more like the Bali beatnik jazz lounge

Valentin and I visited last week than the sober black leather and wood-paneled affair I'd anticipated. Fringed velvet curtains sweep down from the drop ceiling, tucked under the asbestos tiles to anchor them. They turn the large room into a claustrophobic labyrinth. All the fluorescent lighting tracks have been draped with thin sheets of silk in various colors, casting kaleidoscope swirls around the den.

"Ladies! Our new friend is here!" Cindy flutters toward a marble-topped bar and pours herself a glass of something amber and reeking of smoke.

One of the curtains billows as something moves behind it; a hand wraps around it from behind and shoves it back. One girl steps forward, short and lithe, her eyes contracting as she studies me. "I'm Donna. Donna Willoughsby," she says. "Boy, have we been waiting for you."

Donna's glossy blond hair sweeps into a ponytail that forms a perfect inverted question mark. Her skin looks brushed with powdered sunlight; her smile could jam radio frequencies—she looks exactly like I imagine the Beach Boys' "Surfer Girl," though instead of a scandalous bikini, she wears a fluffy turquoise skirt and creamy blouse, with a faint rose cardigan draped demurely over her shoulders.

"It is nice to meet you. I'm Yulia." My right hand twitches at my side. Should I move in to shake? I lurch forward, but then realize I look like a shambling beast from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and decide against it.

"*Dobro pozhalovat*," Donna tells me, in a Russian accent that's not flawless, but still cheerful. "I understand you've been working with Sergeant Davis?"

“She’s the best,” I say. “Anything I . . . misspeak? Is entirely my own fault.”

Donna takes my arm in hers, like I’m her oldest, dearest confidant. “She’s good. But she isn’t one of us. Don’t ever forget that.”

At first, I think she means because Winnie’s colored, and I try to find the right words to protest, but then another possibility strikes me—a divide between psychics and the rest. I don’t think of myself as better than non-psychics. I envy them. I lust after their simple, unguarded lives, never stumbling across secrets they wish they could forget, never causing harm with a thought, a touch.

Donna pulls me onto a plush couch, inflated like some space capsule cushion, that threatens to swallow us whole. Another girl swims out of its depths, looking at first like a spider—just arms and legs flailing around. Then a torso emerges, and a mop of black hair that she smoothes into a bouncy, frothy bob. Her features vanish behind rhinestone-flecked catseye glasses.

“I’m, uh, Marylou,” she says, the words tiny and fragile when exposed to the air. I reach out to shake with her, but her fingers just crumple against mine for an awkward second before she yanks back and forces a pained smile to her lips.

“Marylou’s a remote viewer,” Donna says. I look over Marylou again—the fringed bangs and glasses to hide her face, and the shapeless black dress that suppresses her tall, pudgy body. She certainly looks like the kind of girl who prefers to be as far removed from the situation as possible.

“What kind of psychic are you?” I ask Donna.

“Just a mind reader. Nothing special.” She smiles with one side of her mouth—like even she doesn’t believe this. “But I’m really good at getting people to open up their thoughts to me.”

I frown. “Like a scrubber?”

Donna’s smile fades; her eyes turn sharp with annoyance. “I don’t have to *break into* anyone’s head. When I talk to someone, they eagerly offer up the thoughts I need.”

“It’s basic spycraft,” Cindy says, striding toward our enclave. “You make the target more comfortable with you so they’ll tell you things they shouldn’t. Miss Willoughsby is a psychic extension of that process—making them think about whatever it is they’re trying to hide, regardless of what kind of training they’ve received. They may know not to say it out loud, but they’ll sure be thinking about it—and that’s all we really need.”

Some of her words sail past me, but I get the general idea. If Donna seems overly curious in me, I should probably be concerned.

Cindy clasps her hands together. “Now, then! Let’s talk about what I expect from you, Yulia, and introduce you to some of our current projects. First—I expect you to work hard.” She raises her index finger in a count. “I want you to push your abilities to their limits. We know so little about our powers and where our boundaries truly lie, and I expect them to be stretched.”

I grimace, thinking of the aching emptiness I felt when I forced the Hound’s emotions back onto him. The boundaries I’ve placed on myself—on my powers—are what keep me safe right now. I want to help Mama. I don’t want to be a weapon. But I give her a nod.

“Second, you must work *smart*. Don’t ever think this is easy work, that you’re punching a time clock, reading a few minds, punching out. We need to constantly find new ways to use our

powers, as well as creative solutions to problems that our powers *can't* fix.

“Third, this isn't Junior League. I'm not running a charm school. It is my sincere hope that you ladies will get along with one another, but frankly, my dears, I don't give a damn if you hate each other's guts.” Cindy smiles; Marylou and Donna giggle, and I suspect this is another cultural reference I've just missed. “However, we're here to work *together*. Russian, American, Martian, I don't care who or what you are. You work for me, and the mission comes first. Understood?”

“Yes, ma'am,” I say. I repeat the English phrases to myself: Work hard. Work smart. Work together. I glance at Donna and Marylou out of the corner of my eye; though I'm sure they've heard this speech before, they're leaning forward, eyes fixed on Cindy as they listen. Donna in particular, I notice, strains to mirror Cindy: her smile, her tilted head, her prim smoothing of her skirt.

Cindy drums her nails against the side of her glass tumbler. “Glad to hear it. Now, I understand you've been briefed on the current situation with the deceased, Yulia?”

“The . . . the bodies?” I ask. “I've seen the pictures.”

Cindy nods. “Gruesome business. My instinct tells me they must be all working toward a shared goal.” She presses two fingers against her lips. “But what are they working toward? Marylou, any thoughts?”

“Um.” Marylou looks at her lap. “Well, they aren't working together. It's all spread out.”

“Spread out—by time and location, both. Maybe one is intended to pick up where the previous one left off,” Cindy says.

“Like a relay race,” Donna volunteers.

“Precisely,” Cindy says. Donna eases back with a huge grin. “I ran a similar operation in Saigon not so long ago—if one of my operatives realized they were compromised, they left their task unfinished, and the next operative moved in to pick up where they left off.”

“But what are they working toward?” I ask.

Cindy takes a slow sip of her drink. “That is the question, isn’t it?” She turns to the others. “Ladies? Let’s teach Yulia about our ‘competing hypotheses’ technique, shall we?”

Donna turns toward me with a broad grin slathered on her face. “It’s when we explore a variety of possible scenarios, no matter how unlikely they seem.”

“Precisely,” Cindy says. “Once we’ve examined each of them, we sometimes find what we thought was a certainty is actually not that likely, and what seemed ridiculous is actually pretty reasonable. So! Let’s put ourselves in General Rostov’s head. What does he want?”

My chest aches like I’m breathing exhaust fumes. Rostov’s spent quite enough time in my head—I don’t care to step into his. The other girls’ eyes shine with the thrill of a new challenge, however; Donna sits up even straighter as she answers. “He wants the Soviet Union and the forces of communism to win a decisive victory over the West.”

“And what are some of the ways he can accomplish it?” Cindy looks at Marylou.

Marylou shrugs. “Open warfare, I guess. But then Russia might look like a bully. So he could goad the US into attacking Russia instead.”

“Are there any other possibilities?” Cindy asks.

I feel like I’m watching a hockey match—the three of them taking turns leading the conversation, passing it effortlessly back and forth. We were never asked our opinion in the KGB; Rostov never once regarded us as intellectual equals, or as anything but lackeys to be ordered about.

“What if . . .” Donna fingers her pearl necklace as her eyes dart around in thought. “What if he were being sneakier? Using guerrilla tactics—like the Viet Cong. He could be waiting for us to be distracted by something else. Then he’d have the element of surprise on his side. He wouldn’t need a large-scale battle.”

“That would be classic *maskirovka*—the Soviet art of denial and deception.” Cindy tilts her head to one side, like a curious bird. “What sort of distraction?”

“Like these psychics invading different Western cities. Would that be a big enough distraction?” Marylou asks.

“If it . . . takes up our time . . .” I gesture around me to indicate the PsyOps team. “Then we might miss another attack.”

Donna and Marylou twist around to look at me, the fake leather couch squealing underneath us. Cindy arches one flawless brow.

“Well, then,” Cindy says. “I guess we’d better keep our eyes and ears and sixth senses peeled for something other than a direct attack, shouldn’t we?”

She gestures to a tidy stack of folders sitting on the left-hand side of the coffee table, each cover bearing a cheerful barbershop striping on its border and a giant stamp: TOP SECRET. An additional code of jumbled letters beneath restricts distribution to even narrower channels. Winnie explained the main ones to me,

though I'm brimming with so much language and culture that I immediately forgot them. I'm sure we had similar data restriction rules in the KGB, but they were a bit plainer in their interpretation: keep this confidential or be executed for treason.

"Each morning, I like for us to keep our minds limber by looking through new intelligence, even if it's not directly related to our current cases. After we're warmed up, then I'll run you through a series of exercises to keep your psychic skills sharp. If we have ongoing missions to work, we'll pursue them at that time, as well. Then, in the afternoons, we work joint operations with the gentlemen." Cindy blinks, once. "Any questions?"

I shake my head. I understood her about as well as I'm going to. The Americans seem to have this down to a science; I worry that I'm too clunky for this well-oiled machine.

"All right, ladies, let's see what the analysts brought us."

Donna and Marylou roll forward to hunch over the coffee table in front of us and start pawing through the folders like they're records in the bargain bin at Woodward & Lothrop's. "North Korea's so boring." "I've already questioned that Cuban defector." "Ooh, can I see the surveillance notes?" They swap the folders back and forth, photographs and typed dossiers spilling from them like entrails, while Cindy retidies their discard heap, her patient smile never wavering.

I reach tentatively toward the pile, half-afraid I'll pull my arm back with nothing but a nub. One folder feels fattened in the middle with a stack of photographs—perfect. Not a lot of text for me to struggle through. I flip open the cover, stamped "EYES ONLY: Cindy Conrad," and cycle through the stack of photographs.

They're awful quality. Black and white, with a dearth of gray shades in between, taken through a lens that's distended like a fisheye. Each one is framed in a black ring, like they've been shot through a peephole. The photographs feature the same woman in a variety of settings. Here she's hurrying down a bridge, a fur stole suppressing her face—is that the Lomonosov Bridge in Leningrad? And in the next shot, she's peeling hair from her face in a park. The washed-out colors render her a ghost—only a vague hint of eyes on a vast white visage.

Miss Conrad lurches over the coffee table and yanks the folder from my hands, her blues music blunted and angry as we make contact. The loose pictures spray facedown across the table, but she scoops them up in an instant. “That’s not for you. Didn’t you see the marking?” She jabs her finger at the stamp on the folder’s cover. “EYES ONLY. Unless I give it to you directly, you don’t look at it.”

“It’s okay, Cindy.” Donna cups a hand around my shoulder. Her musical shield is soothing, but too sweet, like a thick syrup. It rings a little too false. “She’s new. She doesn’t understand.”

But I barely hear her. The woman hangs in my mind, like a shadow skimmed from the ground and hung out to dry. I know her.

Even under a layer of exhaustion and Party-quality cosmetics caked onto her like a guilty mask I’d know those high cheekbones anywhere.

They’re the same ones that stare back at me every morning in the mirror.

CHAPTER 5

I LOCK THE RESTROOM DOOR behind me, not caring who I inconvenience, and park myself before one of the angled mirrors. I study the flash of freckles that marches from one high cheekbone, across my flat nose, to the other cheek. I trace the hollow under my cheeks; it's hardly the cavernous pit it was eight months ago, when Mama and I were in hiding, sharing two food rations with five people. No, I am not the leaf stripped down to its stem that I was then, but I barely resemble the well-fed, doted-upon Party member in those photographs, restored to her former high-ranking glory.

Why are they keeping those pictures from me? I know my mother is part of the enemy's machinery. I have accepted this—am trying to accept it, at least, though I cling to the belief that Mama must have some greater plan at work. If the Americans are going to make me a member of their team, then they must treat me as part of the team. I thought Cindy was showing us trust earlier, asking us our opinions, letting us build our own cases. I thought

she was respecting us. While I know they're spying directly on Mama, the fact that they're keeping it from me sets my rusty gears of paranoia churning once more.

Do they have a good reason? Or am I right to be concerned? Competing hypotheses, comparing the possible scenarios—this is a problem my scientist's mind can solve, like sifting through equations and formulae. The Americans know more about Mama's situation right now than I do, I'm sure of that, but I don't know why they're keeping it from me. Do they not trust me, or am I the one who should be on my guard?

Someone pounds on the bathroom door. "One minute, please," I shout.

The obvious hypothesis: Mama is working freely with Rostov. She will do whatever he asks.

"The door's not supposed to be locked." The woman on the other side hesitates. "I'll have to get security."

"Please, I only need a minute."

A counter-hypothesis: Mama is sabotaging Rostov's work from the inside. If this is what she's doing, and the Americans don't realize it, will their meddling ruin her plans? Does she need my help?

The woman rattles the door handle again. I scrunch my eyes shut, struggling to find a quiet space in my mind where these thoughts and emotions can't overwhelm me—

I must help them. I must earn their trust. If I am to keep Mama safe, it will be easiest if I do so from the inside—while following the rules. I am not merely a weapon, after all.

Like an army knife, I have many uses.

I splash cold water on my face. For one moment, I imagine

myself as the ghostly Mama in the pictures, all of the life bleached out of me. For one moment, I am stripped down to the monster inside of me, hungering for a new goal. For one moment, I am not afraid to be me.

I open the door to a security guard, hand raised, trailing a jailer's ring of keys.

"Sorry," I say, eyes cast down sheepishly and cheeks red. "There was a . . ." What was the word Winnie taught me? *Accident, occurrence, disaster*—they are all one euphemistic word in Russian. "Emergency."

My new plan pulses through me like a dangerous bass line under my shield melody as I return to our psychedelic psychic's den. Some trippy record oozes through the room, thickening the air around me. I'm swimming through the watery music—a Hammond organ shimmers against a rollicking drumbeat and sitar chords pierce the air like rays of sunlight. I force my way through the maze of curtains until I finally reach the far corner.

Cindy and Donna huddle together on a pile of pillows, talking in liquid tones. Donna's skirt spreads around her in a perfect circle, knees tucked demurely to one side, while Cindy's wiry knees nestle under her chin. I stare at Cindy through the lens of an operative. I want to know what she knows. I need her trust. I need to be a part of whatever she's involved in.

". . . But surely they asked you to," Donna's saying, her lashes fluttering. "That's what powerful men do."

"That's not for me to tell," Cindy says. But then her thoughts chime against the watery organ chords, completely unshielded, so loud that even I can hear them through the rug we're both touching: *Once or twice. Thibadeaux . . .*

Then her musical shield slams down. They both twist toward me. “Yulia!” Cindy pulls herself to her feet.

“Hi, *Jules*,” Donna says. “Mind if I call you that?” But she looks to Cindy while she says it, like her permission would outweigh mine.

“What are you people doing?” I ask. *Guys*, I chide myself. *What are you guys doing*.

Donna stares at me, like it’s the first time anyone’s ever ignored her. “We’re practicing my skill. Cindy turns off her musical shield, and I ask her all kinds of uncomfortable questions.”

“Not *all* kinds,” Cindy says sharply. “There’s still plenty you’ll never learn, young lady.”

“Someday, I’ll get your real name out of you.” Donna grins.

But Cindy’s studying my expression. “Donna, I’m afraid we’ll have to continue our exercise later. I’d like to work with Yulia privately for now.”

Donna’s face twists, but she smoothes it out by the time Cindy looks back at her. “Yeah. Of course. I’ll just . . . go watch Marylou practice, or something.”

Cindy beckons me to follow her through the maze of curtains. “Feeling better?” she asks, as we wind through the path.

The room feels pressurized, closing in on me. My breath buzzes in my lungs as I search for the right words. “Um,” I say. I have mastered this English stalling technique, at least. “First, I must say something. I know you did not want me to see the photographs in that folder.”

“No,” Cindy says, voice clipped. “I didn’t.” Her eyes keep darting back to the shoebox, as if she’s eager to end this discussion and resume our work.

“But this is a problem.” I swallow through my tightly clenched throat. “In Russia, I could not trust my handlers, you see.”

She taps her heel against the linoleum. Her smile is easing away, but she says nothing.

“I do not want that life here. I want to be able to trust you. I want to work *with* you.” I look away. “Is this something we can do?”

“I’m not trying to keep secrets from you.” Cindy holds her palm up like she’s shielding herself. “Our chief doesn’t want you to work directly on your mother’s case. He thinks it will be . . . easier for you, that way.”

“But—but I want to help. Is this because of what I said in my hearing? That I’m not willing to hurt her.”

“Honestly?” Cindy smiles. “Yes, that’s a part of it. It tells me two things about you. The first is that you have a compass in you still—some dividing line between right and wrong. That the KGB didn’t break that part of you.” She tilts her head as if she’s trying to see me from a better angle. “Though I already knew that about you.”

I certainly don’t feel like someone with a good sense of right or wrong. From her cool tone, I’m not entirely sure she means it as a compliment, either. “And how do you know that?”

Cindy looks down at her lap; her lips twitch, like she’s about to tell me, but then she shakes her head. “Another time.” We reach another alcove in the maze, where she plucks a shoebox off of a desk and holds it out to me. “But the second thing it tells me is that there’s only so far you’re willing to be pushed.”

I breathe in slowly, so slow the cold air makes my teeth ache. I know what’s coming next.

“I had the field team bring this in for you. We collected these items from the dead spies we’re investigating. We need to know who these people were and why they were sent here.”

I sink into the nearest couch and balance the shoebox on my knees, trying to touch it as little as possible. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done this.”

Cindy settles next to me, barely disturbing the couch. “Take your time.”

My hands tingle from disuse. I’ve learned to keep them to myself in Papa’s house, where he and Valentin leave a faint trail of scrubber sound on everything they touch. When Winnie takes me to the Smithsonian museums, I’m too overwhelmed with her translation challenges to focus on the whispered conversations the tourists leave behind. Well, maybe I’ve read objects at the museum once or twice. A tour group had just gone through, and the guide had read the Old Glory plaque verbatim, so I pressed my fingertip to the plaque and quoted it back to Winnie as if I was reading it.

I learned quite an earful of unpleasant words when Winnie realized I was cheating.

Cindy gestures toward the box. “I understand that you knew one of those men—the one who exuded the extremely strong psychic ability. He had been the contact for a double agent within the State Department.”

I study the box’s contents: eyeglasses, a pillbox, a tiny notebook, a man’s wingtipped shoe. The possessions of the bloody, wide-eyed dead from the photographs.

“I am your teacher and your commander, after all. So when I choose to challenge you, or not challenge you—include

you or exclude you—I need you to trust that I have my reasons for it.”

I hesitate, palms itching, nervous energy running through me. I don’t think I can trust her; not yet. But maybe, by following her orders, she’ll reveal more of what she knows about my mother. “Okay.” I like this English word: round and flexible and noncommittal. It will satisfy for now.

“Glad to hear it.” She pulls her smile back into place. “Now—what can you tell me about these objects?”

I reach for the shoe, but the moment my fingers close around it, blinding white pain fires through me like buckshot. I slam against the back of the couch. Static spirals around me in a whirling storm, blistering with cold. It feels like Papa and Valentin and Rostov all combined, needling through my skin, in and out. My throat is raw—my hand sizzles with electricity.

The office is utterly silent except for the trippy record player; Cindy stares at me with white-rimmed eyes.

“It’s been scrubbed of memories. It’s completely . . .” I clench and relax my hand in a fist. Is there an English word for this aggressive emptiness, like a void sucking away all thought?

“There isn’t anything you can glean from it?”

“I don’t think so.” I try to envision an edge to the vast nothingness I saw, stretching as far as Siberia in every direction. “Even my father and Valentin aren’t strong enough to erase so much. Whose was this?”

Cindy checks the folder in her lap and holds up a photograph. “Your old friend, Pavel. Apparently he was running this man as a Russian agent.” She taps the folder. “He worked in the Latin American office of the State Department for five years. The FBI

opened an investigation on him a month ago when a co-worker raised concerns he might be committing espionage. Turns out, he was dropping briefcases full of classified documents next to a bench on the National Mall, and Pavel was collecting them.”

“And this is Pavel’s shoe. After he died.” Something rings inside of me, as though I am hollowed out. I didn’t truly believe the general when he told me Pavel was a powerful scrubber. But the proof is still crackling through my nerves. Could this really be my mother’s doing? Rostov demanded she build an army of psychics, and this man wasn’t one before.

Cindy nods. “Originally, we were going to bring you to his apartment so you could search the area, try to find new leads for us, but there was an . . . incident.”

I swallow. Incident. Emergency. Disaster.

“Someone burned it down not an hour after we removed his body. We’re lucky none of the men guarding it were hurt.” Cindy’s voice doesn’t waver, but her smile does. “The other items are from other locations where we found similar bodies. The pillbox was on a woman who’d last been seen trying to enter the NATO offices in Brussels.”

I reach for the pillbox. My pulse ricochets in my ears, anticipating another wave of bleaching noise. As my fingers circle the cold metal, white blossoms surround me. It drinks me in, swallows me into its throat of steel wool and scrapes me all the way down. The bleach rots me away, one layer of skin at a time.

But maybe I can outlast it. If I can skim just one memory—salvage one clue—

The woman curls around a telephone receiver, lying in a fetal position, stiff polyester carpet fibers stamped hard into one cheek.

Her skin is mine, and it is too tight—like a cooked sausage pushing at its casing. The psychic noise pushes back on me from all sides. It's worse now. I gain some sense that this noise has been festering for a while, but now it's consuming me whole. It's invaded my every cell. I am nothing but this painful, piercing noise.

I have a telephone receiver cradled to my ear, propped beside me on the carpet. "Please," I rasp into the perforated holes. "Send someone." My thumb strokes back and forth against the faded rose pattern on the pillbox's lid. "Your cyanide didn't work."

The phone crackles with a voice tinged in frost. "You must finish the mission."

"Please." Speaking is so hard. I can barely feel the word pushing through my vocal chords. I'm strangled by my own psychic noise. "Please kill me."

A labored inhalation, or maybe it's the static in the phone line turning the caller's breath into crackling squares of noise. "You must reach Senator Saxton."

"It doesn't matter." The pillbox slips through my fingers. The carpet fibers pressing into my temple are damp, hot with the smell of copper. "It's too late for me."

I fling myself out of the chattering white void and choke down fresh air. As soon as I've let go of the pillbox, I clamp my hand onto Cindy's wrist and let what I've just seen pour back out of me.

"Yulia!—" she pleads, her tone suddenly sharp and high. The tone of panic and pain. I want her to feel this pain, too. I shouldn't be the only one subjected to such misery. She needs to know what I'm capable of, what these scrubbers are like. I won't suffer alone—

Bozhe moi. My anger is suddenly gone, poured out of me and into Cindy. I pry my hand away.

“Cindy—Miss Conrad—I am so sorry—” I dump the shoebox onto the ground and curl my arms around my legs, ignoring the twinge from my bad ankle. “I wanted you to see the memory, but I—”

Cindy’s breathing heavily; she runs a hand against her taut, silky hair. “No harm done.” Her eyelids flutter rapidfire. “Is—is that how you shared your findings with your KGB mentors?”

No. I was only a tarpaulin strung between trees, collecting memories like rainwater, then waiting for Rostov to wring every last drop from me. I shake my head and lower my legs back down, trying to match Cindy as she schools herself to calmness.

“Very well. It was my choice to push you.” She raises her chin, regal. “So this woman appears to be a—a scrubber, as well.”

I take a slow breath. “I think so. And she was dying. Whatever is causing the bleeding from her ears—the psychic noise—I think she was in great pain, and she tried to end it with a cyanide pill.” I tighten my hands into fists, trying to squeeze down the dark memories lingering against them. “Do you know this Senator Saxton they mentioned?”

“I’m afraid so.” Cindy stands, bracelets jangling. “Wait right here.”

While Cindy digs around in her desk, I try to keep balance on the couch, as it threatens to reel me in again. Someone laughs from behind me, a snorting sound. I peer over the edge to find Marylou flat on her back on the floor. She’s chainsmoking clove cigarettes, and her hair makes her look like she’s escaped a

volcanic eruption because she keeps undershooting the ashtray by her head. “That was real groovy,” she says.

“What? You heard us?”

“Yeah. I liked what you did with your box of stuff.” Her pupils are cavernous pits, inviting me in. I can’t read the look on her face, both bleary and frighteningly incisive, and I don’t like it. “It’s like you’re reaching through the time-space continuum, you know? And, like, knotting it all together.”

I creep back on the couch. “Thanks.” The silence between us swells. “I did not . . . know you were down there.”

“Always.” Another heavy, crushing pause as she takes a slow drag. “Do you think we could swim in it?” she asks. Then, as if to clarify, “Time.”

Suddenly Cindy is there, peering over Marylou with a click of her tongue. “I didn’t realize you were scheduled for an INFRA session today.”

Marylou snorts with laughter again. “I’m looking in the Forbidden City—couldn’t get past their blockers without one. Following Mao around. I slide in on sunbeams and melt into his shadow, Miss Cindy. It’s *poetry*.”

“I’m sure you could do it without the ‘outside help’ if you tried.” Cindy turns away from Marylou and settles beside me again. “Project MK INFRA. Our research department had been trying to induce psychic abilities for years through the use of hallucinogens so we didn’t have to rely on psychic volunteers, but we had it all wrong—you have to have the genetic predisposition for psychic ability first. Now we’re running preliminary trials to see if it can enhance the abilities you all already possess.”

“Hallucinogens,” I repeat, still trying to process her words.

Cindy smirks. “Don’t worry, I’m not keen on letting them run trials on you anytime soon.” She opens another folder across our laps. “Senator Arliss Saxton, Congressional representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”

I page through the file. Russian propaganda led me to expect a round, white-suited Southern old boy with sinister facial hair, not unlike the man on the bucket of chicken Papa sometimes brings home for dinner, but Senator Saxton just looks tired. His face is riveted into place with deep pockmarks, and his dark hair has been splashed with white. His stockiness looks like fortification against some unseen threat.

“Congressional representative,” I echo. “Is this . . . significant?”

“You have more experience with scrubbers than I do.” Cindy thumbs the corner of the file. “You tell me what one could accomplish if they had control of the man who can send every NATO country to war.”