The Alphabet Code

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Chapter 0

 Holly’s eyes snapped open. She was alive! She had felt the sting of the needle in her carotid artery and thought, *I’m going to die. There’s no one to save me this time. My hero isn’t going to rush in and breathe life into my paralyzed body.*

But Holly was still alive. Why was she alive? Was she blind, or was she in total darkness? In darkness so thick that she could feel it pressing against her skin. Holly sat up and turned her head, first one way, and then another. Still total darkness. Maybe she *was* blind.

 The surface that Holly sat upon was solid. She rapped gently with her knuckles. The resulting sound was a very faint, dull thud—concrete? Maybe. Holly extended her arms and swept them in all directions and then above but encountered nothing but air—air that was far too warm and humid. She brought her feet underneath and slowly, carefully stood, ever mindful that she could strike her head on some unseen object. When fully erect, Holly once again reached overhead, confirming that only emptiness filled the void above.

 With careful, shuffling footsteps, arms in front of her, Holly began to move. The direction didn’t matter; it was equally dark regardless of which way she turned. Fear clenched Holly’s heart. Maybe she *was* blind. Maybe her blindness was permanent. Was she to be forever trapped in total darkness? Or maybe she was dead. Was this what it felt like to be dead? Holly didn’t think that she was dead. Didn’t dead people go to Heaven where everything was light and beautiful, or to Hell where everything was darkness and agony? Well, she had the darkness. If she were dead, would she feel the oppressive, but not painful, heat and the sticky humid air? Would she smell the foul, acrid odor of urine? Would she still feel the sting where the syringe had pierced her neck? No, Holly concluded. She was alive. But where was she?

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 Seventeen days earlier:

PART 1

SLEIGHT OF HAND

*Misdirection is one of the favorite tools of the garden variety magician. While the attention of the audience is focused on the bouquet of roses that has materialized in the magician’s right hand, the left hand is secretly stuffing a rabbit into his top hat.*

Chapter 1

Holly Hill, A.K.A. Holly Taylor, A.K.A. Holly Elizabeth Glover, A.K.A. *Molly* sat at her dining room table examining two marriage licenses. The only difference between the two was that one was dated February 5, 2009, and the other was dated exactly one month later. Both documents stated that Mark Hill and Holly Taylor had married in Gwinnett County, Georgia.

 Less than a year before the dates on those documents, both Holly and Mark had belonged to a covert team that used blackmail and other methods to coerce high-ranking government officials into making the *correct* decisions. Unfortunately one of those *other methods* had gone too far and the team leader, John Erwin, had used extreme measures in an attempt to conceal the disastrous results. When those measures did not succeed, rather than accept responsibility for his team’s failure, John had attempted to eliminate two of the team members—Mark and Holly.

 Holly Elizabeth Glover (married name Mastromonaco) had been given a new identity by General Francis Taylor. She had become Holly N.M.I. (No Middle Initial) Taylor. Along with the name had come all the necessary documents, all carefully filed with the correct agencies. Her new birth certificate stated that she had been born in Atlanta, Georgia instead of Quest, Illinois. Besides the certificate of live birth, there were a Social Security Card, a high school diploma, and a license to drive. There had been no marriage license until—

 Holly held up the document with the earlier date. “What do we do with it?” she asked.

 Holly Glover, with the freshly minted identity of Holly Taylor, had followed Mark Hill back to his hometown where they had shared an apartment—and a bed. Their friends and neighbors had believed that Holly and Mark were married and nothing had been done to discourage that belief. Holly had even begun to sign her name *Holly Hill*. When her driver’s license was nearing the expiration date, she had feared that she wouldn’t be able to renew the license using her new identity. Mark had contacted General Taylor who assured him that there would be no problem with Holly’s identity, but he would personally see to it that the license was updated. That was when Mark had made a second request.

 Holly’s new license was not issued to Holly Taylor; instead, it was issued to Holly Hill. Mark supplied a copy of Holly’s signature, and the new license arrived in the mail and all the proper documentation was supplied to the Georgia Department of Motor Vehicles. The second part of Mark’s request had been fulfilled by the creation of a marriage license, with all the proper signatures, filed in the Gwinnett County courthouse. They were *legally* married even though they had never actually taken wedding vows. The marriage license was dated February 5, 2009.

 Unfortunately, on February 5, 2009, Mark had been a key witness at a trial in San Antonio, Texas. Mark had not realized that there was a conflict until recently when a government investigation had threatened to expose Holly’s true identity based on the fact that Mark could not possibly have been in Gwinnett County, Georgia at that time. General Taylor had once again intervened and corrected the error by the creation of a new marriage license with an undisputed date.

 “Shred it,” Mark replied. “We’ll want to take the correct one with us to Illinois when we *renew* our wedding vows.” He made imaginary quotation marks in the air.

 Holly’s only regret about their pretend, but perfectly legal, marriage was that she had no memories of the ceremony—understandable since it had never actually occurred. The best solution was to *renew* their wedding vows. *Officially*, they had been married by a Justice of the Peace with none of their friends or family present. The upcoming ceremony was to be held in Holly’s hometown where her family and her best friend from her previous life could attend.

 “But our marriage license says that I’m Holly Taylor. Your mom thinks that’s my real name, but my family and all my friends know that I was Holly Glover. During the wedding, which name is the minister going to use.”

 “Glover.”

 “But your mom—”

 “I’ve already talked to her. I told her that you had to change your name because of some classified shit in the military.” At Holly’s raised eyebrows, Mark rolled his eyes. “No, I didn’t use the word *shit*. Then I told her that I couldn’t talk about it because it’s classified. I also told her that she can’t tell anyone where we live because it might compromise ongoing classified operations.” Mark took his wife’s hand. “You know, maybe it’s time we stop with all this secrecy. It’s been seven years now; there’s no way that Tim’s still trying to find you. Seven years is a long time.”

 Holly shook her head. “No. I’m still scared of him. Until I know for sure that he’ll never hurt me again, we have to keep my secret.”

 “Okay,” Mark agreed, “but it’s not *your* secret. It’s *our* secret.”

 A wan smile crossed Holly’s lips. “After we left the Air Force and moved here, I called Mom. When she said that Tim had been calling her, trying to find me—well it scared me to death. We’d been divorced for over two months and he was still calling my parents. Maybe he *has* quit looking for me, but I have to be sure. And he didn’t get out of the military when we did; for all I know, he may still be in the Air Force. When that shit happened where you work, and they were trying to look into my past—I was afraid that Tim would find me then.”

 Mark wrapped his arms around his pretty redhead. “I can keep our secret forever if that’s what you want.”

 Holly changed the subject. “After the wedding, wereally will bemarried won’t we?”

 “*Legally*, we’re married now,” Mark replied.

 “I know what this paper says,” Holly waved the document, ”but we never actually said any wedding vows.”

 Mark kissed his wife on the forehead. “On the day we left San Antonio together, I vowed to love you for the rest of my life.”

 “I love you too, Mark, but I think it’ll feel more real after we say *I do*.”

 “I will.”

 “What?”

 “I think that the minister expects us to say *I will* when we say our wedding vows.”

 “I don’t care if it’s *I do* or *I will*; I just want us to *really* be married.”

 “Yeah, me too.”

 Holly moved out of the embrace and gazed directly into her husband’s eyes. “Mark?”

 “Yeah.”

 “When you and Debbie were married—well, did you two ever want to have kids?”

 Mark had been married when he entered the Air Force, and he had still been married when circumstances had thrown him and Holly into each other’s arms. That marriage had not survived. He replied, “We discussed kids, but we wanted to wait until we could afford it. Sort of, career first, then kids. How about you? Did you want kids?”

 “I wanted kids but Tim didn’t. I didn’t know that until after we were married, and I guess I always resented him for it. And that was even before everything turned to shit.”

 Things *turned to shit* when Holly’s ex-husband, Tim, had injected her with a lethal dose of curare. Tim had not known that the drug was intended to kill his wife; he had only believed that it would render her unconscious. That belief had been the result of deliberate deception on the part of the aforementioned John Erwin, the leader of the covert team. In Holly’s eyes, Tim’s actions had been unforgivable and she had demanded a divorce. Tim had refused. Even though the court had granted the contested divorce, Tim had sworn to never let her go. Fearing that she would never truly be free of her ex-husband, Holly had requested and received a new identity. When Mark had boarded a plane to return to his hometown, Holly had joined him using her new name.

 Mark looked into Holly’s emerald eyes. “Are you trying to tell me that you want kids?”

 “We’re not getting too old are we?”

 Mark chuckled, “No, we’re not too old. You never said anything about kids before. Why now?”

 “I’m old-fashioned; I didn’t want to have kids unless I was married. But if you don’t want to have kids—if you want to keep everything just as it is—I understand.” When Holly had been on the edge of death, Mark had charged in like a knight in shining armor and snatched her from the abyss. She had fallen deeply and madly in love that day and, during the seven years that followed, the passion had never faded. There was nothing that she would not do for her knight.

 Mark pulled Holly into his arms and held her close. “I would love for us to have kids. We can start trying right now,” he said with a lecherous grin.

 Mark’s fingers deftly unfastened Holly’s jeans before she could push his hands away with a laugh. “No, we can’t start now. I’ve got to finish packing.”

 “But I *really* want kids,” said Mark as he reached for the zipper.

 Holly spun away. “I know what you want, but you’re not getting it until after the suitcases are packed.”

 “And then…” Mark grinned, his eyes fixed on the elusive zipper.

 Holly placed her thumb under Mark’s chin and lifted his lips to meet hers for a brief kiss. “You know, the packing will go a lot faster if you help.”

 “All I need are blue jeans and tee shirts. I’m going to buy a suit after we get to Illinois.”

 “What about work clothes? What are you going to wear while we’re in Switzerland?”

 Mark was a programmer at *Nova Packaging Group (NPG)* and he was being sent to Switzerland to assist in commissioning several new machines for one of their clients. Though it was officially a business trip, evenings and weekends were going to be an unofficial honeymoon for the newlyweds.

 “I just need to fill a suitcase with my work clothes, drop it off at the factory, and let them ship it to Switzerland. That way we won’t have to take it with us to Illinois.”

 “Will they do that?” Holly asked.

 “Yeah. They shipped Scott’s and Maggie’s clothes. All they took with them on the plane was a carry-on.”

 Scott Ledford was an engineer, also at NPG*.* He and his wife, Maggie, had left for Switzerland a week earlier. Because passports cannot be obtained overnight, Mark had not been able to fly to Switzerland with Scott. The delay was not necessarily a problem. As a programmer, Mark’s skills would not be needed until the machines were actually in place and ready to operate. While waiting for his passport to clear, Mark was going to take a vacation away from his job. The vacation would give Mark and Holly a chance to *renew* their wedding vows.

 Holly drifted into their bedroom where she began selecting garments for her suitcase. “Will we have time to drop our clothes off at the factory? They *will* ship mine too, won’t they? The flight leaves at noon and we still haven’t figured out how we’re getting to the airport. I really don’t want to leave our car in one of those parking lots. We don’t know how long we’re going to be in Switzerland.”

 Mark nuzzled his wife’s neck. “I’ve got it covered. Pete’s going to pick us up here and drive us to the airport, so we can just leave our clothes with him. All you should need is a light carry-on for the time we’ll be in Illinois.” Pete was a programmer who had been working at NPG for a little over four months. Until very recently, Mark had known nearly nothing about Pete, but after a near disaster at the factory, they had become friends. Mark continued, “So everything’s taken care of and we’ve got plenty of time to…” Mark’s voice trailed off as his lips traced their way from Holly’s neck to her ear.