

CHAPTER 1

PARIS, FRANCE

Victoria Prescott woke from a restless sleep. Outside the Air France Boeing 777 it was early morning as the aircraft approached over the British Isles for the final leg of the overnight flight from San Francisco into Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport. Her first time back to Paris in years. This hurried trip unexpected following a telephone call just two days earlier.

That morning in her office at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California the caller identified himself in Russian launching a flood of emotions. She had not spoken to Anton Grigoryev for twenty years. Fluent in Russian although with an Anglicized accent, she fumbled with what to say.

“Anton, is this really you?”

“Have you forgotten my voice after all these years, Victoria?”

“Of course not. My god how are you?”

Of course she had not forgotten him or those ten days in Moscow so long ago. With his assistance her academic career catapulted. Considering their short but intimate relationship, a sense of guilt flooded back for never having reached out to him. Must he not think of her as ungrateful after all he did for her?

“I have followed your career all these years, Victoria. According to your online photograph, still as uncommonly attractive as that first time we met. Age has been more than kind. No

one would mistake you for an esteemed professor of history and twentieth century Russian scholar."

What was this about? Why was he reconnecting now after all these years?

"Still the charmer I see, Anton. So good to hear your voice. I want you to know that I regretted not ...well, remaining in contact after ...

"No need for recriminations, Victoria. I did nothing either. Complicated circumstances for both of us. But we can explore all that when we see each other. At least I hope that can be arranged.'

"See each other? What do you mean?"

"Listen, Victoria. I need to ask for your help. Can you come to Paris?"

"Paris? What is this about? We haven't spoken for twenty years now you want me to fly to Paris?"

"Victoria, please listen to what I have to tell you. Not just for me but ... but let's just say for reasons of world security. That is not exaggeration. I have absolutely vital information for the United States. Your father was formerly with your State Department. He will know the right people to contact."

"Contact for what, Anton? You're scaring me."

"Victoria, I can't discuss this on the telephone. Understand what I'm saying. I am still in the Russian Foreign Security Service. Now the first deputy director with a general's rank. I'm defecting, Victoria. What I have to offer will scare Western intelligence. Will you help me?"

"Defecting!"

The shock of hearing from him now compounded with this bizarre and admittedly frightening implication of what he was saying. Was this some elaborate Russian hoax? The current autocratic regime nothing like the Yeltsin era when they met. Was he the same person? Might he be playing on their brief intimacy twenty years ago? To accomplish what?

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"I've so many questions, Anton. Aside from why you are doing this, why me? Can't you just go to the U.S. embassy in Paris?"

"Too risky. I suspect my colleagues by now suspect I have already left Russia. What I possess is too dangerous to the current regime to allow me to go over to the other side. My business is Russian intelligence. I would never trust American intelligence to handle this without incident. And of course your current president's close ties to Putin. Your foreign service is in disarray with no qualified senior people. I need to negotiate a deal before begging for asylum on terms drafted by some bureaucrat."

"But I'm an academic, Anton. A historian. I know nothing about your world of espionage."

"You're an expert on Russia. The Stalin and Cold War eras. Of course you know something of espionage. You uncovered that World War Two Soviet spy decades later. According to your website you are currently pursuing research to explain modern Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fluent in Russian, you can immediately translate and appreciate what I have to offer the West. Personally you'll have a wealth of exclusive confidential material for your research. And your father will know how to go about this."

"You're the perfect intermediary because I can trust you. Defection is a delicate mating dance. It takes time. I need to go underground while the Americans make the necessary security preparations. Putin's thugs have a long reach. I don't intend to end up like the defector Alexander Litvinenko murdered in London years ago."

Prescott did not know what to say.

"Trust me, Victoria. You will not regret the adventure. Paris is so much more appealing than Moscow."

She remained silent for several moments. It was the summer break at Stanford so she had no teaching commitments for the next three months. Recalling those days in Moscow with Grigoryev brought forth a flood of images. No denying the thrill of revisiting that past great adventure now wrapped in this new

mystery. Assuming it was as it seemed. But if she said no, she would forever regret her timidity.

“Okay, Anton. Because of our time those years ago, I’ll trust this isn’t some elaborate Russian spy thing. So where in Paris do I meet you?”

“For security reasons let’s discuss that when you arrive. Text me at the number I’ll give you of your schedule and again when you arrive at Charles de Gaulle. Sorry I can’t offer to meet you there. I’ll take care of getting you a room. Can you come right away, Victoria?”

“Yes. I’ll try to get a flight no later than a day after tomorrow.”



While waiting for her bag at the airport carousel, she received a text message. *You have a room booked at the Relais Christine on the Left bank. I will meet you at 6:00pm in the lobby. Anton.*

The Hotel Christine turned out to be a charming luxury boutique hotel occupying a 17th century former abbey in the Saint-Germain-des-Pres district on the Left Bank. Tucked away on a secluded street with the River Seine only a couple of blocks to the north, she decided on a walk along the Seine, stopping for a light lunch. With a few hours to kill before meeting Grigoryev, a nap and shower shook the jet lag. This was certainly a time to be at her most alert. Meeting a defecting Russian spymaster of all bizarre circumstances.

Beyond the intrigue was the excitement of meeting Anton after all these years. Attractive at fifty-two, vanity dictated she take particular pains with her makeup. The black knit dress flattered her physical assets. It felt like first-date expectation nervousness. And why not when reuniting with a former lover from twenty years ago?

Promptly at six o’clock, she descended the lift exiting into the hotel lobby.

Anton Grigoryev walked over immediately. Still as handsome and fit as she remembered. Dressed in a fashionable sport

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coat with open-collar shirt, together they looked a trendy attractive mature couple. Anything but an American academic and Russian spy chief.

He greeted her in English, "Victoria, you look lovely," embracing her and kissing each cheek in the French style.

"My god, Anton, hard to believe it's been so long. It is so good to see you."

"So much to talk about, Victoria, but first I must explain the circumstances that compelled me to drag you to Paris. Once you hear the whole story I'm sure you will not regret coming. A wonderful evening so let us go out into the garden. I'll explain everything over a bottle of good Bordeaux then we'll have dinner."

The elegant Parisian setting stood in sharp contrast to the reason for this Paris rendezvous. For Grigoryev, defection meant an extreme altering of his life. Leaving his country forever. Obviously dangerous given his official position. The thought provoked a flicker of concern for her own safety.

Once seated in the interior garden patio, Grigoryev briefly discussed wine in excellent French with the waiter.

"Are you in danger, Anton?"

"Well of course. Senior Russian intelligence officers defect at great risk. The Putin regime doesn't shy from killing journalists and certainly not intelligence officials that possess damaging information. Had I remained in Russia I would now be in some undisclosed prison."

"And here in Paris?"

"You mean are you in any danger? No. You will not be here long enough. Nor will I. They are of course looking for me but I have taken precautions. After all, espionage is my profession."

"Who are *they*, Anton?"

"The SVR, the foreign intelligence service of course. My superior the Director of the SVR General Dubrovsky, is now in a career-compromising position. Then of course the Federal Security Service, the FSB, the equivalent to your FBI will take the lead

in trying to locate me. Now outside Russia, I pose a serious counterintelligence threat."

"But what you are asking me to do might take time to arrange. What will you do to remain safe?"

"Victoria, trust me. I've planned this for some time. I have a false passport and credit cards. I speak French and English fluently enough to fit those carefully created identities. I'll be fine long enough to negotiate terms with the Americans."

The waiter brought the wine and after the ritual of examining the label, opening the bottle and inspecting the cork followed by tasting a sip, Grigoryev pronounced it excellent.

Once the waiter finished pouring and left, Prescott said, "Okay, Anton, tell me why you're doing this."

"A long time in the making," he said speaking in Russian. "I don't need to convince you what Russia has become under Putin. Any thoughts of a democratic governmental structure evaporated long ago starting with Putin in 2000. Imagine the disillusionment of being on the inside and witnessing the disintegration. As dysfunctional as the Yeltsin era appeared to be, it was a start. Even those of us having started our careers in the KGB did not embrace life in a police state. I spent much time in the West. Life there clearly preferable to Russian circumstances."

"Progressively Russia has descended into a state criminal enterprise. Even a ranking insider could never feel secure. Once you look at what I will give you will understand just how far things have degenerated."

"And something happened I'd guess that made you take the leap now?"

Grigoryev's face darkens as he nodded affirmatively.

"They attempted to arrest my brother-in-law five days ago."

"Oh no. What for?"

"My brother-in-law was a senior Federal Security official. He was deputy head of the Economic Security Department. Ostensibly, his department investigated financial crimes. In reality, a corrupt process rigged to charge or threaten opponents of the current regime with financial crimes as a means to control any

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opposition to the Putin regime. Beyond that, he was intimately involved in covering up for a vast illegal financial empire controlled by Putin.

"I'll go into greater detail later, but suffice it to say that Stepka Lytkin and I conspired for a long time. What I'll turn over is a well-documented dossier of covert investments of individuals in the Putin regime. How state-owned assets and public funds financed personal investments. Corruption on an industrial scale. The material reveals the mechanisms of Russia as a state operated criminal enterprise."

"What will happen to your brother-in-law?"

Grigoryev shook his head.

"I said they tried to arrest him. He prepared for something going wrong. Knew he would be tortured to reveal everything. Shot himself in his apartment when they came for him."

"Oh my god!"

"Did it to save his wife and two daughters from being used as leverage. He made sure there was never any incriminating material in his office or apartment. Never shared anything with them about his subversion. Nevertheless, he shared everything with me. By agreement, I kept electronic files well hidden. If ever discovered in my possession, he and his family might possibly escape arrest, or least have some warning. As for me, my only family is Stepka's wife, my sister Ursula and her two daughters. Therefore, without the material, the government probably does not yet know the extent of what Stepka uncovered."

Grigoryev's account left Prescott visibly shaken. This evoked the horrors of the Stalin era. In her research, she read countless firsthand accounts of decades of brutal NKVD reprisals. However, this was today's ugly reality with a personal connection.

"I'm so sorry, Anton. Will your sister and your nieces be okay?"

"If you mean will they be imprisoned, probably not. As I said, Stepka was careful. But they will still suffer greatly."

"Such a terrible tragedy. But I don't understand what you meant on the phone about what you were offering would scare

Western intelligence. I would think this evidence of widespread corruption of the Putin regime your brother-in-law documented would delight rather than scare the West?"

"You're correct, but it is the other thing that both my brother-in-law and I discovered that is of immediate international concern. Bred from the same corrupt Russian environment but with far different ramifications than financial corruption. Remember we were both high-ranking security officers. Both former KGB. Just like Putin and a good many others now in all sorts of positions within the government. Russia is a police state. Not exactly Stalinist era repression but moving closer to the worse of the Third World dictatorships. The security services leak information internally in their own form of corruption. Both of us could access the most confidential material even if often outside our principal areas of responsibilities. A true den of thieves.

"You recall that great scandal causing the fall of the American corporation, Martinelli Global a few years ago?"

"Of course. The journalist responsible also published a book. I read it since the corporation was intimately connected with a Russian oligarch. Revealed a lot about modern day Russian corruption between the public and private sectors."

"Then you know the involvement of that oligarch's tangle of corporations with the Russian nuclear industry."

"And the author made this allegation that someone senior in one of those Russian corporations was involved with the theft of Russian nuclear bombs. Nothing ever came of that obviously. Even the United States denied such a thing took place. Sounded wildly preposterous."

Grigoryev set down his glass and leaned in toward Prescott.

"To be precise, the theft of three fully operational thermonuclear warheads each with a 400- kiloton yield. I have evidence proving theft did in fact occur."

"Oh no! And what happened to them? Who has them?"

"Iran."

"Jesus Christ. You're sure of this?"

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"Both the internal and foreign security organs investigated. I'll be handing over the full transcripts of those investigations. There is no doubt it happened. The reports are thorough. Including what happened to the perpetrators. Makes for chilling reading."

"Why has Russia kept silent?"

"My dear Victoria, being a scholar of Russia you should know the answer to that. Russia would never admit to such gross negligence. Worse yet, possibly accused of complicity with the Iranians. Given both Iranian and Russian support to the Assad regime in Syria, an admission that advanced thermonuclear warheads found their way to Iran would surely provoke destabilizing Western sanctions on Russia."

"Those few senior officials that know the truth may see the weapons as another strategic problem for the United States."

"So what are the Iranians intend to do with these weapons?"

"That remains unknown. Personally, I believe the Iranians are waiting to develop the necessary missile capability before exerting political advantage. Might be something more complicated such as factional disagreement within the leadership. This theft happened before Iran concluded the 2015 agreement to limit Iranian nuclear weapons related technology in exchange for lifting sanctions. Since the United States has recently pulled out of that agreement perhaps they are rethinking their options."

"Of course they are studying the Russian advanced design for their own weapons program. Whatever they do they must exercise extreme caution not to alert the Israelis. That could invite an Israeli military response. Perhaps even a Saudi response given their new leadership's muscle-flexing in the region."

"So your information confirming the theft is disastrous for both the Russians and Iranians."

"More than that, it will upset international equilibrium. All the world powers and the entire Middle East must eventually confront the situation. Impossible to anticipate the range of possible reactions."

Prescott staggered under the scope of what Grigoryev was saying. If he possessed documented evidence this was world shaking.

"I have so many questions I hardly know where to start, Anton."

"Of course. I will go into greater detail tomorrow. Better yet, I'll show you the raw documentation. But right now let's take just a few hours to be human. We have twenty years to catch up on, Victoria. Let's do that over dinner. I've a favorite small bistro not far, near the Sorbonne."



Prescott could see why Grigoryev liked this restaurant. Small and cozy. Although close to the university, the other patrons were locals rather than students. Everyone speaking only French. She felt sorry for Grigoryev. Undoubtedly this would be his last time in Paris. At best, he could only hope for a new identity provided by the witness protection program while living out an alien existence in obscurity in some boring U.S. city.

She would do everything she could to help him escape to safety although hardly knowing him. Their very brief romantic relationship was twenty years ago. Yet she connected with him in a way eluding her since then. In addition, she owed him professionally. His assistance in accessing Soviet-era intelligence archives proved led to her spectacular academic success. The information she obtained in Moscow identified a previously unknown Soviet spy within the ultra-secret Manhattan Project during World War Two. A trusted U.S. Army officer on General Groves' staff with access to every aspect of the scientific project to create an atomic bomb. Perhaps as instrumental to Soviet nuclear development as the infamous spy Klaus Fuchs.

Grigoryev provided access and guidance into Soviet intelligence archives under the openness of the new Yeltsin presidency. This was 1998 just seven years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. That brief period where Russia attempted to embrace

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democratic governess and the West suddenly seemed no longer the great enemy.

Settled at a back table in the garden patio of the Christine with a bottle of wine, Grigoryev suggested they converse in English since she did not speak French. No point in arousing unwelcomed curiosity by speaking Russian.

She laid her hand over his on the table and said, "When you called, it brought back an old guilt. Something never really forgotten but buried in the recesses of memory."

"Guilt? Over what?" he said genuinely surprised.

"Over us. I guess is how I'd put it. It was more than just a brief affair yet that is what I made it out to be. I never attempted to contact you. Never even properly thanked you for the professional help much less the ... emotional connection I experienced."

He clutched her hand, "You should dispel any such recriminations, Victoria. We did make a deep emotional connection. We were perhaps both vulnerable but it was still something profound. Neither of us expressed what we both knew. There could be no future together.

"An American academic and a Russian spy? Living where? We both had careers on opposite sides of the world. Our identities shaped by our careers and history. What would a retired Russian spymaster do in America? You could never live in Moscow. Our very lives, our cultures were worlds apart.

"Your leaving was very ... difficult, Victoria. I realized I would probably never see you again. I reconciled to each of us proceeding down separate paths. Had to be that way. The situation back then left no practical personal choices."

Tears ran down her cheeks as she dabbed them with the table napkin.

"Damn, I told myself I wasn't going to do this," she said. To redirect the conversation to him, "And what happened in your life these last twenty years, Anton?"

"Well I eventually married. Over ten years ago. A brainy woman like you. A medical researcher."

"And?"

"Natasha died four years ago of cancer. An ugly death."

"Oh no. I'm so sorry."

"With Russia visibly reverting to a new form of Soviet-like repression, her death drove me deeper into an already developing depression. Rather than opting out of life, I chose to resist this criminal regime. No defined objective at first but not long before my anger turned to specific means of sabotage.

"My sister is the only family I have. She made a great effort to return me to the living after Natasha's death. It proved difficult to withdraw into depression around her two precocious teenage daughters. In addition, I liked her husband Stepka. We shared high positions in the security organs."

"And you soon learned that your brother-in-law shared a common loathing of what was happening in Russia?"

"Exactly. Our conspiracy quickly developed. If caught, the first suspicion would be a foreign intelligence penetration. We would disappear but not before enduring severe unpleasantness."

"If caught? But you were caught. At least your brother-in-law."

He smiled. "Obviously. And if I had not left Russia immediately, I would also have been arrested. Not only being connected to Stepka since he was married to my sister, but other indicators caused me to suspicion I was out of favor professionally. In today's Russia that alone is dangerous."

"And with no personal ties in Russia you planned your defection? How did you learn of your brother-in-law's death? How did you manage to get out of Russia? Aren't they probably looking for you all over Europe?"

"Most certainly they are looking for me. But I am safe temporarily. Tomorrow I'll explain everything in more detail. How I escaped and how I intend to elude my former comrades. And of course, I'll show you what I have to offer the Americans. But now you must tell me about your life these past years. I resisted researching you more thoroughly to avoid leaving any trail to

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you. All I know is what the Stanford University website says in your biography.

"I never asked if I was complicating your life by asking you to come to Paris."

"You mean if I'm in a relationship? The answer is no. No one to be accountable to."

Never a serious relationship over these many years. Might never be although she felt an unidentifiable emptiness. Intelligent enough to know it was her rather than poor choices in men. Something amiss within her makeup, or a combination of factors always ending in disappointment.

By her tone, Grigoryev chose not to pursue the obviously uncomfortable subject.

"I did read your book *Critical Mass*. Good writing. Reads like a suspense novel. And you actually met this old Soviet spy?"

"Yes. Thanks to your help, Anton."

"And that unusual period of Russian glasnost. Would not happen today. Not since Putin came to power in 2000. What I have to give you now will top that Soviet Stalinist era history, Victoria. This is about today. The post-Soviet Russia of today. Make sure you keep copies of everything. Don't trust your government. They will cut you out of the picture invoking reasons of national security. Might just bury the material if it suits the objectives of the current U.S. administration. You will understand tomorrow when I show you the material. Now let's enjoy the evening."