Maz Evans

VI SPY

LICENCE TO CHILL

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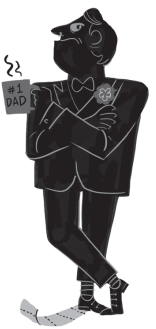

For Rachel Leyshon
Thank you for accepting the
most impossible mission of all.
With grateful love.
And infinite bananas.
xxx

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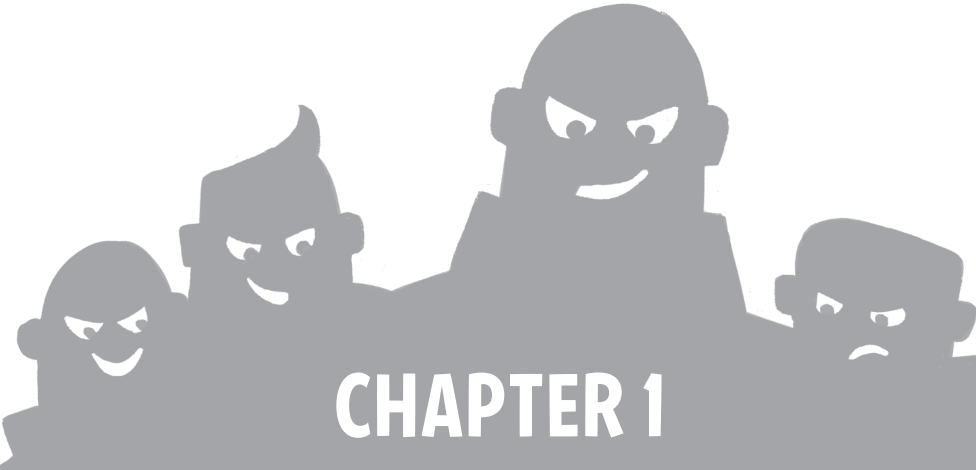

CHAPTER 1

Spies are *rubbish* at keeping secrets. Not your big 'it's a matter of state security' secrets – obviously they have to be good with those. After all, they wouldn't be much of a spy if they posted a selfie on Twitter while parachuting into a top-secret enemy lair (#ItsUnderTheVolcano).

No – the big stuff is safe. You have to protect the code to the prime minister's chocolate safe? Go ahead and tell a spy. You need to hide the world's first laser-guided, intercontinental water pistol? A spy will know just the place. You've discovered that brain-sucking aliens are invading Surbiton? A spy will take that information to their grave. And, hopefully, to Surbiton.

But personal secrets? Forget it. If you're organizing a surprise party, say *nothing* to a spy. There

will be undiscovered species in the Amazonian rainforests who'll turn up on Tuesday with sausages on sticks. You mustn't tell a spy your suspicions about the lady from the corner shop. There'll be a SWAT team trained on her pick 'n' mix before you can say 'monobrow'. And don't EVER ask a spy to keep that funny thing about your mum quiet. Imagine Mum's face when she sees her pink leopard-print knickers on the six o'clock news.

It's true. Spies are rubbish with secrets. And no one knew this better than Valentine Day.

Valentine's mum was a spy. Valentine knew this because, like all spies, her mum was rubbish at keeping it a secret. There was the time her mum got Arthur Tilsley's dad arrested at the PTA casino night because she was convinced he was concealing dynamite in a bin (it was actually his wife's disgusting sausage rolls). Or the time she trained next door's dog to sniff out explosives (and it attacked Fred the postman for delivering sparklers to No. 12's bonfire party). Or the time she abseiled from the top of the supermarket multi-storey to catch the last post (which was actually incredibly cool). Yes, Valentine was convinced

her mum was a spy. And on an unremarkable Friday, in her unremarkable home, in her unremarkable town, Valentine Day was determined to prove it.

'I want a word with you,' sighed her mum as Valentine came down to their kitchen for dinner. 'This school report from Mr Sprout is terrible! What's this about you pickpocketing his board marker?'

'Mum – chill! I didn't pickpocket. I *putpocketed*.'

'You what?'

'Putpocketed. It's the opposite of pickpocketing – I put it back in his other pocket,' said Valentine, who loved to practise this particular skill. There was nothing better to do in Norton-on-Sea (or 'Nothing-to-See' as Valentine liked to call her boring home town, whose greatest claim to fame was that it was 'Home to the Norton Power Station' – and even that had been shut for thirty years). 'I just . . . relocated it. And I've got a question for you.'

'Don't change the subject,' her mum warned, lobbing the ingredients for dinner on to the chopping board with pinpoint accuracy. Mum liked to create 'fusion' cuisine that 'celebrated' their

family's mixed Senegalese, English, Jamaican and African-American heritages. Tonight it was jerk monkfish with plantain fries and mushy peas. Valentine would have been perfectly happy with a pizza.

'If your first name's Susan,' said Valentine, changing the subject, 'why does your birth certificate say it's Easter?'

Her mum – Susan, or Easter – froze, plantain still in hand. That was a good change of subject.

'Where did you get my birth certificate?' Mum asked tensely, dropping the plantain before kicking it back up with her foot and catching it.

'Er . . . I just . . . found it . . . lying around . . . accidentally,' said Vi, who had 'found' the private documentation 'lying around' in a locked box in a padlocked suitcase hidden beneath the floorboards under her mum's bed. It had taken her nearly an hour to 'accidentally' pick all those locks.

'Um . . . I changed it,' Mum stuttered. 'I didn't like it.'

'I did,' said Vi's nan, who lived with Vi and her mum. 'Our family has a great history of unique names. Your great-great-grandmother was Mother Sunday. Your great-grandmother was Christmas

Day. I named your mother Easter Day and fought hard for you to be Valentine Day. Your father wanted to call you Doreen. Typical – the man was a complete idiot.'

Nan shook her head and tutted, like she always did when mentioning Vi's father, who had died when Vi was a baby. Valentine only knew three things about her father: 1) he was called Robert Ford (according to her mum's 'lying around' marriage certificate) 2) he was white (according to her light brown skin) and 3) he was 'a complete idiot' (according to her adamant nan). Valentine had always felt a bit embarrassed by her name, although it suited her a lot better than 'Doreen'. Thankfully, most people called her Vi.

'Is that how you got your name, Nan?' Vi asked.

'Independence Day,' nodded Nan. 'Indy to my friends and proud of it. Your mother should be proud of who she is too.'

'I am,' Mum replied, waggling the plantain seriously. 'I am Susan Day.'

'You are Easter Day,' Nan insisted. 'And one day, you'll remember that.'

'Valentine?' Easter said in a threatening tone

(Vi decided that 'Easter' suited her mum much better than 'Susan'). 'Mr Sprout's report also says you cheated on a spelling test. Is this true?'

'Mum – chill!' Vi insisted. 'I didn't cheat. I just "researched" the answers in the reflection in his window. I was actually being resourceful . . . And now you tell *me* something – is Mr Sprout your boyfriend?'

'Er . . . no . . . of course not . . . don't be so silly,' said Easter, blinking furiously. Vi's mum always blinked when she lied. It was a very helpful tell.

'You've been spending a lot of time together.'

'We're just . . . discussing your education . . .'

'Over dinner?'

'George – Mr Sprout – is a busy man during the school day . . .'

'I see,' said Vi. 'Is that why you have to have all those picnics at the weekend?'

'George – Mr Sprout – has a lot of after-school commitments . . .'

'Which is why you went to Paris with him last month?'

'How do you know about that?' Easter exclaimed.

Vi looked over at the kitchen calendar, which had 'PARIS WITH GEORGE/MR SPROUT' written in red capital letters in the previous month. She looked back to her oblivious mother.

'Just a hunch,' said Vi.

'Look,' said Mum, with a startled blink, 'I simply enjoy George's—'

'Mr Sprout's,' Vi corrected.

'. . . company,' Easter said. 'There's nothing more to it. We're friends. Just good friends.'

Vi watched her mum blink so hard she nearly dropped her plantain again. This needed further investigation. But for now, back to the spy thing. Time for some interrogation . . .

'Mum?' she asked as Easter started chopping the plantain, throwing it up and slicing mid-air with a small machete. 'Can I have a phone?'

'Sure,' said Easter, spearing the last of the fries with the end of her blade.

'Really?' asked Vi keenly. She was desperate to get a phone. Then maybe she'd have something in common with the kids at her school. She hadn't found anything else. Although it didn't help when your super-overprotective mum banned you from playdates and parties 'for your own good'. Vi had

been at Norton-on-Sea Primary School for seven years and never had a best friend. That didn't feel very good. 'When?'

'On the Twelfth of Never,' Easter confirmed. 'You know how I feel about phones. They're too easily abused to invade people's privacy. I read this research paper just the other day about the science of hacking and . . .'

Good. Mum was distracted. The plan was working. Time to go in for the kill.

'Mum?' Valentine interrupted as Easter lobbed the fries across the kitchen into the deep fat fryer, then ducked behind the breakfast bar with her fingers in her ears. 'Are you a spy?'

'Yes,' said Easter absently, stabbing the monkfish as she realized what she'd said. 'I mean . . . no! I mean . . . I used to be! I mean . . . !'

Vi walked over and gently prised the knife out of her mother's hand.

'I think we need to have a little chat,' she said, leading Easter to the table.

'About bloomin' time,' huffed Nan from behind her crossword.

So that was how Valentine Day heard how Easter Day – and Independence Day before her –

used to be a top secret agent for SPIDER, the Security Protection Intelligence Defence Elite Regiment, but had given it all up when Vi's dad died.

'So . . . my dad was a spy too?' Vi asked.

'Uh-huh,' Mum said, turning away as Nan snorted into her crossword. 'Robert died diverting a nuclear missile into space one second before it exploded in the Earth's atmosphere. It's what he would have wanted.'

Easter shot a look at Nan, who was snorting so hard now that she sounded like a horse with hay fever.

'Why did you stop?' Vi asked.

Easter sighed and put her arms around her daughter.

'With Robert gone, you needed a stable parent. One who could keep you safe. One who could watch your every move. One who wasn't going to die in a tank of mutant piranhas. So I retired and moved us to this lovely, quiet town where no one could find us.'

'Who would *want* to find Norton-on-Sea?' Vi scoffed. But she'd been right. Her mum *was* a spy. That might explain why Vi was so good at . . .

accidentally finding things that were lying around. She wondered what skills she'd inherited from her father.

'Well, thank heavens it's finally out in the open,' said Nan. 'Now Vi can go to Rimmington Hall.'

'What's that?' Vi asked.

'Rimmington Hall Espionage Academy,' said Nan with a twinkle. 'Secondary school for spies. To get in, you need to complete a successful mission. Your mother saved seven hostages from a bank raid when she was your age, using only a catapult and a Barbie doll. All the greats go to Rimmington Hall.'

'Spy school – that sounds awesome,' Vi enthused. 'How do you get a mission?'

'You need to find one,' Nan whispered gleefully.

'No!' snapped Easter. 'Vi is going to St Michael's Comprehensive. Not . . . that place.'

'Don't be absurd,' scoffed Indy. 'Valentine comes from a long line of great spies, going right back to the days of the underground railroad in nineteenth-century America. Mother Sunday spied undercover as a nurse in World War One. My mother, Christmas Day, used her singing career to spy all over Europe in World War Two.

I was the first black woman to be recruited by SPIDER, you were the youngest. Spying is in our blood. However hard *some of us* try to deny it—'

'No!' Easter interrupted. 'I am sick of explaining this to you, Mum! That life is over!'

'None of my business,' said Nan breezily, going back to her crossword. 'I'll keep my opinions to myself.'

'I'm telling you, I'm done!' Easter insisted.

'Denial,' Nan said.

'It's NOT denial!' Easter barked.

'It is,' Nan replied, with a wicked twinkle in her eye. 'Fifteen across, "a statement that something is not true".'

Nan was the only person who dared to speak to Mum like this. Vi loved it.

'Choice,' said Nan, squinting at the crossword. 'Five down, "the right or ability to make up one's own mind".'

'I am just trying to keep you safe, sweetheart,' Easter said more gently, holding Vi's hand. 'You are my everything. One day you'll understand . . .'

'Impossible,' said Nan. 'Eleven across, "not able to occur, exist or be done".'

'. . . and going to Rimmington Hall would set you on a path that, trust me, you don't want to follow,' Easter continued.

'Destiny,' Nan announced, looking straight at Easter. 'Sixteen down, "the events that will necessarily happen to a person or events in the future".'

'It's not happening!' said Easter decisively. 'Valentine will not be a spy!'

'Idiot,' said Nan.

'Will you put that crossword down?' Easter snapped, snatching the paper from her mother's hand.

'That one wasn't in the crossword,' smiled Indy, winking at Vi.

'I'm trying to save her life,' Easter whispered.

'Then you need to let her have one,' Indy whispered back.

There was a tense silence. Vi considered doing her homework. After all, she'd need to work hard if she was going to Rimmington Hall. And she *was* going to Rimmington Hall.

'Don't you miss it?' Vi asked Easter, picking up her backpack and spilling everything out of the broken zip. 'Being a spy, I mean. It must have been so cool.'

The sound of the knife clattering to the floor made Vi jump. Her mum strode over. Easter was always working out, so she was in impressive shape. She was slim, strong, had cheekbones that could chop chicory and her short, cropped black hair seemed to get taller when she got emotional. This combination made her a) really very awesome but b) sometimes quite scary.

'Now listen to me, Valentine Day,' said Easter, her voice trembling. 'Nothing about being a spy is cool. It's a reckless profession full of missions, explosions, weapons and danger and I don't want you going anywhere near it, do you understand? Everything I'm doing, everything I've ever done is to keep you safe. You must promise me that you'll do the same. I love you so much, Vi, and I will support you in anything. But not this. No spying. Ever. You swear to me?'

'OK, OK, Mum – chill—' Valentine began.

'No!' Easter replied anxiously. 'I will never chill where you are concerned. Promise me.'

'Fine . . . I'll just get on with my homework,' said Vi, deliberately not agreeing to her mum's vow. There was no way she could.

Because now Valentine Day knew she wanted

to be a spy more than anything in the world.

'One tiny thing, Vi,' Easter said airily, shooting Nan a look. 'You have to keep this secret. No one can know I used to be a spy.'

'Of course,' said Vi solemnly. Unlike her mother, Vi was excellent at keeping secrets. The massive chocolate stain on the underside of the armchair Nan was sitting on proved it.

'Good,' said Easter. 'It's the only way to keep you safe. And, well, the whole . . . spy thing hasn't really come up yet with George.'

'So Mr Sprout *is* your boyfriend!' said Vi, leaping on Easter's mistake.

Vi watched Easter try to find a way out. She had nothing.

'Yes, he is,' Easter admitted. 'Is that . . . is that all right with you?'

Vi pulled a face. Mr Sprout was her teacher. Of course it wasn't all right. It was super-gross.

'George is kind and sweet and loving,' Easter said dreamily. 'He makes me laugh, he makes me feel young again. And when he kisses me . . .'

'OK, OK!' Vi gagged, not wanting to hear another syllable. 'Go out with him, it's fine. Just . . . please don't talk about it.'

‘The same goes for my spy past,’ said Easter seriously. ‘George doesn’t know. And I really need it to stay that way.’

‘You’d better move that bazooka out of the guest bathroom, then.’

‘Please, Vi,’ said Easter gently. ‘Please do this for me? For us? I just want us to have a normal life. A quiet life. A safe life.’

Vi softened at her mum’s pleading face.

‘Sure,’ she said. And she meant it. She wanted her mum to be happy. And Mr Sprout was actually quite nice. For a teacher. ‘But you have to promise me something too.’

‘Of course,’ smiled Easter.

‘Promise me that you two will never get married,’ Vi insisted. ‘Because I’m not living with my teacher and his weird son.’

‘Russell’s lovely!’

‘Russell Sprout? Are you kidding me?’

‘Valentine – be nice.’

‘Promise me, Mum?’ said Vi seriously. ‘I cannot be Valentine Sprout.’

The doorbell rang.

‘You are silly,’ giggled Easter, heading for the front door, leaving Vi unable to see if she was

blinking or not. 'Valentine Sprout . . . Of course not. I will never get married again. Never ever ever ever ever ever ever.'

Easter opened the door, letting a blast of sappy music into the house. There was Russell Sprout, glumly controlling a robot that was playing the music and waving a bouquet of heart-shaped balloons. And next to him, down on one knee, was Mr Sprout.

'Susan!' Mr Sprout declared, holding a diamond ring. 'You've changed my life! I love you more than a blue whale loves krill – which is a huge amount, incidentally, as they need to consume up to 8,000 lbs of krill during their peak consumption period! You are my life! You are my world! Will you marry me?'

'Oh George!' squealed Easter tearfully. 'Of course I'll marry you!'

'How wonderful!' Nan cried behind them as Mr Sprout gathered Easter in his arms and Vi and Russell exchanged unimpressed looks. 'Congratulations!'

As the adults danced around and made wedding plans, Valentine Day knew her life was about to change for ever. What she couldn't

possibly have known was by just how much.

Because spies might be rubbish at keeping secrets.

But they are much, much better at telling lies.