

# BOOK CLUB KIT





# A LETTER FROM ELIZABETH BENTLEY

Dear Reader,

The problem with being an accomplished liar is that no one believes you when you're telling the truth. It's been my crux to bear these many years—one of several—but I suppose that's my own fault.

First, let me start by stating for the record that if Catherine Gray—Cat, as she likes to be called, which I find ridiculous—were here, she'd instruct you not to believe a word I'm about to write. However, given that Catherine is decidedly not here, let me set everyone straight on one thing.

I was a spy. And sometimes, spies bend the truth a little. It's a matter of survival.

Not only was I a spy, but I also performed a rather impressive about-face and informed to the FBI on my NKVD contacts. (I'll let you be the judge as to whether that was a wise idea.)

Did I make some mistakes over the course of my life? Of course—show me someone my age who hasn't and I'll give you my Soviet Order of the Red Banner. (All right, I don't actually have the medal, since I was due to receive it about the same time I told the NKVD to go hang themselves.)

As a reader, all I ask is that you try to put yourself in my shoes as you turn the pages. What lengths would you have gone to in order to protect your country and those you loved, not to mention save your own skin?

Not so easy now, is it?

I truly hope that my story makes you forget the dusting and the laundry and maybe even forget that you need to make dinner. (I suggest hot dogs—always a solid American choice.) Also, as an avid reader myself, I want to thank you for choosing A Most Clever Girl as your book club pick.

All the best,

*Elizabeth Bentley*





# A MOST CLEVER GIRL *Playlist*

Chapter 1: **"Yesterday"** by Imagine Dragons

Chapter 2: **"I Know"** by Jude

Chapter 5: **"Come Away with Me"**  
by Norah Jones

Chapter 6: **"bad guy"** by Billie Eilish

Chapter 8: **"Dreams and Disasters"** by Owl City

Chapter 9: **"Red Lips (feat. Sam Bruno)"**  
by Good Times Ahead

Chapter 10: **"I Grieve"** by Peter Gabriel

Chapter 11: **"Angel"** by Sarah McLachlan

Chapter 12: **"Skyfall"** by Adele

Chapter 13: **"Mess is Mine"** by Vance Joy

Chapter 14: **"My Way"** by Frank Sinatra

Chapter 15: **"Burn the House Down"** by AJR

Chapter 17: **"That's Life"** by Frank Sinatra

Chapter 20: **"Delilah"**  
by Florence + the Machine

Epilogue: **"Sloom"** by Of Monsters and Men



# Pick Your Poison

## Russian Kiss

A red-toned drink—  
with vodka, of course—  
that everyone can enjoy.  
"За ваше здоровье!"  
("To your health!")

### INGREDIENTS

1.5 ounces vodka  
1.5 ounces grenadine  
3 ounces lemon-lime soda  
Ice  
Splash of lime juice  
Cocktail cherries &  
lime wedge to garnish

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Pour vodka and grenadine into shaker with ice and mix.
2. Pour over fresh ice and add lemon-lime soda.
3. Garnish with cherries and lime wedge.

## The Perfect White Russian

### INGREDIENTS

Ice  
2 ounces vodka  
1 ounce Kahlúa, Sheridan's,  
or another coffee liquor  
1 ounce heavy cream

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Start with ice, then pour all other liquids into your glass.
2. Swirl gently with a stir stick for the marbled effect! (You can also mix in a shaker and then serve on the rocks, but you'll lose the marbled effect.)



# White Russian Peppermint Mocktail

## INGREDIENTS

1/2 cup strong brewed coffee, chilled

1/4 tsp. vanilla extract

1/4 tsp. peppermint extract

1/4 cup heavy cream

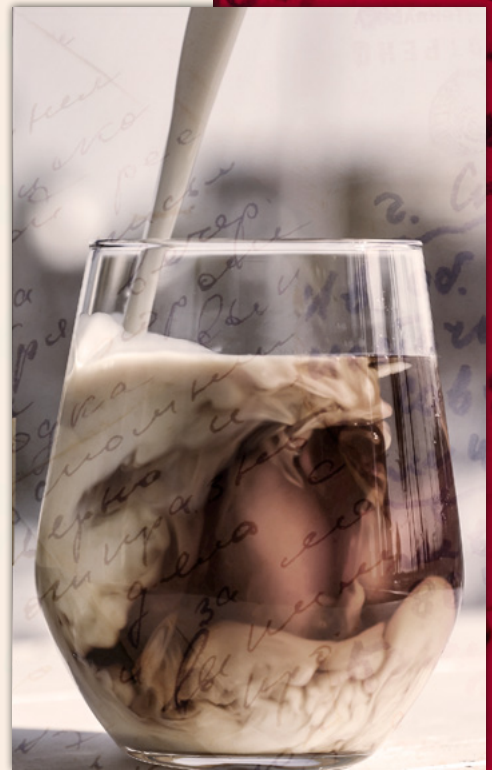
1 peppermint stick

Sugar or sweetener (optional)

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Add a scoop of ice to a glass and pour the chilled coffee over the ice.
2. Add vanilla and peppermint extracts.
3. Float the cream by holding an upside down spoon over the glass. Pour the cream over the spoon.
4. Garnish with a peppermint stick, serve before you stir.
5. Stir, then enjoy!

Optional: If you prefer a sweeter drink, you can also add sugar or sweetener to your liking.





*Behind the scenes*

## WHY STEPHANIE WROTE ABOUT ELIZABETH BENTLEY



### AFTER WRITING

*And They Called It Camelot* about Jackie Kennedy, I started digging to see if there were any forgotten American women from the Cold War. I came across Elizabeth Bentley's name and couldn't believe I'd never heard of this American spy who at one time ran the largest Russian spy ring in America. Because Bentley was a *female* NKVD spy turned FBI informer—quite a combination that America wasn't quite sure what to do with—she was overshadowed by Joseph McCarthy and Whittaker Chambers. In fact, Whittaker Chambers—whose story is very similar to Bentley's—received a posthumous Presidential



Medal of Freedom in 1984 for his contributions to "the century's epic struggle between freedom and totalitarianism."

The veracity of Bentley's many testimonies was substantiated by the FBI's top secret Project VENONA, but that wasn't declassified until 1995, well after she was deemed a hysterical, menopausal woman whose testimony couldn't be trusted. While Elizabeth Bentley was an incredibly complicated woman—and she sometimes made terrible decisions—I felt people needed to hear her story again, especially now that we know she was telling the truth (or at least, most of it) all those years ago. It's time to polish away some of the tarnish on her forgotten legacy.



Beware of female spies! Silence is safety. See everything, say nothing! Betty Quirk reads the sign, hanging in one navy department office in Washington. The sign was made during the World War, and one was dug out of the musty files and hung on the wall "just as a curiosity," as one officer put it.

## **BEWARE** —OF— **FEMALE SPIES**

Women are being employed by the enemy to secure information from Navy men, on the theory that they are less liable to be suspected than male spies. Beware of inquisitive women as well as prying men.

**SEE EVERYTHING  
HEAR EVERYTHING  
SAY NOTHING**

Concerning any matter bearing upon  
the work of the Navy

**SILENCE IS SAFETY**



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1.

Throughout this story, Elizabeth Bentley is an unreliable narrator as well as an antihero. At what points did you cheer for her? When did you condemn her? What do you think she should have done differently in her life?

2.

Elizabeth calls herself a villain and tells Cat that even the most heinous villain has reasons that let them rationalize their wrongdoing. How did Elizabeth rationalize the many wrongs she committed?

3.

Many of the characters in this book—Elizabeth, Yasha, Mary Tenney, and even Cat—go by multiple names. What is the power of a name? What role did code names play through out the novel?

4.

When he recruits her, Yasha tells Elizabeth that he needs operatives who trust him implicitly and who will report any mistakes they have made even if it's the dead of night. Was there anything that surprised you throughout the story about the relationships between Russian handlers and their contacts?

5.

The life of a spy is often portrayed as exciting and glamorous—complete with dazzling spy gadgets and high-speed chases. What parts of Elizabeth Bentley's life as a spy fit that stereotype and what parts were entirely the opposite? Did Elizabeth's life remind you of any other spy stories you've read or seen on television or in movies?



6.

Mary Tenney says to Elizabeth at one point, "There's a saying my father often said: Sinners make the best saints. I know what I'm doing isn't strictly right, but it's not wrong either. Because it's for a good cause." Do you think her work as a honeytrap and Elizabeth's spy work were more right or wrong? Did the ends truly justify their means?

7.

Following the end of the war and Yasha's death, Elizabeth decides to go to the FBI with her insider knowledge of the Russian spy rings in America. Do you think she made the right decision?

8.

Early on in the story, Elizabeth tells Cat, "That's the problem with being an accomplished liar—no one believes you even when you're telling the truth." At what points in the story did you suspect Elizabeth was lying? When did you think she was telling the truth?

9.

The adoption scam Elizabeth speaks of was a real phenomenon in America, especially in the 1950s. (The author's own mother was adopted this way.) Were you surprised to hear of such illicit adoptions taking place?

10.

Elizabeth's work as a Soviet spy and FBI informer spanned both World War II and the Cold War. What did you know about spying during these eras before reading this book? Have you heard of William Remington and the Rosenbergs or Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee?



# About STEPHANIE MARIE THORNTON

Stephanie Marie Thornton is a  
*USA Today* bestselling author  
and a high school history teacher.

She lives in Alaska with her husband and daughter.

**StephanieThorntonAuthor.com**

**f StephanieThorntonAuthor**

 StephMThornton



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*Also available*

