

## CHAPTER 1



There were six urgent messages on the high-tech communication device my boss insists be turned on at all times—three voice mails and three texts, some less courteous than others. All from him. My being available to him regardless of the circumstances is critical. However, willingly and knowingly, I placed my smartphone under a stack of underwear when I unpacked at the Virginia Beach ocean-front house on Friday night. It was now Sunday morning, and I was in six messages'-worth of trouble. The first was growled, and clearly and colorfully reinforced his position about availability and, although unsaid, the danger inherent in hiding a cell phone under delicate bargains from Victoria's Secret.

"I don't give a damn if you're scuba diving or making crazy love, when I need to reach you, I need to reach you. Got it?"

I pictured myself in a glistening black wetsuit, surrounded by evil-eyed, saw-toothed barracudas while attempting to have a wireless conversation with Logan. As for the other circumstance, the crazy love, I tried not to picture it at all.

I had figured, now clearly wrongly, that I deserved three days at the beach with dear friends and without Logan. The last time I tried to have an honest-to-God holiday, he called me at a ski lodge in St Moritz to ask why the pheasant he'd baked for hours at three-hundred degrees had turned out on the dry side.

I didn't call him immediately, trying first to conjure up an excuse as to why, for two days, I'd been unreachable. A tumble off the deck, perhaps, followed by a coma from which I'd just recovered. Other possibilities that came to mind seemed equally unlikely to placate Logan, the savage beast for whom I toil faithfully in the hallowed halls of the J. Edgar Hoover Building in Washington, D.C.

The last message from Logan had been a text. *Y the fk u not n tch?*

"So," I said when he answered, "what's up?"

"What's up?" he bellowed. "Just like *that?*"

It took a couple of minutes, or more, for him to get to simmer, after which he succinctly summarized the urgent matter at hand. As he did so, I felt a chill run over my bikini-clad body, felt my palms dampen.

"It seems as if the dead double agent we so carefully buried two years ago in Los Angeles, along with her juicy secrets, *may* have surfaced in Russia. You and I are going to L.A. tomorrow to attend an exhumation. Get your ass to Dulles for a nine-o'clock flight." He gave me the departure information I needed, and I made note of the details with a shaking hand.

Not that I haven't encountered my share of dead bodies in my role as a special agent of the FBI. It's just that I've never handled well the business of seeing human beings in a lifeless condition, seeing the emptiness, the coldness of their spiritually void remains. And to revisit a body once buried, once told farewell, would be doubly difficult.

I looked at the clock. Twenty-four hours until I was scheduled to meet Logan. I would spend the rest of the day and early evening here with the Robinsons, my Capitol Hill neighbors and very special friends. I figured a three-hour drive home, less than an hour to pack, and seven hours of rest before getting out to Dulles. I had with me my universal travel gear—cosmetics, multi-vitamins for women, electric toothbrush, and dental floss. As for the other necessities of

everyday life, they can be found at my mother's glitzy Beverly Hills condo, where I keep a closet full of clothes and shoes for occasions such as this one. Plans made, I sighed deeply. I would enjoy this day despite the gnawing in my middle and the zillion thoughts whirling around in my head. Lara? Alive? Not possible!

It was late in the summer, Labor Day weekend to be exact, the perfect time for sitting on a deck overlooking white sand and a foaming surf, which is where I found all three Robinsons finishing breakfast. I still held my high-tech phone in my hand.

"I thought you weren't going to touch that thing this weekend," Helen said. And then, "You shouldn't have. You look ghastly."

"Nonsense. Just a routine message from the boss. Really, I'm fine. Except that I'm wondering if a Bloody Mary might settle my breakfast."

"You're not fine!" (Helen is very observant.) "Was it the Hollandaise? I thought it was perfect, but you never know when you don't cook it and just use the blender."

"I never cook it anymore. Even Julia didn't. It's not the Hollandaise. It's an unexpected trip to L.A. tomorrow morning."

"Make Maggie a Bloody Mary," Andrew told his son, "and don't tell me you're too young to serve liquor."

"Shit," Skyler offered in my defense, rising from the table and grabbing a giant blueberry muffin. "This is a three-day weekend. So, what's up?"

What was up was what Logan had just told me was up, or soon would be—a casket we put into a million-dollar mausoleum, the occasion marked by a cemetery full of mournful American fans suffering the loss of the gorgeous Russian-born film star, Lara Langfeld. "An urgent matter," was all I explained, which was not sufficient for Helen, my hyper-curious neighbor.

"Like how urgent?"

“She said it was an urgent matter,” Andrew shushed. “So let’s leave it at that. And,” he jabbed a thumb in the direction of the water, “speaking of urgent, let’s see what’s happening with Reynaldo.”

People like the Robinsons, who own a lovely old house on the dunes, are very hurricane aware. Their home is one of the few original dwellings left along this part of the coast, the rest having been sacrificed to development of high-end condos and rather ostentatious residences of mixed architectural heritage. It had been hit by more than one hurricane in its long years of standing guard on the coast, but never severely damaged.

“Right,” Helen said, turning up the volume on a small portable TV. “Thank God it’s heading out to sea.”

Televised images of Hurricane Reynaldo focused on a whirling, diaphanous mass with a clear, dark eye in the center, still an angry beast registering Category 3 on the Safer-Simpson Scale. Helen and Andrew watched intently as details about the rogue storm flashed on the screen. I watched as well, but my thoughts drifted, my mind rather like Reynaldo’s—fuzzy, circling, with Lara the dark center.

Andrew said, “I told you Friday, or was it even Thursday, that we didn’t need to board up the damned windows. The storm wasn’t going to touch us.”

“Too bad you didn’t call the weather experts,” Helen snipped. “They’d love to have known.”

I had become comfortably close to the Robinsons—Andrew, a Library of Congress medical librarian; Helen, owner of an air-conditioning and heating business; and Skyler, one of my favorite people in the world. He has just started his senior year in high school, is taller than anyone I know, shares my love of old movies, and owns the most sophisticated palate of any kid his age this side of the *Tour d’Argent*. We are on the same page of Julia Child when it comes to cooking; I’m in charge, and he’s my devoted *sous chef*. He wants to be an FBI agent because, he says, I’m his

role model. The problem with this flattering idea is that he's way too tall for the Bureau—a reality I haven't discussed with him. Perhaps it won't ever be necessary, given the college basketball scouts lurking in the shrubbery across the street. Skyler is not only exceedingly tall, but he is also exceedingly good looking, with sun-bleached blonde hair, keen blue eyes, and a terrific smile, which means there are girls in the shrubbery as well.

Carrying my carefully crafted Bloody Mary, I headed out to walk the shore alone, my bare feet dipping into the shallow water as it sighed its way back from the sand, my whole body reacting to the sensuous ambience of air damp with sea spray and filled with the call of circling gulls. I needed to forget about my boss, the demanding and often impossible Logan MacLean, and the movie star/spy/double-agent whom I had come to know so well. I shuddered.

Later, the others joined me for a swim before lunch. As for lunch, there was good French bread left from last night, so we made bruschettas with fresh Mozzarella, basil from Helen's kitchen garden, and heirloom tomatoes from the open-air market. We used Sachet olive oil produced by my father's family in the south of France.

Skyler attacked lunch with vengeance. "I hope this will hold you until mid-afternoon," I told him.

"Possible, but don't count on it."

From the deck we watched a boisterous game of beach volleyball. Skyler wanted to join the fun, but a heated argument over who got to have him on which side caused him to try out his new surfboard instead. As for me, I tried out a new mystery and periodically managed to follow the plot. But my thoughts kept going back to Lara. The last time I saw her, she was alive and well and supremely gorgeous. When her casket arrived in Los Angeles, it was sealed. I imagined her as she might have looked lying inside, with hands crossed over her heart, a white silk pillow under her head, those Liz Taylor turquoise eyes closed.

Tomorrow there would be no need for imagining Lara.  
If I wanted, I could touch her.