

Red

Irina stood inches away from the doorway as “Canon in D” began for the third time. She had intentionally chosen this church with an aisle long enough to entertain her last temptation to change her mind. Andrew’s niece had just crossed the metal threshold plate that joined the narthex’s laminated floors with the red carpet lining the church aisle and was sprinkling rose petals as she skipped merrily. Irina patiently waited for her cue. Dim lights escaping from the nave’s arches outlined her sharp cheekbones and toned upper arms, clad in lacy white. Lips coated in her usual red and blonde locks in perfect curls, she raised her chin and inhaled the stale air of biblical parchments and ancient frescos of the basilica. She clutched her pink rose bouquet tightly; the florist had left the thorns so she could prick herself back into reality for the final judgement: seal the loveless marriage covenant and launch a once-in-a-lifetime career mission, or flee, sacrifice her family in Russia, give up her own life, all for a chance at real love.

Just forty feet away, Andrew stood facing the ambulatory dome plastered with the image of Panagia holding Jesus in her arms. He looked down at his shoes, comforted by the gold shoelaces tied in symmetrical loops and emerald studded brogues emanating absinthe plumes, just as they had one minute ago. He smirked to himself as the violinists stroked their chords. Finally, he was moments away from the ritualistic “I do” exchange, guaranteeing his rightful claim to his family endowment. Light pierced the stained-glass windows, illuminating his tuxedo-clad back for the guests, now standing on their feet in anticipation of the bride. *Who would’ve thought Andrew would end up with a woman?* they collectively thought.

Andrew’s brother, Gabriel, was the only person standing on the altar steps. The guests didn’t question the absence of a full court. The altar was no place for groomsmen to stand without their matching bridesmaids. However unconventional this was to the Greek Orthodox

weddings his family was used to, though, nothing was more unconventional than a Green Card marriage. Gabriel had offered to walk Irina down the aisle, but of course, she declined. There was no need to make her feel as if she belonged. She would never belong here.

She remembered her first assignment, almost five years before. The FSB had scouted her at a track meet. She had just shattered the village record for her forty-meter sprint when she was approached by a man in a gray cloak. “Yakubov, Aleksey,” he said with an outstretched hand. She extended her hand to meet his. “Come with me.”

Not waiting for a response, he pulled her off the field into an unmarked van. Rumor had it he had been watching her from the stands for the past three months. They drove for two hours straight to Moscow headquarters. She had never seen so many tuxedos, pencil skirts, and AN-94s in her fifteen years of village life. Aleksey brought her to a brightly lit boardroom where four men and one woman sat all on one side of a dark oak table. Only the woman spoke, uninterrupted the entire time, fuming cigarette adeptly dancing between her moving lips as her deep velvet words punctuated the still air. She had jet black hair in a tight clipped bun and wore a collared gray button up shirt. She interlaced her fingers on the table, “Irina, your intelligence, speed, and beauty make you the perfect candidate for what we need. The FSB serves to protect Russia against domestic and foreign threats. We think that you can help us.” Irina pinched herself under the table. “If you agree to join, we will guarantee you and your family fifty million rubles per year and protection for the rest of your life. So, how would you like to join the Special Forces of the FSB?” Irina knew she would be forced to leave her family forever and risk her life as an agent. But she also knew that her mother’s grocery store business would not be able to support all six children for much longer. She agreed to the offer without hesitation.

That night, Aleksey drove her back home to collect her essentials. Only clothing and recreational items were allowed. She would be issued the rest. He waited outside as she gathered her mother and siblings in the shared bedroom and told them the news. They wept together until Aleksey knocked on the door and pointed at his wristwatch.

For the next six months, she underwent intensive training. Target practice, American pop culture, the art of disguise, and the practice of fooling a lie detector test. She picked everything up quickly. Her first assignment was for Directorate A, Spetsgruppa Alpha: intercept a convoy of drugs entering Moscow from Siberia. It was easy. Nobody expected a petite secondary school girl to pull a pistol out of her back pocket. The stakes increased with each new assignment. She intercepted robberies in the capital's banks, assassinated grenade-wielding ISIS terrorists in Chechnya, and imprisoned heroin mules from Afghanistan.

After one year of operations, she was called into the boardroom again. This time, fifteen people sat on all sides of the oak table. She took her place in the empty seat at the head of the table. The woman with jet black hair lit a fresh Marlboro cigarette and filled the room once more with irresistible baritone words of mother Russia. "Agent Sokolova, you have impressed us with your assignments for Spetsgruppa Alpha. We have an offer for you. How would you like to join Spetsgruppa Vypel?" Irina repeatedly scanned the room with her wide eyes.

"In what capacity?"

"Well, as you know, Vypel specializes in counter-terrorist operations. We protect nuclear powerplants from domestic and foreign threats."

"Yes, I know."

"Very well. We would like you to join our operative unit based in the United States of America."

Universal time slowed to a crawl, broken only by Irina's saucer sized eyes and arrested breath exclamation, "You want me to be a spy!"

"We don't call it that. We just want you to gain intel on American threats to our powerplant integrity and prowess."

"You want me to spy on America's nuclear power plans?"

"Agent Sokolova, listen closely. If you do not agree to this mission, we will remove you from our special forces."

Irina narrowed her eyes and leaned into the table. "Yes, and maybe my life would return to normal so I could see my family again."

"Agent Sokolova, are you forgetting something? The FSB is supplying your family with money." The woman reclined in her chair, placing one leg over another and flicking her taunting wrist. "Or would you rather little Dima and Kristina go hungry?"

Irina didn't break her gaze from the woman. The clock on the wall ticked loudly with each passing second. She counted 60 ticks. "Okay. Tell me what I have to do."

"Good. You will attend an American university near Washington DC. Through our connections, you will intern as a student journalist at the White House. Our inside operative will be in contact with you there. He will report his findings to you, and you will log everything into this secured laptop. Every night, you will sync your laptop with our encrypted server." She slid the gun-metal hardened case of a military grade laptop across the table. It landed squarely in front of Irina.

"What is my disguise?"

"You will play a Siberian transfer student hoping to start a new life and become a journalist in America. You will use your own name. We have altered your birth certificate and

passport to reflect your new identity. Upon your arrival, you will receive a monthly compensation for all your cost of living needs. You will find an American in your university, you will marry him and gain a Green Card, and eventually, Agent Sokolova, you shall be a US Citizen. For as long as you are in our service, your family will have no unmet needs.”

“Why can’t you just forge a Green Card for me?”

“We need you to be a legitimate and legal resident in America and gain the trust of White House politicians. We cannot risk questions of your legality.”

The thought of her family cared for and protected cast a warm glow, but Irina had a hard time believing an American would want to marry her, knowing she needed a Green Card. *I have never lied my way through love*, she thought, *what an impossible challenge*. She could never turn down a challenge. “Okay. I accept.”

Now, it was almost Irina’s cue. The flower girl was more than halfway down the aisle, still dotting the carpet with rose petals as she hopped to the altar. Irina tightened her grip on the thorny rose bouquet and leaned forward to let the sweet smell permeate her nostrils. She let her eyes droop. The roses smelled the same as the bouquet Lorenzo gave her the night she left.

They met in a journalism class in her second year at university. His red-hot Brazilian blood perfectly complimented her icy-blue Russian blood. She always told him she didn’t know how long they could be together, and he never asked why. He would only respond, “Then let’s just run away together. To the Bahamas, or to Spain, or to Greece, or to Australia.” She always giggled, knowing it was a joke but wishing it weren’t. Just as she had predicted, one night, less than six months after they met, Lorenzo had fallen asleep mid-read of his favorite Portuguese novel when her private international phone, a 2007 Blackberry on a private cellular server, rang.

The only two people who had access to her international phone number were her mother and the Spetsgruppa Vypmel director, and she had a strong feeling it was the latter. She stepped into the living room and answered the call.

“Hello?”

“The grass stays green on a dewy morning.”

“The birds are singing in the light blue sky,” she immediately responded.

“Agent Sokolova, we have received intel that you are not following through on your assignment. Let me remind you of the consequences...”

“Director Ivanov, so pleasant to hear from you. I do not know what you are referring to. I have been sending encrypted messages from Agent Vasiliev to the Vypmel server for many months now.”

“Yes, I know. But, part of your assignment is to stay in America after you have finished university, Agent Sokolva.”

“Yes Director, I know I need to find a man. I am still searching for my target.”

“Agent Sokolova, do not lie to me. I have eyes and ears everywhere. I know you are in a relationship with a foreign student. He cannot get you a Green Card.”

Her eyes widened in terror. “Oh, Lorenzo? He is just a friend,” she said, now gliding over every wall in the living room with her palms.

“Agent Sokolova, let me be clear that if you continue in this direction, I will have to terminate your contract with the FSB.”

She was now standing on the sofa, tracing the edges of the ceiling with her index finger. As she rounded one corner, careful not to step on the bouquet of roses from Lorenzo, she felt a

change in texture under her fingertips: a thin white wire with a rounded end running along the ceiling edge. Her apartment was bugged.

“Well, what if I do want to terminate my contract with the FSB?”

“Agent Sokolova, let me remind you of the consequences. If you do not comply with the FSB and complete your assignment as detailed, your family’s health and safety are in grave danger.”

She froze. Director Ivanov heard only her bated breaths. She climbed down from the ceiling and collapsed on the sofa, head in her hands. Dreams of the Bahamas and Greece were exactly that now. Just dreams.

“Okay. I will leave Lorenzo.”

“Very well. Within 24 hours, you must find an American to marry and report back. Goodbye, Agent Sokolova.” With one click, the line went silent.

She held the rose bouquet close to her chest and wept directly onto the petals. The sugary smell made her cry more. She pulled the one with the longest stem out from the rest and walked back into the bedroom. Lorenzo was gently snoring. She pinched the rose stem with two fingers and placed it on her pillow, softly scratching the cotton cover. *Enough distractions. Love was never part of this mission. Back to work.*

Irina’s cue. The flower girl had now skipped her way to the altar steps and was already exchanging ghoulish faces with one of the guests in the front row. Childish giggles filled the space between each note of “Canon in D.” Irina finished her last inhale, filling her lungs with the rosy scent, and lifted her head from the bouquet. *Chin up. No tears. Complete the mission.* With one long stride, synchronized to the stroke of the violins, she crossed the threshold plate onto the

red-carpet aisle. The red carpet sank under each puncture of her high heels, and the guests stood with mouths ajar. Blurry faces of strangers on either side of the aisle passed by. She did not know or care to know Andrew's relatives, yet they shed tears at the sight of her elegant, lonesome stride in silky white towards their beloved Andrew. She stared directly ahead, not removing her glance from Andrew's precisely gelled black hair.

The night they met, less than one full day after she had kissed Lorenzo for the last time, Andrew's hair was gelled then too, as it always was in public. He had just ordered his third margarita when she finished her seventh would-be-suitor conversation of the night and approached him at the bar. Perhaps, the seven were too intelligent to be manipulated, but Andrew's diamond-studded wristwatch and alligator skin shoes on the sticky alcohol-covered floor were tell-tale compensations for a pretentious simpleton with means. She fingered his wristwatch and stared into his eyes. He eyed her red lips and pale foundation. She was not like the rest here.

They exchanged the usual platitudes: name, hometown, college major. "Irina, Serbia, journalism" did not match "Andrew, DC, economics" like it did "Lorenzo, Brazil, journalism." He spoke about his favorite musical artists. Lady Gaga, Freddie Mercury, Elton John, Cher. She retorted with Adele and Alicia Keys, some of the American artists she remembered from training. His leg bounced repeatedly, and she fidgeted with her silver necklace as they both waited for the hackneyed conversation to end. Neither wanted to be there, yet each filled a specific role for the other.

After a few hours, they went back to Andrew's apartment. Hovering 9 stories above K Street, the expansive open floor plan beamed with designer décor and framed in exposed brick. Another hour of stalling passed until they finally made their way into the bedroom. The sex was

impersonal, uncomfortable, mechanical. *Get used to it*, they each told themselves, not knowing there would only be a handful of attempts after this one for the next two years. He quickly fell asleep, rattling the picture frame above the bed with his snoring. She wasted no time in scouring the apartment for any information she could find. Financial records, credit cards, family pictures, anything she could report back to the FSB.

But it was better than she could have ever imagined. Papers outlining the terms of the endowment were strewn about his office desk. *Too easy*. She traced each line of the page with her pointer finger, skipping over large paragraphs of legal jargon. *...relationships with men...against family values and the moral code...the eyes of God...financial incentive...*, she whispered to herself with furrowed brows. Then, the golden line in bold letters: *One million dollars for each month that Andrew Alexopoulos is married to a woman*. Jackpot. They needed each other.

She immediately walked back to the bedroom to find Andrew still roiling the air with deep snoring. *Just too easy*. She grabbed her international phone from the pile of crumpled clothing on the cold ceramic floor and quickly typed in today's long string of random characters. Every day, she received and decoded her password through the encrypted Vympel server. She pounded the keys desperately, placed the phone by her ear, and walked into the hallway, closing the bedroom door behind her.

Four rings later, the line picked up, yet nobody spoke.

"The stars shine bright in the twinkling sky," she said.

"Fish swim deep in the dark blue ocean."

"Director Ivanov, I found the one. Andrew Alexopoulos. As oblivious as they come."

"Very good, Agent Sokolova."

“Don’t touch my family.”

“Marry him, and you have my word.”

“I will.”

As the line dropped, Irina felt at peace, knowing her family would be safe. Yet, the hairs on her arms were standing up. A cold feeling washed over her from head to toe. *When did I stop hearing the snoring?* Suddenly, a muffled sneeze traveled through the bedroom walls and pierced her ears. The sound of sheets sliding against one another and the creak of the bed ensued. *Did he hear me? Does he know I’m a...* The snoring resumed, picture frame rattling against the wall. She put her hand to her chest and exhaled slowly through pursed lips. *Thank God. He was probably just asleep...*

Now, the violinist rolled his eyes as the fourth iteration of “Canon in D” began. Irina was halfway to the altar, only twenty steps away from completing the next step in the mission and securing her family’s safety. *Are sweat stains visible on white lace?* She tightened her grip on the rose thorns, feeling them rip through the skin of her palms as her breathing accelerated. *Protection for my family, but at what cost?*

The guests shuffled to each other as she passed. Andrew heard their whispers steadily approaching. He clutched his stomach in excitement and looked to his right at Gabriel. His wedding had been just six months before, but he had actually loved the woman he was marrying. Andrew immediately shrugged away encroaching doubts, thinking about the new Huracán his first monthly endowment check would acquire. *I may not be able to marry the man I love, but nothing will stop me from sleeping with men.*

He recalled Gabriel's wedding. They had recently graduated, Irina summa cum laude and Andrew with no distinctions or awards. They were still living in Andrew's K street apartment; an arrangement Irina didn't mind too much. Every day, by the time he would wake up to get to Barclays, a job secured through his family name, she would be long gone without a trace. And most nights, by the time he went to bed, she was still not back. On nights when she called ahead and told him she wasn't coming home until the next day, he would invite a variety of men to their apartment for drinks and more. He found it hard to believe the White House would have such miserable work hours, but whenever he asked, she would just say she was working on an important political campaign. He learned to stop questioning her. After all, she could be the steppingstone to his endowment.

The little time they were together in the apartment and awake, he watched baseball in the living room while she typed fervently on her laptop in the kitchen. Sometimes, they cooked dinner together but otherwise would not speak very much during the day, except for the occasional commonplace banalities. He, of course, was content with this arrangement, but he wondered why she never asked for more. She told him that in Serbia, relationships were more about "business" and coexistence than about emotions. In fact, "many marriages were arranged in Serbia only for financial motives." It seemed odd that relationships in another country could be so different, when love and lust were so universal, but of course, he didn't complain. *Why fix what isn't broken?*

His only request was that she attend his family's events with him so he could "show her off" to his parents, but in truth, she knew it was to prove his heterosexuality to his family. One hour before Gabriel's wedding, however, just as she was applying her last stroke of eyeshadow, her Blackberry rang.

After a few whispered exchanges on the phone, she opened the bathroom door and told Andrew, now spraying exclusive Hermès cologne across his suit, “Something came up at work. I can’t go to the wedding. You go on by yourself.”

Dumbfounded, he responded, “Irina, you always do this. There’s just no way the White House is asking you to work on a Saturday at 5 PM.”

“Andrew, I can’t talk right now. I have to go.” She grabbed her purse from the kitchen bar stool and let the insulated metal door slam behind her.

From the moment he arrived solo at the wedding, the questions began. *Where’s Irina? Did she leave you? Are you dating men again? Do you want to bring shame to our family? How do you think the priest will feel? You know you won’t get the endowment if you act like this, right?* Just like Andrew, they refused to believe that Irina could be called into work at such a time. The ceremony provided some respite from the harassment, but the reception brought questions anew. He left early and drove back to the apartment, drowning out his troubled consciousness with blasting rock music.

As soon as he unlocked the metal latch with the satisfying ratchet of his key, a sliver of light slipped through to the hallway. He had turned off the lights when he left. Crossing the threshold, he looked around and called out to her, but she was nowhere in sight. He rounded the corner to the master bedroom and was surprised by the light under the bathroom door reflecting by the ceramic tiles just outside. The shower was running. *She must’ve gotten back early.* He sat down on the well-cushioned bed and noticed her Blackberry by the pillow. He’d never seen it detached from her person. She’d told him it was her “work phone” and she had to keep it on her

at all times, in case the White House urgently needed something. “What a high-stakes journalism job, huh?” he’d say.

He picked up the phone. The keys were warm, and the screen was open to a message exchange where Irina had sent an attachment to an unknown number. He clicked on the attachment and was prompted to enter a password. Irina kept a stack of post-it notes on her bedside table, and every morning, while he pretended to snore, she would pull one out and write some combination of numbers and letters on it and then place it into the textbook-size Tolstoy novel *Anna Karenina* in the bottom drawer. He now reached into the drawer and pulled out the book. He removed the slip of paper and entered the characters exactly as written into the Blackberry. *Z59E4KW*. The phone buzzed and an error popped up on the screen, “Incorrect code. 2 tries remaining.”

He looked up at the bathroom door, thinking of what other tactics she might’ve used to hide the code. He looked down once more at the rough pages of the novel. The post-it note was directly in the center of page 255. Perhaps this was part of the code. He now typed *Z59E4KW255*.

“Incorrect code. 1 try remaining.”

What else could it possibly be? The water promptly stopped running and the tub squeaked with the friction of pivoting heels. *Come on, come on. Think.* He looked once more at the book. *That’s it.* The post-it note was sitting directly below the word “red,” about one-thirds of the way down the page. He typed in the code quickly. *Z59E4KW255RED*. He pressed enter and time stopped as the blue circle spun in the center of the screen. From the bathroom came the sounds of a brush running through freshly washed hair with droplets hitting the tile. Then, the words “Access Granted” appeared.

The document was a series of Russian words and chemical compounds, hexagonal shapes he didn't understand. He scrolled through all 27 pages with the keyboard cursor. *Well, she's definitely not a journalist.* Suddenly, the screen went completely black except for one long string of numbers in the middle as the phone began ringing with an odd tune. Three notes, low, then middle, then high, then repeat. He looked around, frantically wielding the phone in the air, deciding whether or not to drop it on the pillow and leave the apartment, pretending he was never there, or to pick it up and figure out what was really going on with Irina.

He picked up.

"The turtle lays eggs on the cold sandy beach."

"What?" he whispered.

"The turtle lays eggs on the cold sandy beach," the voice repeated.

At that moment, Irina burst out of the bathroom in just a towel, almost ripping the doorhandle out of the door. She clawed at the phone by his ear and pulled it towards her own ear.

"The trees sway in the summer breeze," she said through gasping breaths. He continued sitting wide-eyed, staring directly at Irina's makeup-free lips, an uncommon sight. After a moment, she said into the phone, "Yes, I have sent the document to Agent Federova. I will locate the rest of the files tomorrow...Goodbye." She perched the Blackberry into towel fold near her chest.

"Andrew, what are you doing here? You are supposed to be at the wedding right now." He continued staring at her. "Andrew, I can explain. For my job, we are looking at chemical compounds in the..."

"You're a spy."

"Andrew, don't be foolish. I'm not a spy."

“I’ve heard everything, Irina. I heard your phone call on the first night we met. I saw the picture of the Secretary of War in your wallet. I saw the Russian document you sent to the other agent. You’re a spy! And you’re using me, for what, some sick disguise, a Green Card? I can’t believe it took me this long to figure you out.”

She paused and put her head down. “I did what I had to do. I knew you needed to marry a woman, so I chose you. This way, we both get what we need.”

“We’re more similar than I thought.”

“I guess we are.”

“So then, what’s stopping us from getting married? I want my endowment now.”

“I don’t know. I just thought that maybe I could get out of this mess somehow, but they’re always watching me,” she said, glancing at the corners of the ceiling.

“Let’s get married. We both need this.” He pressed his index finger to his lips, “I won’t tell,” and then to hers “and you won’t tell either.”

She hesitated. *Do I have a choice?* “Okay. Let’s get married.”

The real proposal had no semblance to the inflated stories of fireworks and a 5.16 carat ring that everyone in witness of their wedding heard from Andrew. Now, Irina was just steps away from the altar. She pressed her palms deeper into the rose thorns until a trickle of blood dripped down her wrists onto the red carpet: the perfect disguise. She climbed up the steps of the altar, still synchronizing her feet to the beat of “Canon in D,” and pivoted to face Andrew. Minutes away from becoming one of the wealthiest men on the east coast, he couldn’t hide his satisfactory grin. She held her chin high and bit her tongue to stop the threat of tears.

Moments before in the dressing room, as she donned the bridal veil, the Blackberry broke the silence of her cold feet introspection. The number was her mother's, but a man's grizzly voice declared, "Choose carefully, Agent Sokolova." In the background, Dima, Kristina, and her other siblings whimpered. Irina didn't need any more convincing. Blood is thicker than water. She had made up her mind.