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Chicken
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © Mary Evans 2022
Illustrations © Jez Tuya 2022

First published in Great Britain in 2022

Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

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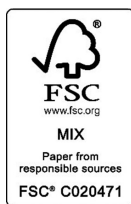
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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells and Helen Crawford-White

Cover and interior illustrations by Jez Tuya

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-911490-74-6

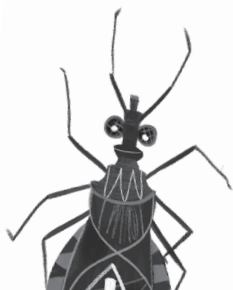
eISBN 978-1-913696-44-3



For Johnny B.
My top agent.
My techie.
My love.
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And for Dilly. The original Missy Fit.

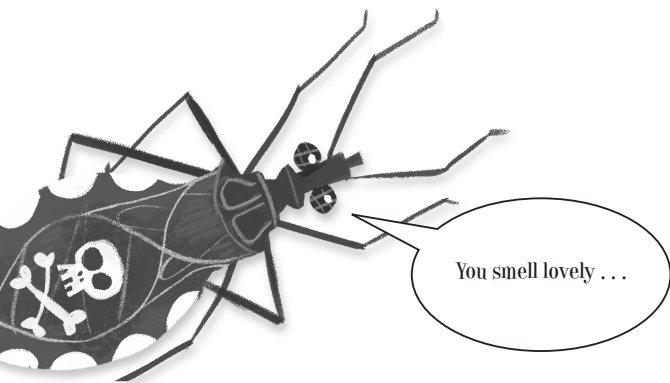
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**Also by
MAZ EVANS:**

Who Let the Gods Out?
Simply the Quest
Beyond the Odyssey
Against All Gods

Vi Spy - Licence to Chill





CHAPTER 1

‘**A**gent Day . . . Agent Day . . . VI! You have . . . five minutes and twenty-three seconds! That ship is going to blow, repeat, the ship is gonna blow! Transmitting route to hostage containment facility and optimum exit strategy for immediate evacuation! You have to get those children out of there!’

Vi listened to her technician, Tamina, plead through her earpiece as Doomsday Dan jumped on a jet-ski and blasted across the ocean. The notorious super-villain now had the codes to the nation’s nuclear arsenal. He could destroy the whole world. Doomsday Dan had to be stopped. And Valentine Day was the agent to do it.

‘Agent Day!’ Tamina barked in her ear. ‘Have requested urgent back-up for pursuit of target! Three ally agents within two kilometres! Your

mission objective is to save the hostages! There are twenty children locked in the cargo bay, transmitting coordinates! Do you copy? Agent Day! Do you copy?!

Vi could hear the urgency in Tamina's voice. Her techie was brilliant at running the numbers, analysing the threat, finding an exit strategy.

But she wasn't in the field. Vi was. And she was going to catch Doomsday Dan.

'Negative,' she announced into her mic, running towards a jet-ski at the end of the jetty. 'Engaging in pursuit. Target within range. Mission parameters unchanged – detain villain and save hostages. We need a win.'

'You can't win if you're dead!' Tamina shouted. 'Repeat, support incoming from ally agents! Your mission is to save the children!'

'I know my mission,' Vi growled, leaping deftly aboard the jet-ski. She could see Doomsday Dan just ahead – Vi could do this. Vi wanted to do this. And after her last few disastrous missions, Vi needed to do this.

'Abort, abort, abort!' Tamina screamed in her ear. 'Agent Day, you are not authorized for pursuit! New mission objective is to save the hostages!'

DO YOU COPY?

Vi winced. Her techie was loud when she was excited. Vi ripped her earpiece out and threw it in the water.

‘No, I don’t copy,’ she said, revving up her jet-ski. ‘Valentine Day leads . . .’

Vi smiled. She’d been waiting to use that line.

She yanked back her jet-ski handle and it roared off underneath her, skipping across the choppy waves, the warship shrinking in her rear-view mirror. Vi bent over the handlebars and gritted her teeth. She was going to stop Doomsday Dan. *And* she was going to save the hostages. Vi was going to save the world. All by herself.

She watched her target grow on the horizon. She was gaining on Dan. Vi reached for her Eye-Spy watch on her left wrist and set it to one o’clock: *tranquillize*. She needed to bring this one back alive – Doomsday Dan knew a lot that could help SPIDER foil future threats to world safety. With her right hand steadying the jet-ski, she held up her Eye-Spy on her left, framing her target between the cross hairs on the watch face.

OUT OF RANGE.

Her display flashed the inconvenient warning.

Vi cursed – she had to get closer. Yanking back on the handle, she drove her jet-ski harder, her legs clinging to it as the surging waves threatened to unseat her. The warship was just a speck behind her now. She was further out than she realized. Vi needed to be quick if she was going to save those kids.

She raised her Eye-Spy again, her heart lurching as a big wave lashed her jet-ski and threatened her balance. The cross hairs found their mark . . .

TARGET IN RANGE.

‘Yes!’ hissed Vi, holding her jet-ski as firmly as she could with her legs. Now all she had to do was squeeze the button on the side of her Eye-Spy and—

VROOOOOOOM!

With a tidal wave of a turn, Doomsday Dan suddenly jerked his jet-ski around. The splash was so immense it took a second for Vi to see what was happening. But as the wave subsided, the situation became worryingly clear.

Doomsday Dan was heading straight for Vi.

Vi tried to line up her target in the cross hairs again. But this villain was no fool. Dan swerved his jet-ski from side to side, making it impossible

to get a lock on his position. Vi could feel her heart rate rising as Doomsday Dan got nearer and the warship further away. She looked at her watch. There were less than two minutes. She was running out of time.

‘It’s OK,’ she reassured herself, bitterly regretting leaving Tamina on the jetty. She could really use one of her techie’s cool exit strategies right now. ‘I’ve got this.’

She raised her Eye-Spy and fired a wild shot, guided more by false hope than true aim. Doomsday Dan dodged it with ease, now close enough for Vi to hear his laughter ripple across the water. He reached inside his jacket. Her heart was racing. It hadn’t occurred to her he might be armed – what if he . . .

But it wasn’t a gun he produced.

It was a detonator.

‘VALENTINE DAY!’ he shouted, circling her. She fired another hopeful shot, which was just as unsuccessful as the first – and apparently just as funny.

‘Come quietly!’ she called, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice. ‘And you won’t be harmed!’

The roar of laughter was matched only by the roar of the jet-ski as Doomsday Dan gleefully whizzed past her.

‘You should have saved those poor children,’ he gloated.

‘I WILL save those poor children,’ said Vi unconvincingly, trying not to glance at the diminishing numbers on her watch. She had under a minute. How was she going to get out of this and back to those kids?

‘I don’t know about you,’ said the villain. ‘But I can’t bear dragging these things out. Watching a timer tick down to zero, it’s just so . . . clichéd.’

Vi’s panicking mind randomly turned to her father, Robert. He loved a ticking clock. She could do with him being here now. He used to be a super-villain. He’d know what to do.

‘So let’s not,’ said Doomsday Dan. ‘Let’s just give it a quick three . . . two . . . one . . .’ He slammed his thumb down on the detonator.

‘NOOOOOOOOO!’ screamed Vi.

She turned to face the warship, although the sickening explosion told her everything. The debris from the ship flew across the ocean. Those poor children. She’d failed them. She’d failed her

mission. She'd failed herself.

Again.

The villain circled her like a maniacal shark.

'Oooops!' he cackled, reaching into his jacket.

Vi could feel anger burning in her stomach. She was going to avenge those children. She was going to get those codes. She was going to save the world . . .

Doomsday Dan produced a large gun from his jacket and aimed it straight at her.

Vi felt her breath catch.

She was going to die.

'Better luck next time, Valentine Day,' grinned the villain. 'But for now, your mission is over . . .'

Vi closed her eyes. She knew all too well what was coming.

BANG!



Vi recoiled as the device around her upper body smacked her hard in the chest. If these simulation vests were anything to go by, she hoped she never actually did take a bullet. It didn't matter how many times she got virtually shot – and there had

been many over the past year – it always really, really hurt.

She yanked off her virtual reality mask and tried to gather some breath in her winded body. The screen in front of her flickered off its ocean view and returned to green for the next Recruit's simulation. The actor playing Doomsday Dan grabbed a coffee.

Vi dismounted the Multi-Vec, the mock 'jet-ski' she'd been riding, and couldn't resist giving it a swift kick. The same piece of equipment, a kind of high-tech gym horse that served as whatever you needed in a simulated mission, had failed her in every single assessment. In her last one, the Multi-Vec had been a car she'd driven to pursue a jewel thief – she'd ended up driving it into the River Thames. The one before, it had been a motorbike she rode to foil a plot to bomb the Welsh Parliament building – she'd ridden it off a cliff near Penarth. She'd hoped that making the Multi-Vec a jet-ski would bring her better luck. But she was wrong. Vi was wrong a lot these days. And it didn't get any easier each time.

She looked over at Tamina in the tech booth, who gave her a wave and a cheeky grin. At least

Tam wasn't disappointed in her. But Vi knew someone who would be . . .

'Agent Day. Agent Shalli. Please report to Ms Direction for debriefing,' came a stern voice over the intercom.

Vi groaned. She'd been 'debriefed' too many times this year to feel more positive. Vi had been so excited about getting into Rimmington Hall, it had never occurred to her that she'd be anything but brilliant when she got there. After all, she came from a long line of successful spies, she'd already proven herself against a super-villain when she defeated Umbra last year, she . . . she just thought she'd be really good at this.

But no matter how hard she tried to prove she was the best, something kept going wrong. She should be a natural. So why was she finding this so hard?

Vi trudged out of the virtual reality simulator and along the corridor towards Ms Direction's imposing wooden office door. Tamina was already outside, tying her long, dark brown hair back from her smiling light brown face. Her mischievous blue eyes turned to Vi and she grinned.

'Hey,' Vi began to the friend she'd made on her

first day at Rimmington Hall. The friend who, now they had nearly finished their first year, was still her only friend at Rimmington Hall. ‘Look, I know you disagreed with me back there, but you have to understand that . . .’

‘You’re in field and I’m not,’ said Tamina breezily, offering Vi a sugared almond. ‘Don’t stress. You know I couldn’t care less. If we get kicked out, you’re doing me a favour.’

‘I know,’ said Vi quietly, declining the sweet. She wished she didn’t care either. But unlike her friend, Vi was desperate to stay at Rimmington Hall. Spying was her destiny.

Wasn’t it?

‘Enter!’ came the clear instruction from inside. Vi felt her innards wobble. This was not going to be fun.

They both held their faces up to the facial recognition scanner.

‘*Agent Shalli, Tamina. Agent Day, Valentine,*’ it intoned. ‘*Access granted.*’

The large mahogany door clicked open to reveal Ms Direction’s beautiful old-fashioned office. Around the sumptuously carpeted room, portraits of previous head teachers of Rimmington Hall

adorned the wood-panelled walls, with Ms Direction's own picture suspended above her large oak desk. The portrait wasn't a recent one – Ms Direction's brown face had a few more lines and her black hair a few more streaks of grey than her painting these days. But her determined brown eyes had lost none of their intensity. An intensity Vi tried to avoid by looking around the office, although she already knew every inch. In the past year, she'd spent plenty of time inside it.

Vi reached for a chair.

'Agent Day,' Ms Direction said in her clipped tone. 'You have not been invited to sit.'

Vi silently reprimanded herself. She always forgot that. She looked over at Tamina and mirrored her correct pose, feet slightly apart, hands crossed behind her back.

'Agent Shalli,' Ms Direction began, lifting her eyes from the screen on her desk and turning them to Tamina. 'How do you feel your mock assessment went?'

Tamina took a slow breath. Vi figured she was trying to find words that weren't too rude.

'Agent Day faced a tough call,' she began. 'She's the field agent and in her estimation, there was

enough time to achieve both mission objectives, so she—’

‘Your loyalty is admirable,’ Ms Direction interrupted, ‘if misguided. You analysed the data well and correctly reassessed a rapidly evolving situation. Were it not for the outcome, you would be on target for an A-plus . . .’

‘...but given how epically we tanked, you have no choice but to fail me and throw me out of Rimmington Hall. I get it,’ said Tamina casually. ‘No biggie.’

‘But, given the results,’ Ms Direction spoke over her, ‘the best I can award you is a C-minus. We both know you are capable of better, Agent Shalli. I look forward to you demonstrating it next week.’

‘Thank you, Ms Direction,’ said Tamina, looking miserable at her pass grade. Vi doubted she was about to be so lucky.

‘And, Agent Day,’ said Ms Direction, turning her cool gaze on Vi. ‘How do you explain the absolute failure of your mission?’

‘I made a call,’ said Vi, trying to sound confident. ‘I decided—’

‘—against the sound advice of your technician,

who has boundless data at her disposal and whose job it is to change the parameters accordingly? Remember: surveillance, then action.'

'Well . . . yes . . . but with respect, Tamina – Agent Shalli – isn't the one in the field.'

'More's the pity,' sighed Ms Direction, turning her eyes back to the screen before turning the monitor towards them. 'Agent Bhatt has just freed all twenty hostages while his colleagues apprehended Domsday Dan. *He* listened to his technician, Agent Sprout.'

Vi rolled her eyes. Oh, good. Another win for Russell. Like he needed it.

'The fact remains, Agent Day,' Ms Direction said, 'that your place at Rimmington Hall depends on you passing your end-of-year assessment next Friday.'

Vi shuffled her feet. She was painfully aware of that. After all, she'd failed all the others. This was her last chance. But she wasn't going without a fight.

'I understand that, Ms Direction,' she said. 'But while I've not totally aced these tests, I do have proven experience in the field. I mean, I saved the world from Umbra and the Neurotrol last year . . .'

‘And where is Umbra now?’ Ms Direction asked, removing her glasses.

‘I . . . we . . . no one knows,’ Vi muttered in frustration. Since their showdown at Norton Power Station, Umbra had retreated to the shadows. No one had heard anything from the super-villain for nearly a year. ‘But if I could spend less time doing assessments and more time doing actual field work, then I know I could—’

‘Your performance today demonstrates precisely why you are not ready for the field, Agent Day,’ said Ms Direction at an uncomfortable volume. ‘And until you learn to listen and work as part of a team, you will never be ready. Failing your assessment will cost your place at Rimmington Hall. Failing a mission will cost innocent people their lives. Thus our school motto – *non est optio deficere*.’

‘Failure is not an option,’ sighed Vi. If failure wasn’t an option at Rimmington Hall, why did she keep picking it? No. Valentine Day was going to be a great spy. Whatever her assessments said . . .

That was it! She didn’t need some stupid school assessment to prove herself – they were for kids. No, Vi needed a real mission in the real

world. That was the true test of a great spy. If she ached that, there was no way Rimmington Hall could fail her.

‘Your grade is an F,’ said Ms Direction, failing her immediately. ‘You are certainly consistent, Agent Day. I’ll see you both in the Great Hall for assembly later. Agents dismissed.’

Vi wanted to say more, but a warning glance from Tamina made her think better of it. They walked out of the office, just as Russell and Adi Bhatt came towards it, saluting each other with a high five.

‘Hey, Vi,’ grinned Russell. ‘How did you do?’

‘Great,’ smiled Vi falsely. ‘Ms Direction had a . . . really strong response to my performance.’

‘Nice one,’ said Russell, as Ms Direction commanded him to enter. ‘See you in assembly.’

‘Whatever,’ grumbled Vi, watching her nearly-stepbrother practically skip into the office. Russell Sprout had spent a lot of time in Ms Direction’s office that year too. The head teacher must have been running out of commendations to give him. Vi trudged off down the corridor.

‘Cheer up,’ smiled Tamina. ‘It’s only a mock, it doesn’t count – unfortunately. Maybe if I fail the

end-of-year assessment I can actually get out of here. Even if my dad would put me on eBay. That's if he could figure out how to use it. Philosophy professors are great at the mysteries of the human condition. Less good at the mysteries of the internet.'

Vi grunted. Her mum would probably buy her an actual jet-ski if Vi got a C-. It would be by far the best grade she'd achieved at Rimmington Hall. Mum would go mad at Vi for failing again – Easter Day had been a top student during her time at the spy school, as Vi's teachers never tired of reminding her. But thankfully, Vi's mum was super-preoccupied with her wedding to Russell's dad tomorrow. Vi could get away with it. For now.

'What have you got next?' Tamina asked.

'PE,' Vi groaned. What on earth climbing ropes and ladders had to do with being a spy, she didn't know. But she sucked at that too.

'I've got advanced analytics,' Tamina sighed. 'Save you a seat in assembly?'

'Can't wait,' grumbled Vi, the sound of an exploding warship still ringing in her ears.