05. Who Pa Really Is

Where have you been? Ever since Mr. Alexander's unexpected visit, you've been acting like a ghost, creeping from the darkness of the phone. Are not good at hiding secrets, Ellie. Tell me what's wrong. Is it Pa? Is he sick?

Ellie's mind raced. Pa was not sick, but the truth he had kept hidden was worse. Her gaze settled on the face of a distinguished gentleman with a pencil-thin mustache and a kind smile. Mr. Alexander had been Pa's friend for years, a regular at the family's dinner table, a man who had always treated her like family. But now, he was a stranger, a man who had lied to her, who had kept her in the dark about her own father's life.

Ellie, are you okay? Mother's calling her, but I'm not listening. Pa's sick, I know it. Tell me what's wrong.

Ellie's hand trembled as she typed a response, her fingers hovering over the keys before she finally hit send.

Mr. Alexander's here. He's telling me Pa's not a fisherman. He's telling me Pa's a spy.

Silence. The dots appeared, disappeared, then appeared again. Finally, a reply.

Spy? Pa's a fisherman. I've been with him my whole life. I know what he does. He's not a spy.

Ellie's heart sank. Her sister was right to be skeptical, to dismiss the story as nonsense. But Mr. Alexander had been so convincing, so calm and certain as he had laid out the evidence, that Ellie had felt the ground shift beneath her feet.

Mr. Alexander showed me photos. Pa in Berlin, Pa in Moscow. He's been gone for months at a time, Mother's been lying about where he's been. He's been working for the Soviets.

Another pause. This time, the dots never appeared.

Ellie, I'm sorry, I've got to go. Mother's calling for me. I'm sorry, but I don't believe you. Pa's not a spy. He's just a fisherman. I've got to go.

The screen went dark.

Ellie stared at her reflection in the mirror, her face pale in the dim light. She had been a fool to think her sister would listen, to think she could share the truth and expect to be believed. But she had seen the photos, she had heard the recordings, she had watched her father's face when he had admitted the truth. And she had been right to trust him, to believe him, to stand by him when everyone else had turned their backs on him.

Her phone buzzed one last time. A text from Mr. Alexander, a number she had never seen before.

Tomorrow, 10 a.m. Meet me at the corner of Fifth and Maple. Bring your sister if you can't leave her behind. We need to talk about what comes next.

Ellie exhaled slowly, her reflection blurring as she blinked back tears. She had lost her family, she had lost her home, she had lost everything she had thought was real. But she had also gained something she had never had before: the truth. And the truth was worth more than any lie, no matter how much it hurt.

She typed a response, her fingers steady now.

I'll be there. I'll bring Mother. I don't care what she thinks of you. I want to know the truth. I deserve to know the truth.

The reply came almost instantly.

You do. And you will. I promise you that. See you tomorrow.

Ellie put her phone down and turned off the light. She would need her rest. She would need her strength. And she would need her family, the family that was left, the family that was being torn apart by a lie that had lasted for years.

But she was not alone. She had Mr. Alexander. She had her sister, whether she liked it or not. She had the truth, and the truth was a weapon, a shield, a bridge to a future she had never imagined but was now willing to fight for.

Tomorrow, she would meet her father's friend and learn what it meant to be a spy's daughter. Tonight, she would sleep and dream of her father's face and wonder if she could forgive him for the lies he had told her for her own good.

Ellie Mae Thompson was a fisherman's daughter who had never left her hometown of Bayshore, Maine, in her entire life. She had never seen a passport, never boarded a plane, never spoken a word of any language other than English. She was twenty-three years old and had spent her entire life in a small fishing village where everyone knew everyone else's business and where the arrival of a stranger was the most interesting thing that had happened in decades.

Her father was a fisherman, too. Captain Thomas Thompson, a man who had spent forty years on the water, who could read the weather in the clouds and predict the tides by the moon, who was known throughout the fishing community as a man who could be trusted with anything and who never told a lie unless he was protecting someone he loved.

Or so everyone had thought.

Ellie was sitting on her bedroom floor when the knock came at the door, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chest, her phone clutched in her hand like a lifeline. She had been scrolling through her father's contacts, looking for someone she could call, someone who might know what was happening to her family, when the doorbell rang for the first time.

She ignored it. She was not expecting anyone, and she was not in the mood for company. The village was small enough that everyone knew everyone else's business, and news travelled faster than the tide when there was gossip to be spread. She was sure that by tomorrow morning, half the town would know that something was wrong with the Thompson family, that something had broken in a way that could not be easily repaired.

The doorbell rang again, longer and more insistent this time. And then someone began knocking, three sharp raps that echoed through the house like gunshots.

Ellie's mother was in the kitchen, preparing dinner for her husband and her son, Jonathan, who was twenty years old and had just come home from his first year of college in Boston. The smell of fish and potatoes filled the air, a smell that had been her father's favorite for as long as she could remember, and she was trying to focus on that smell, on the familiarity of it, on the comfort it was supposed to provide, when her mother's voice cut through the silence.

Ellie, honey, there's someone at the door. Can you see who it is?

She could have lied. She could have pretended she was asleep, that she had headphones in and could not hear a thousand knocks. But she was twenty-three years old and she was not a child anymore, and she was tired of being treated like one, tired of being protected from the truth by people who thought they were doing what was best for her but who never asked her what she wanted or what she could handle.

She stood up and walked to the door and opened it without looking through the peephole, without asking who was on the other side, without any of the caution she had been taught her entire life.

The man who was standing on the porch was not someone she had ever seen before. He was tall and thin, with gray hair and a pencil-thin mustache and a kind smile that did not reach his eyes. He was wearing a dark suit that was too formal for this village, too expensive-looking to be anyone she had ever met before, and he was holding a leather briefcase that looked like it had been through more than just a few business meetings.

Miss Ellie Mae Thompson? he said, his voice low and pleasant and carrying a hint of an accent she could not place. My name is Alexander. I'm a friend of your father's. I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, but I need to speak with you about something very important.

Ellie's father's name was Thomas. He was a fisherman. He was not a spy. He was not anything else. He was just a man who had lived his entire life in this village and who had never left it and who had never lied to his family about anything that mattered.

But he had lied about something, she was sure of it now, the way a compass needle points north when it has been disturbed by a magnet. The way everything in her life had been pointing in one direction her whole life and now was spinning and spinning and she was not sure she could stand it if it did not stop.

What do you want? she asked, her voice steadier than she had expected it to be, her hand still on the door, her other hand still clutching her phone like a weapon.

Mr. Alexander reached into his briefcase and pulled out a manila envelope and handed it to her without saying anything else. Ellie took it because she was twenty-three years old and she was not a child and she was tired of being treated like one and she was not sure she could stand to be left out of this one more minute.

She opened the envelope and looked at the first photo and her knees almost gave out beneath her.

The photo was black and white and slightly blurry, as if it had been taken from a distance with a camera that was not quite steady. It showed her father, Captain Thomas Thompson, standing on the deck of a fishing boat she did not recognize, talking to a man who was not wearing a uniform and who was not a fisherman and who was not anyone she had ever seen before. The second photo was closer, taken from a different angle, and her father was smiling and he was holding a cigarette and he was wearing a watch that she had never seen before and he was not her father anymore in the way he had been her father for twenty-three years.

The third photo was a receipt, a piece of paper with numbers and letters and a signature that she could not read but that was clearly from a bank in a city she had never heard of and was not Portland or Boston or anywhere else she had ever been.

The fourth photo was her father and another man in a restaurant in a city she did not recognize, and they were sitting across from each other at a table covered in maps and papers, and her father was pointing at something on one of the maps and the other man was nodding and taking notes and they looked like two men who had been doing this for years and who had done it so many times that they could do it in their sleep.

The fifth photo was her father and a woman she had never seen before, and they were standing in front of a building with a sign she could not read and they were shaking hands and the woman was smiling and her father was not smiling but he was standing straight and tall and he was wearing a suit that he had never worn in Bayshore because there was no place in Bayshore that was fancy enough for a suit like that and he was not her father anymore and he was not her father and he was not her father and he was not her father.

Ellie dropped the envelope. The photos spilled across the floor like a deck of cards that had been shuffled by someone who was in a hurry and who was not sure he wanted to see what was written on the back of each one.

Mr. Alexander was still standing on the porch, his briefcase at his feet, his hands in his pockets, his face carefully neutral in the way of someone who had delivered this end number of times and who had learned how to make it as painless as possible.

Your father is not a fisherman, he said, as if he were stating a fact that was as obvious as the sun rising in the morning. He is a spy. He has been a spy for the United States Government for twenty-three years. He has been working for the Soviets for the last seven years. He has been lying to his family about where he has been and what he has been doing and who he has been for longer than you have been alive.

Ellie's mother came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel, her face pale and her eyes wide and she saw the photos on the floor and she saw her husband's face in the photos and she saw something in her daughter's face that she had been trying to see for years and she did not say anything at all.

Ellie's brother came down the stairs two minutes later, his backpack still on his shoulders, his college ID still around his neck, and he saw his sister on her knees and he saw the photos and he saw his mother's face and he did not understand any of it but he knew that something had broken and that it was not something that could be fixed with a phone call or a hug or a promise that everything would be fine.

Mr. Alexander cleared his throat. He said that he had been watching the family for three weeks, that he had been waiting for the right moment, that he had hoped to speak with Ellie alone first but that he had run out of time because the Soviets had found out that someone was asking questions and that someone was now dead and that Captain Thomas Thompson was the only reason his own wife was still alive and that she was pregnant and that she was due in three months and that her husband was a man who had never asked for anything in his life except to be left alone to do his job and that he was asking now for the first time in twenty-three years because he had run out of people he could trust and he had run out of time and he was sorry but he was not sorry enough to leave without telling them the truth.

Ellie picked up the photo of her father on the deck of the boat and she looked at his face and she tried to see the man who had been her father for twenty-three years and she tried to see the man who was standing on the deck of a boat he did not own in a city he had never visited and she tried to see the man who was smiling at a woman he was not married to and she tried to see the man who was not her father and who was not a fisherman and who was not anything she had thought he was and she could not see him at all and she could not see him at all and she could not see him at all.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She did not answer it. The village was small enough that everyone knew everyone else's business, and news travelled faster than the tide when there was gossip to be spread. She was sure that by tomorrow morning, half the town would know that something was wrong with the Thompson family, that something had broken in a way that could not be easily repaired