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## CHAPTER SIX

Max Starkey and Kelly Riggs fell in love fast, and hard, and with the reckless abandon of youth. They were both green CIA officers on their first field assignments, although neither knew that about the other at the time. The legend the Company had built for Max was that he was a grad student in the Czech Republic to write a dissertation on the Prague Spring of 1968, when the Soviets sent troops into the city to smash down a growing freedom movement, as the Soviets were prone to do. His real task was to get close to a Czech historian, an expert on the era, whom the US suspected of passing documents between Chinese spies and their counterparts in the American embassy in Prague. Kelly was already in place as the professor's teaching aid, the latest in a long line of attractive young female assistants that the older man never touched but liked having around.

Max was smitten with her right away. For one thing, he was pretty sure she was the smartest person he had ever met, certainly smarter than him. She would bring him the stack of books the professor had picked for him, then sit on the edge of the reading table and tell him why each book was worthless, meticulously dissecting the poorly constructed worldview of its author. They started meeting at Na Palmě, their local beer bar, to discuss art, history, geopolitics, everything but movies, since he had hardly seen any. He was drawn to her intellect. She knew she was smart, but she wasn't condescending or arrogant, and in fact, she was damn funny, in spite of the fact

that most of her jokes sounded like they came off a Bazooka Joe bubblegum wrapper. “What do you call someone with no nose and no body?”

“What?”

“Nobody knows!” He hated himself for laughing.

Before long they were sharing morning jogs along the Vltava, at the foot of the Prague Castle. Kelly said it was the castle from *Beauty and the Beast*, and they were like lovers in a fairy tale. They challenged each other physically. She kickboxed, she rowed, and he loved that she could almost beat him to the top of Vítkov Hill. They walked the cobblestone streets at night, and she showed him the most beautiful spots in the city, while he pointed out the chock marks in the ancient stone walls which were still visible from the Soviet tank shells, five decades later. They bonded over their difficult childhoods, and believed, like all young lovers do, that no one in the world could understand them the way they understood each other.

He was so taken with her intelligence and her physicality that it took him a while to fully realize how beautiful she was. When he did, he was thunderstruck. He began to suspect that God was playing a trick on him, that He had specifically constructed a woman perfectly tuned to all his senses. The feel of her skin, the scent of her, the taste of her lips (all of them), seemed to exist on a frequency precisely tuned to provoke need in him. Instead of pheromones, he called them Kellymones. The first time they made love, he felt like he had been drowning and didn’t know it, and now he was safely on shore.

It was all built on a foundation of lies. They maintained their cover from one another for months, and when it finally fell it was purely by accident. They were in a coffee shop on Dlouhá Street, just off the Old Town Square. She was arguing that the current party in power in neighboring Slovakia would be swept out in the next elections by a wide margin, and he had asked, “What are your inferences?” It was a phrase they were taught to use at The Farm and was a dead giveaway to anyone that had been through the CIA training program. They

stared at each other in silence for a few seconds, then they both burst out laughing. Somehow, finding out that they were both Company assets wasn't the big surprise it might have been. By then they were so deeply in love they could have found out they were both Martians and it wouldn't have mattered.

They would learn that putting both of them on the same target was not unusual. It was called a double blind, a redundancy in which two officers are assigned to the same case, neither of them knowing about the other, so that if one was exposed or killed the other was still in place. But they had figured it out, and working together they had the professor and his contacts at the embassy behind bars within a month. They reported their romance to HR at Langley and requested to be assigned to cases together.

From that point on, their relationship was forged in fire. They traveled through deserts and jungles. They made love in bunkers and in Humvees, and more than once, in the presence of camels. Their private joke was that for two years they never had sex more than three feet away from a loaded gun. They shared weapons and intel and dreams. They patched each other's wounds and carried each other's pain. They were young and alive and in love, and if it wasn't perfect, it was damn close.

Max's mother once told him that everyone you meet is half a person. They show you the half they want you to see, but there's another half, the side she sometimes saw in her work. Max noticed the cracks in Kelly's facade fairly early. She had a violent temper which she could lose over something trivial. She could fall into bouts of despair or petty name-calling. Her selfishness would manifest in small ways that made him uncomfortable but weren't a big deal. He could tell there was a part of her that he couldn't access, some darkness that she either needed to, or believed she needed to, keep to herself and deal with on her own. Some of her mood swings were so intense that he found himself looking up "bipolar" on the internet. But 95 percent of the time, she was the smart, funny, self-confident woman he had made love to in the stacks of the central library at Charles University

in Prague. And she grew stronger, and more confident, every day. He felt lucky to be with her, and then there was that pesky thing about her scents and tastes being perfectly calibrated to his senses. So, he willfully ignored the danger signs. Denied them, even. And when he found out the source of her pain, he told himself the simple lie that he could help her heal.

The thing is, he loved her. They almost died together more than once, pulled each other from the fire, and killed together. You don't walk away from a relationship like that over a few dark moments. She was damaged, and defensive, and in minor ways, even treacherous. But Max knew that despite her increasing criticism of him, and her bouts of depression, she truly loved him, and he was still naive enough to believe in soulmates.

Some relationships end with a bang. This one died from a thousand cuts, and when she walked into his filthy hotel room in Patpong, they all came back to him. The love and the hate, the joy and the anguish, the sex and the lies.

But most of all, the betrayal.