

Book Review: The Spy Coast
By Tess Gerritsen

I decided to read (and review) “The Spy Coast” because I found the title and book description intriguing.

“Former spy Maggie Bird came to the seaside village of Purity, Maine eager to put the past behind her after a mission went tragically wrong.”

And while I enjoyed the read for the most part, I found the title and description a bit misleading.

The story opens briskly. A woman (Diana, clearly a current or former spy) alters her appearance and flees Paris.

Cut to Purity, Maine, where former CIA agent Maggie Bird – along with four other former agents – has retired and is enjoying life on her chicken farm. She’s even built a close friendship with her neighbor, Luther Yount, and his 14-year-old daughter, Callie.

The feathers fly when Maggie is visited by an agent, Bianca, who says Diana has disappeared, and the CIA needs Maggie’s help finding her. Maggie declines, and later that night Bianca’s tortured and lifeless body is found in her driveway.

Acting chief of police Jo Thibodeau wants answers. So do Maggie’s friends – the four retired agents. Maggie is reluctant to divulge details of past missions that might shed light on the current development. But the stakes are ramped up days later when a sniper barely misses taking Maggie out. Why did someone kill Bianca, and try to kill Maggie?

Flashbacks to Bangkok 24 years earlier begin to fill in the gaps. Maggie’s chance meeting with a traveling British doctor, Danny Gallagher, quickly moves from a one- or two-night stand to a long-distance, across international boundaries romance.

Initially, the backstory is interesting and balances nicely with present developments back in Purity, where Maggie's friends begin utilizing their specialized skills to help her unravel the mystery – though she still keeps them at arms length, dropping only small breadcrumbs of information when pressed.

The issue I have is when the flashbacks begin to take center stage. They're definitely a key part of the story, without which there likely is no story. And they certainly add depth to, and a better understanding of, Maggie's character. But when the flashback chapters begin running consecutively – sometimes four or five in a row – the continuity with present day events suffers. I found myself having to backtrack several chapters to recall where the storyline in Purity had been halted, and wondering which part of the story – present day or flashback – is the primary narrative.

Gerritsen does do a nice job of keeping the reader guessing how various characters will eventually fit into the grander scheme of things. And there are a couple of plot twists that are sure to surprise, as well as some loose ends (purposely left loose??) that could give rise to a sequel.

Overall, despite its somewhat misleading title, "The Spy Coast" is a fun, page-turning spy novel that will pretty much hold your interest from page one. I give it 4 out of 5 stars, and welcome your feedback.