

CHAPTER 1

CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA - 1998

VICTORIA PRESCOTT WOULD otherwise be feeling foolish had it not been for the excitement of meeting her quarry after years of research. Her obsession was about to see fulfillment. She had been sitting in a rental car parked on a quiet tree-lined street in the small California city of Claremont. It was a quaint university town in eastern Los Angeles County. The San Gabriel Mountains just to the north sported snow down to 4000 feet, yet it was sunny with a temperature in the sixties on this early December day.

She had been watching the house in a modest neighborhood of older homes for nearly two hours. Several people out walking had viewed her a little suspiciously. One woman had returned for what might have been a second pass of surveillance. If the police were called, she would have to contrive some cover story. Damn. Where was he? She was not a trained investigator. This was probably a bad idea but she had no other way of confronting him.

After deciding to allow only fifteen more minutes before aborting, an old BMW sedan pulled into the driveway of the house. An elderly man exited. Prescott walked briskly from

across the other side of the street as the man was removing a bag of groceries from the trunk.

"Mr. Voronin?" she called out.

The man turned toward her but did not answer.

"Are you Mikhail Voronin?"

"And who are you?" the man answered. His voice was strong and direct. He was thin, of medium height, glasses, with hair now gone white.

"My name is Victoria Prescott."

"Ah, the persistent Ms. Prescott. I would have thought that my lack of response to your letters would indicate that I have no interest in participating in your project. There have been countless books written on the subject. I've read most of them. I would have nothing to add that hasn't been discussed by others."

"Well if you've read the many books on the Manhattan Project, I'm sure you would not agree with all of the different opinions and characterizations, even from some of the direct participants. You could add some new clarifications. I'm intimately familiar with those same books. My career has been largely concerned with the Manhattan Project. I did my doctoral thesis on the subject. Most of the central figures are now all deceased. You were so central to everything and yet no one has interviewed you that I can find. Your recollections could be most enlightening."

The man set down the grocery bag on the steps of the landing to the side door.

"And at my age, I will soon be joining those others from that time. I can see why you would like to interview me, but there is nothing I can add to the historical record. It was a difficult time for all of us who participated. Difficult from emotional factors you cannot appreciate unless you were there at the time. It was the defining event in most of our lives. As for me, I have tried to create a life since my involvement with nuclear weapons. I must still decline helping you, Ms. Prescott. I'm sorry. Goodbye."

The man picked up his groceries and proceeded to insert the key into the door.

Prescott said, "Mr. Voronin. Before you reject helping me, I would like you to read these materials."

The man turned to face her.

"I've tried to be polite, Ms. Prescott. I'm not interested. If you don't leave me alone I will make a complaint to the police."

"I don't believe you will, Mr. Voronin after you have read what I have here."

She handed him a sealed envelope. He did not reach out to take it from her.

"I assure you, I'm not a process server," Prescott said. "As I told you, I'm an historian. In the envelope are materials that will explain why your assistance is vital to my project. I think perhaps you will also find reason to change your mind about participating. My mobile telephone number is in there. I'm staying in Southern California until Sunday. I'll expect your call."

The man took the envelope but said nothing. Prescott turned and walked back toward her car. She did not appear angry, and surely not defeated. She was fairly certain he *would* call her after he opened the envelope.

Voronin entered his house. The grocery bag was deposited on the kitchen countertop. He sat down at the dining room table. Before she showed up it was an otherwise idyllic day. The sun streamed in through the north-facing window with the snow-capped mountains framing a postcard scene. Persistent arrogant bitch. Bile rose in his stomach as dread gripped him over the unknown contents of the envelope. He suspected what might be in there. After a few moments he tore open the envelope.

Hours later he was still sitting at the table. The initial shock had only slightly subsided. It was the worst of all his fears comes true. Why now after all these years? He passed quickly through the initial denial phase at what he had just read. For some time

he just contemplated a swirl of possible damage control ideas. But there was no clear option to mitigate the situation. This Prescott woman's material could not be brushed aside.

Once the initial shock eventually abated, he started to deal with the problem in earnest. Voronin was a pragmatist. The rest of the night he devoted to trying to develop a strategy. At the least he needed to find a way to wrest the initiative from Prescott to provide some sort of maneuvering room. It took a couple of Scotches to finally get some rest for the night. He would call Prescott the following morning.

The night's sleep, although fitful and interrupted, did afford him a more objective view of his options the following day. By the time he dialed Victoria Prescott at noon, he had formed a rough plan.

Prescott arrived an hour after taking his call. After Voronin opened the front door, neither exchanged any words for several moments. Both just stared at the other like two boxers sizing up each other before the bell.

Breaking the silence, Voronin finally said, "Come in. We can talk in the dining room."

"Please sit down, Ms. Prescott. Coffee?"

"No thank you."

"Are you sure? I'm having some. Probably drink too much coffee, but it's one of my last remaining vices."

"Then sure, I'll take some. Just black thank you."

Voronin returned with two mugs and sat down. "I agreed to talk with you to convince you that your suspicions about me are all wrong. Your allegations are frankly insulting. I don't need you smearing my reputation. I'm an old man. I just want peace for the little time I have left. Your premise in the letter is flawed, Ms. Prescott. Your evidence is wholly circumstantial. It's extremely thin at best. Sounds like a conspiracy theory looking for a scapegoat. Not the sort of scholarship I'd expect from a Stanford history professor."

Within the package she had left Voronin, Prescott included background information on herself. Voronin needed to understand that she was a reputable, accredited historian, not some journalist out for a headline. Prescott had thought a lot about how to approach Voronin. The opportunity to confront him with the details and debate the conclusions would be invaluable. At the least, she wanted to afford him the opportunity to refute her conclusions.

“You’re right about the need for credible scholarship, Mr. Voronin. But you’re mistaken about the depth of my evidence. I’ve done some unique research. The evidence is conclusive I assure you. There’s much more than what was included in the package. I’m willing to share those details and give you the opportunity to explain, or refute for that matter. I’d like you to expand on my material from your own first-hand perspective. More as a collaborator than just the interview subject. It would change the level of the book’s impact. So I have a selfish motive for seeking your collaboration. But make no mistake, Mr. Voronin, I will publish my findings even without your participation.”

“After all these years to be accused of such a thing.” Voronin shook his head with an expression of disgust. “That whole time was fraught with allegations of loyalty. Worse right after World War Two with the beginning of the Cold War. Communism was the new enemy. Look what happened to Oppenheimer himself. There’s nothing new here, Ms. Prescott. I’m just an old man and one of the few remaining people from the tens of thousands that worked on the Project. Why are you pursuing this ridiculous conspiracy theory? You’re looking for ghosts.”

Prescott shook her head emphatically.

“No I’m not. That I’m sure of. Let me lay out what this is about. First is the opportunity afforded by your position. You were an Army officer and a key member of General Groves’

staff. You joined his staff at the inception of the Manhattan Project. More than that, outside of Groves himself, you may have known more about the entire scope of the project other than the most senior scientists. You had access to all the technical work at every location of the Project. After all, it was your job to spend time at the various Project sites and write detailed reports for Groves and other senior Army staff. You had access to the most sensitive information. You personally interacted with all the top scientists."

Voronin was silent for a few moments. "And there is of course the fact of my ethnic background. Does that add weight to your argument?"

"That may be a factor in some way. But my research did not uncover anything specific about your parents being Russian. At best your parents were anti-Tsarist before the Revolution and their immigration to the United States. No record of any Communist activities during the twenty years they lived here. You have no siblings. Obviously you weren't a Communist."

"You're implying that I leaked atomic bomb secrets to the Soviet Union. Yet you don't suggest how I did this, or why. So what specifically are you alleging, Ms. Prescott?"

"I'm saying you spied for the Soviets, not leaked information as you put it. That you were undoubtedly a more vital source than Fuchs, Hall, or Greenglass with your breadth of access. That you were the most senior spy, speculated for decades to be either Oppenheimer or one of the other senior scientists. That you could circumvent the rigorous security measures surrounding the Manhattan Project because you moved above the security blanket. You were a trusted Army officer. You simply had the keys to everything. And why can I be so certain? Simply that you were intimately connected with people that I can conclusively prove were trained Soviet intelligence agents. Agents that were assigned to penetrate the United States nuclear weapons development program, the Manhattan Project. Agents who were

apparently successful in that mission. The evidence I have is conclusive, Mr. Voronin. The *why* I don't know. That's what I hope you will explain."

Prescott caught her breath. Voronin said nothing but a facial tic suggested she had made an impression. He rose from his chair and went into the kitchen. Had she gone too far? Would he have a gun? Her aggressive makeup may have caused her to overlook an obvious danger. If he was a former Soviet spy, as she was sure he was, then would he not be potentially dangerous if forced into a corner? In his eighties, though? What difference does that make if he has a gun? Murder-suicide would not be a farfetched result of her naivety. Stupid to have confronted him like this.

Voronin returned with the carafe of coffee. "More?" he asked. Her eyes may have belied her anxiety.

"More coffee, Ms. Prescott?"

She simply nodded.

"If I'm guilty of your accusations, then you must harbor some strong feelings about me personally. I would be a traitor. I'm no lawyer but there probably is no statute of limitations on espionage. Innocent or guilty, I see no benefit in helping you. What is it you realistically expect of me, Ms. Prescott?"

She had not constructed a particular mental image of what it would be like to finally confront the result of her breakthrough research. But still, this poised old man was unexpected. He was dressed in gray wool slacks with a neatly pressed white shirt, glasses, and although his hairline was receding, his white hair was still thick. Stylish glasses. In every way a professorial impression. He could have been a senior academic, yet he was a traitor to his country. Perhaps a key factor in creating the Cold War. The answer to his question was she simply wanted his participation regardless wherever it led, even if she was forced to counter his denials with her evidence. At the least, he would put

the flesh of reality to the skeleton of her story since he was there at the time.

“As I said, to participate. Fill in details. Confirm, deny, debate my findings. Suggest alternative conclusions. I know the history as well as any historian. I’ve lived my personal and professional life against the backdrop of the Manhattan Project. My grandfather was a scientist at Los Alamos. A chemical engineer. His name was Aron Zielinski. The only person that can fill in the gaps is you. There is simply no one as senior as you still alive. I’ve interviewed Teller but he is still hung up on Oppenheimer’s culpability as a security leak. Nichols provided some helpful general background but he was always at Oak Ridge until after the War. He spook highly of you by the way. Of course I was careful to suggest nothing about you being a spy. So you’re the only one left. And of course, you were a Soviet spy. You’re the central player.”

She finished the last comment with a slight smile.

Voronin did not respond in kind. Letting out a sigh, he said, “So you expect me to defend myself? You will still publish your assertion that I was a Soviet agent no matter what I say. You have the benefit of years of documented research. I have only a failing memory of events over fifty years ago. What does my participation do for me?”

“I would think that everyone would want the opportunity to tell their version of important events. If nothing else, the opportunity to refute my allegations for the record.”

Voronin grunted as a way of dismissing her trite response. The reality of his situation was clear. This woman was not only smart but aggressively determined. She had the academic stature to give her research credibility. What she already revealed to him was sufficiently incriminating. He had to assume she had even more evidence. What she had would bring about an FBI investigation. It would bring the media. His fate had been determined the day he received Prescott’s first letter. There was no

way out of the inevitable result of all this. He knew that when he arrived at his decision that morning. This conversation was just verbal jousting. He could only try to manage the process.

"And if I'm guilty of spying for the Soviets fifty years ago, why should I confess to a stranger now? Simply unburden myself of the guilt? Atonement? Make peace with my soul before I die?"

Prescott was uncertain where this was headed. Voronin remained defiant. He certainly did not appear trapped. Perhaps this entire conversation was simply to assess her as an adversary. In the end he could simply retreat without comment after she published. Her research was sound but there would still be a media fight that might reflect poorly on her academic scholarship. At best it was a risk. If he participated, even denying everything, the work would have a balanced journalistic cover.

"Mr. Voronin. I would not pretend to know your personal reasons for working with me any more than I know why you spied for the Soviets. I do however believe that in a practical sense of being faced with imminent exposure of your past, you have more to gain by collaborating."

"I'm sure you know a great deal about me. Since I'm eight-four, I'm obviously in the twilight of my life," Voronin said. He had placed his elbows on the dining table and leaned forward toward Prescott. "I believe there is one thing you do not know however." He coughed successively several times and covered his mouth with a handkerchief. "As if on cue."

"Are you all right?" Prescott asked.

"No. I don't believe I am. You see, I have lung cancer. Well advanced. Too many years of smoking. It's terminal. Not all that much time left I'm told."

Prescott hardly knew how to respond. She instantly started to calculate the impact of that information on her project, but offered the expected empathy of, "Oh God. I'm so sorry. Are you undergoing treatment?"

"Just a drug regimen. The more aggressive treatments can be more debilitating than the disease. It's a quality of life decision at my age. So now you're wondering how this changes things."

Prescott fumbled for the right expression that would keep her in the game. "Well with that looming"

"With my mortality immediately looming you would expect me to tell you to go to hell. And part of me says I should. But I will make a bargain with you instead. I'll tell you everything I can about those times. In exchange you must promise not to make your story, your history, in whatever form, public until after my death."

"Well sure. I guess I could agree to that," Prescott said. She was a little unsettled with this turn of events. How long might that be?

"But of course you want some time frame before committing. The doctors give me only six to twelve months. That's a statistical mean. You'll be taking some gamble that I might be in the more optimistic percentile."

"I can agree to those terms, Mr. Voronin. Perhaps you will even find the experience of our collaboration important to you in your own way."

Voronin coughed some more. "We shall see. At any rate to insure our deal, I will arrange for you to receive unspecified documents upon my death. These will greatly validate your work and establish a solid base of scholarship. These materials will be worth the wait. Not that I don't trust you, Ms. Prescott, but there is no reason I should is there? I know nothing about you. The best arrangements are made on a basis of mutual benefit. Just like mutually assured destruction. These documents will make your career, I assure you. They're worth waiting for me to die."

That was an unexpected benefit. Circumstances had turned from nothing to exceeding all her expectations. She could wait until he died.

"Tell me this, Mr. Voronin. Why the change of mind about working with me?"

"You were right about two things, Ms. Prescott. First, we all want to tell our version of our own story. Secondly, *I did spy for the Soviets.*"

Voronin's outright admission stunned her. She had expected him to continue his denials. Beyond his admission, he was also offering to be interviewed. This was the mother lode.

"Just like that you're admitting you spied for the Soviets?"

"It may seem like that, Miss Prescott, but this day has been feared for most of my adult life. There were countless times that I expected to be exposed. During the Second World War and especially afterwards during the era of McCarthyism and the beginnings of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Even during the last few years since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. I feared Soviet intelligence archives might become public and implicate me. There were reasons to explain why I was never discovered, but like most circumstances in life, chance played the major factor."

"Were you a Communist, Mr. Voronin?"

His dark blue eyes flashed and his cheek muscles tighten in an expression of anger. But the reaction passed within a moment.

"No. I was not a Communist. Communism is a failed concept. Stalin's Communism was simply a contrived political structure to control power. I hold views that are left-leaning, even Socialist, but not Communist. My parents were Communists by the way, original Bolsheviks even, but I didn't embrace that dogma."

That was interesting. The parents were academics with no documented evidence of involvement with the American Communist Party. Nothing damaging was discovered in the Army's background check when Voronin was issued a security clearance in 1942. Yet they were Bolsheviks?

“Most of the World War Two Soviet spies that were identified were Communists, or avowed sympathizers. Why then did you end up spying for the Soviets?” She hoped it was not something as venal as money.

“You only know the surface truth somehow pieced together from your research. There is no simple answer to that question. I’ll attempt to explain as I tell you my story. However, before we get into that, I would like to know about you. You are changing what remains of my life. I’d like to understand how a young academic discovered this buried secret from fifty years ago.”

