

# **The Sound of Red Returning**

*A Novel*

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# Prologue

It was just two paragraphs in the *Boston Globe* that morning in October 2008:

## **Slain Professor's Widow Dies**

Eugenia C. Devoe, wife of the late Schell M. Devoe—a prominent Harvard music professor who was murdered in his Boston home in 1996—died Friday in Canada. She was 78.

Mrs. Devoe had separated from her husband shortly before his death. Under an assumed name, she had moved to the small farming community of Curien, west of Montreal. Until now, her whereabouts had been unknown. The couple had no children.

By dawn the next day, though, the isolated cottage that had been Eugenia Devoe's hiding place lay in ruins. Even the boards had been stripped from the ceilings and floors. Yet when the intruders left, they took only one thing from the house—a letter Schell Devoe mailed to his wife just hours before he died.

# Chapter 1

*One week later*

When the lights dimmed, a tall, trembling silhouette stood in a doorway to the East Room. The audience gathered there waited expectantly.

“Miss Bower, are you all right?” whispered the President’s valet as he straightened a beaded clasp on the back of her gown.

Liesl nodded absently, but all was not right. From a time and place long buried, an alarm had just sounded, causing her gifted hands to tense and her mind to flash the unbidden image of a dark alley in Moscow.

A voice inside the historic room spoke, momentarily dispelling the fearful image, and the valet stepped aside. “The President and First Lady wish to continue this evening’s festivities with a performance by one of the world’s most acclaimed pianists. Please welcome the recent winner of the coveted Messenhoff Award for the Performing Arts, fresh from her victory recital at Carnegie Hall—Miss Liesl Bower.”

A chilling inertia threatened to abort her entrance, but the stimulus of applause propelled her slowly forward. Her head held high, she passed beneath chandelier prisms that now, to her wary eye, cast a distorted light.

She had performed in royal courts around the world and in this very room before two sitting presidents. It was not the dignitaries and other guests of the President assembled before her, not the white-knuckle jitters that still plagued her no matter how often she performed, not the powerful scherzo she would soon unleash onto the keyboard. What had stricken her just moments earlier was a face in the second row, the same face she’d seen burn with rage that night in the alley. What was he doing in *this* place?

As she crossed the room, the clapping hands ringing in her ears, she risked the briefest glance at the man in the second row. But even in that instant, she felt his eyes breach the barricade she’d constructed around herself so long ago, that bulwark about her soul that isolated her from the hurtful world outside.

Though her mind was in turmoil, her slender body, now slick with perspiration inside her black velvet gown, slid with practiced poise toward the piano. When she reached the imposing Steinway concert grand with its three gilded-eagle supports, she placed a steadying hand on its fine, aged wood and turned to face her audience, knowing where she must *not* look again. She nodded to President Travis Noland before bowing grandly, then seated herself at the keyboard, the only thing in the room she was sure of.

As she always did, Liesl closed her eyes to summon the music, to place herself in the hands of the composer. Sometimes she would hope for the faintest breath of God. This was one of those times.

To settle the after-dinner crowd, Liesl began a warm and rippling etude by Moszkowski. Later, like the times she had driven for miles in deep thought and couldn’t remember anything about the route she’d taken, she realized she’d finished the etude without inhabiting it—a transgression for any concert pianist. *No more of this!* she scolded herself.

She rose from the piano to accept the audience's appreciation. Careful to avoid the troubling face, she looked around the room and noticed one or two guests beginning to nod off. Even now, that amused her because she knew what was coming.

Moments later, the long, silken hands lifted like graceful swans from the even-tempered opening measure of Chopin's *Scherzo No. 2 in B-Flat Minor* only to strike with a fury that caught her audience off guard and swept them into the stormy yet lyrical piece. It was President Noland's favorite and his special request for the evening.

Now, Liesl escaped her audience and plunged so deeply into the music, she no longer sensed if anyone else was there. Except once. After the pounding clash of the first passage, she was midway into a peaceful interlude when she surfaced long enough to dare look into the second row. *Gone! He's gone! But where?* No time to wonder; the music wouldn't wait. The storm was gathering again. It demanded she channel it down the length of the instrument and release it to the room. But in the finale, in the resolution of the strife, the victory of peace prevailed.

It was then she suspected why the President had selected this particular composition. She knew who else was in the room. The Russian ambassador and others from his diplomatic corps were seated so close to her, she could hear them breathe. She knew the strife of recent negotiations between the U.S. and Russia, knew that the delicate balance of power between them sizzled ominously. Of course, Ambassador Olnakoff would know the scherzo she'd just performed. A music scholar himself, a devotee of Chopin, he would surely translate the conflict-to-peace narrative of the music into the political message of reconciliation that Noland must have intended.

When it was over, Liesl rose from the piano to exuberant applause, her eyes falling on the empty second-row chair. Though she usually allowed the applause to roll over her in tingling, uplifting currents, at that moment, she was numb to it, feeling only the need to warn someone about the man she'd just seen.

She scanned the crowd for Ben Hafner, assistant to the President for domestic policy, perhaps her closest friend since their Harvard days together. *I've got to reach him!*

But the audience wouldn't let her go. They begged for an encore and Liesl knew she must oblige. But as she lowered herself to the tufted bench, she looked out once more and caught Ben's mop of brown hair, his toothy smile beaming her way from a side door to the room. *Read my face, Ben*, she silently implored, then raised a summoning brow.

Once again, Liesl lapsed into the spell of the music, having chosen something she hoped would reinforce President Nolan's mood for the evening: the disarming *Clair de Lune* by Debussy.

The piece had been a recital offering when she was just twelve. Under her grandmother's tutelage, she had refined her performance of it in the centuries-old house beneath the live oaks. Now, as she gently stroked the keys, she could almost smell the briny wind off Charleston Harbor; hear the creak of the kitchen floor as her mother and grandmother prepared the evening meal. And hear the bells of St. Philip's.

Was this selection for Noland? Or for her need in this hour?

As Liesl took her final bow, she was set upon by admirers, her path to Ben still blocked. The reluctant celebrity with the amber hair and eyes to match always drew more attention than she welcomed. She'd been photographed around the world, not just at the piano in one of her regal gowns, but in baggy sweats leaving a produce market in Paris, even swimming in a remote grotto in Greece.

The White House photographer approached and asked her to pose next to the piano, between President Noland and Ambassador Olnakoff. When the President swooped in with the ambassador in tow, more than a few observers raised an eyebrow over the unnatural chumminess the two men displayed toward each other. Liesl overheard one tuxedoed gentleman comment to another, “A beautiful woman can bridge many a gap, eh?”

After the photos were taken, other admirers now moved toward Liesl. Between the heads of those gathered about her, she made eye contact with Ben. Finally, she excused herself from some wanting to discuss the finer nuances of the scherzo, and quickly left the East Room.

“What’s up?” Ben asked when Liesl reached him. “I still read you pretty well, don’t I?”

“Right now, that’s a good thing.” She took his arm and pulled him down the hall.

“Whoa, take it easy. People will start talking again.”

She stopped abruptly and turned into him. “Ben, you’ve got to listen to me!”

He stared down at her, then put both hands on her shoulders. “You’re shaking. What’s the matter with you?”

Before she could answer, he steered her across the hall and opened the door to a small, tidy office, then closed the door behind him. “Sit down and talk to me.” He remained standing.

“Did you see the man in the second row wearing a red ascot? Black hair slicked straight back, hollow cheeks?”

Ben thought a moment, then nodded hesitantly. “Probably Evgeny Kozlov.”

“Do you have a picture of him?”

“No, I don’t have a . . . what’s this about, Liesl?” he asked impatiently, his forehead bunching in creases.

“Who is this Kozlov?” she asked, her tone urgent. “Why was he here tonight?”

Ben took a seat opposite Liesl and looked intently at her, but didn’t answer.

She knew there were many things Ben could never talk about with her. Perhaps this was one. She drew a hurried breath. “Ben, do you remember that last trip I took to Moscow with Dr. Devoe?”

He nodded solemnly.

“It was January 1996.”

“I remember,” he said softly.

“The last night we were there, Dr. Devoe came to my hotel room. He pulled me out into the hallway and asked me to take a walk with him. I was tired. I’d just played a concert that night at the conservatory. But he insisted. He said he had something to tell me. I asked why we couldn’t talk in my room, and he said, ‘Because they’re listening.’”

Ben reached for one of her hands and held it.

She squeezed the hand of this burly, compassionate man she loved as a brother. The media had tried hard to make something more of their relationship, daring to suggest that Ben might stray from the wife he adored.

Liesl continued. “I had no idea what Dr. Devoe was talking about.” She steadied herself. “When we walked out of the hotel that night, the snow was blowing hard, but we kept going. He was taking me to a small coffee house in the next block, he said. Before we got there, though, my scarf blew off and I ran after it. Just a silly thing. I chased it into the street.”

“But when I turned back, Dr. Devoe was gone. I ran to where I’d left him and heard voices from an alley nearby. Angry voices. Dr. Devoe and another man were arguing in Russian.”

There was a knock at the office door. Ben put up a hand to silence Liesl as he moved to answer it.

“Mr. Hafner,” said Ben’s chief aide, Ted Shadlaw, “sorry, but I happened to see you come in here.”

“It’s all right, Ted,” Ben said calmly. “What is it?”

“Miss Bower’s car is here.”

“Tell the driver to wait, please.” Ben closed the door. “Keep going,” he told Liesl, returning to his seat.

She didn’t know how exerting this would be. She wanted to curl into a ball and draw the barricade closer. “I didn’t know what to do,” she said. “I was afraid to approach the alley until I heard a scuffle and just went charging in. Dr. Devoe was on the ground. His mouth was bleeding, and a man stood over him. By the street lamp, I could see him clearly. Then the man came at me. He pointed his finger in my face and yelled, ‘Don’t ever come back to Russia!’”

Ben flinched.

“I never saw that man again,” Liesl said. “Until tonight. In the second row.”

Ben breathed a heavy sigh and stared at the floor. When he looked up, Liesl saw his frustration.

“Liesl, what happened to Dr. Devoe, that terrible thing you witnessed, is history. Twelve years ago. It’s over.”

“But, it’s—”

“It’s like it happened yesterday for you, I know,” he interrupted. “And now, after what you just told me, I understand even more why you disappeared after the murder. But why didn’t you tell this to someone during the investigation?”

Her eyes clouded and she looked away. “You know the way they treated me. Like I’d done something to betray my country.”

“The police?”

“No, the others.”

Ben nodded quietly. “Liesl, lots of people were questioned. Dr. Devoe had many associates, many students. None as close to him as you were, granted. And none of them had to watch him die. I’d do anything to erase that trauma from your life, but I can’t. And you can’t.” He paused. “But you can break its grip on you. You have to let it go.”

Liesl straightened her back as if a steel rod in it had just snapped into place. “Tell me who Kozlov is?” she persisted.

Ben stood up and raised both hands in surrender. “Someone Olnakoff recently brought over for counsel. He’s a lawyer in Moscow.”

“He’s a punk!”

“Liesl, keep your voice down. And try to understand what’s going on. Russia is back on a collision course with the U.S., and President Noland is dealing every diplomatic card he can to keep our countries from a showdown. We can’t go accusing one of their diplomats of brutish behavior over a decade ago. From your account, that’s all it was. Scared the wits out of you. Probably had everything to do with Devoe’s treason, though maybe not his murder. But that chapter’s closed. What do you want from this man? An apology?”

Ben moved toward the door. “I know you think I’m insensitive. But you’ve suffered long enough. Make it stop. The man isn’t here to terrorize ‘one of America’s classical darlings’, as that *Post* reporter called you.” He smiled brightly as if trying to coax the same from her, but she fixed a stony eye on him.

“Liesl, come with me,” he finally said with a hint of begging in his voice. “Your coach awaits.”

Liesl let him pull her up from her chair and hug her gently, though she barely returned the gesture. When he let her go, she said, “Mrs. Devoe just died. Did you know that?”

Ben went still. “Yes, I know,” he said, then tried again to lead her to the door, but she stood her ground.

“That warm, vivacious woman was living alone in the backwoods of Canada under a false name, Ben. Why did she have to do that?”

He looked down at the floor then back at her as though he’d had to compose the impassive face he now showed her.

She searched his eyes and understood. “You know something more about that, don’t you?”

Ben straightened stiffly. “Liesl, please let this go. It doesn’t concern you anymore.” He waved an arm toward a draped window. “There’s a whole world of beautiful music and adoring audiences out there for you. You’ve worked hard for it. Now put this behind you once and for all and go live your life.”

The limousine that had transported Liesl to the White House on that Tuesday evening pulled back onto Pennsylvania Avenue and headed toward her small, rented house in Georgetown. She wrapped her velvet cape tightly about her and sank deep into the plush leather of the seat, resting her head against its high back. *Ben’s right. It’s over. Time to put it away.*

Soon, she gazed out the window at one of Georgetown’s stately old houses, and her mind raced back to her childhood home. She wished she could climb the worn stairs to her room, to wander the neighborhood where she’d been just another kid on the block, not the prodigy others had labeled her. She wanted to go back in time and skip rope with her friends, canoe into the marsh, and catch fiddler crabs. It had all come too quickly to an end.

A few blocks from her house, the driver turned toward her and asked, “Miss Bower, are you expecting anyone at your home tonight?”

Liesl looked at him curiously. “Why do you ask?”

The man hesitated before answering. “I just thought you might have arranged for someone to follow you there.”

The impact of what he was saying suddenly hit, and Liesl turned quickly in her seat to look out the back window. A few car lengths behind was a set of headlights, nothing unusual, she thought. “I’m not sure I understand,” she said, though something quickened inside her.

“So, you’re not expecting anyone?”

“No, I’m not.”

“In that case, ma’am, I’d like to call Mr. Hafner and tell him I’m returning you to the White House.”

# Chapter 2

Liesl stepped from the back of the limousine into Ben's sure grip. Flanked by two Secret Service agents, he escorted her into the West Wing.

"Ben, there was no one following me," she insisted as he steered her through the nerve center of the White House. It was largely deserted at this late hour except for security agents now questioning her limo driver in an open cubicle.

"Just precautions," Ben replied blandly. He opened the door to his office, flipped a light switch and gestured for Liesl to take a seat on a worn, overstuffed sofa. He moved quickly to his desk and opened one of its file drawers. "Let me just gather a few things and then we'll go."

"Go where?" she demanded, still standing.

Ben removed several folders from the drawer and looked up. "I've already called Anna and the guest room is ready for you. Of course, the kids are asleep and you won't get to—"

"No, Ben. This has gone too far. I'm not going with you. So please ask the driver to take me home. There's no one out there waiting to . . . get me." Her irritation was unmasked. But inside, behind the barricade, her resolve had begun to crumble.

"Now, Liesl, until we're sure that . . ." Ben stopped, looked past her toward the door, and stood. "Sir."

Liesl glanced over her shoulder and pivoted quickly.

"I would be grateful if you did as Ben asks," said President Noland from the doorway. Still dressed in his tuxedo, he stepped into the office, filling it with his commanding yet gentle presence. His silver hair reflected the harsh overhead light, but his smile was easy.

"Mr. President?" The verbal salute spilled nervously from Liesl, but as a question. *What is he doing here?*

"You performed magnificently this evening, Miss Bower. Now let us repay you by tending to your security and exploring what happened tonight, if anything did happen."

"That's my point, uh, sir. Nothing happened."

"Probably not," the President replied, "but I'd feel better if you stayed with Ben and Anna tonight."

She turned an accusing eye on Ben.

"Yep, it's an ambush," Ben admitted as he dropped more folders into his briefcase. "I knew I'd need reinforcement to make you come peacefully."

The President laughed, but Liesl wasn't amused. *There's more to it than that.*

Then something occurred to her. "Sir," she said as the President turned to leave. "I was wondering about the music you requested for this evening."

"Yes?"

"It was a message to Olnakoff, wasn't it?"

She saw something flash in Noland's eyes. He glanced at Ben then back at her and the eyes softened. "From all of us."

Wednesday night, Liesl flew to New York hunched against the tiny window. Only then did she realize how much the previous evening at the Hafner house had restored her. Anna and Ben had made her feel safe and wanted. As godmother to their two children, she was always



welcome. Liesl knew that. But it was their home, not hers. Still, she'd slept peacefully in an antique four-poster bed. Secure for a while.

Liesl looked thousands of feet below at the densely populated corridor between Washington and New York. Flying had always made her feel so temporary, as if at any moment one of the thousands of critical parts that kept the plane aloft might malfunction. It made her wonder why so many sensible people flew. Still, she was drawn to the spectacle unfolding below. Against the black void, neon tentacles now crawled into view, and the aircraft tracked them all the way to the massive, pulsating body of New York.

The ride from the airport was uneventful, the Whitley Hotel near Grand Central Terminal welcoming as usual. It was small and elegant, catering especially to women who came to the city alone. As she entered the lobby, Liesl lifted a wave to the familiar concierge and followed the bellman to her room.

The next morning, a cab whisked her off to the venerable Juilliard School at Lincoln Center, where she was to teach a two-day piano workshop capped by a recital Saturday night. She was grateful for the diversion. But later, after the day's seamless itinerary of classes and private lessons, exhaustion crept in and she returned early to the hotel, declining an assortment of dinner invitations from students and faculty.

In the same top-floor corner room she always requested, she slipped out of her cashmere sweater and wool slacks and wrapped herself in a thick terry robe, compliments of the hotel. She pulled a chair close to the window and, nibbling on a room-service sandwich, gazed down into the canyon of Park Avenue, cut as brilliantly as facets in a diamond.

But this night, the city failed to dazzle her. Instead, it whispered too many questions through the glass. How many hotel rooms have there been? How many nights alone? Was someone really following her?

Liesl put down the sandwich and stood. She pressed her hands against the cold window pane and watched strangers pass below her. The drenching loneliness rushed at her, and tonight, she couldn't fend it off.

# Chapter 3

In a vault room deep and sealed inside the Russian Embassy in Washington, Evgeny Kozlov drew a ragged breath. Perhaps it was what lay before him that caused his distress. Even so, he'd returned to look at it again, now three times since it was recently recovered from a remote cabin in Canada.

Alone in the tiny room, the locking tumblers inside the steel door solidly in place, he sat at a table cleared of everything but the open metal box and what it held. They were just two small pages written in a bold, steady hand, not the hand of a man who feared imminent death, but one confident in what he was doing and those who protected him.

*You fool!* he raged silently. *Even if you had given your Americans what they wanted, they would gladly have dangled you before your executioner. You betrayed your country first, then mine. Did you think that warning in the alley meant nothing? Did you think I would not find you?*

But too late. Kozlov knew that now. Schell Devoe's final communication had just been unearthed like a musty scroll bearing the key to an old mystery—and igniting a furor inside Russian intelligence. Now, KGB agent Evgeny Kozlov held the simple letter from Devoe to his wife and read it again:

Dearest,

Victory! I have uncovered the mole's identity, the name that will ensure our future. Just hours ago, I finished coding it in the usual way. It appears nowhere else. I will deliver it to my contact late this evening. But an unfortunate thing just happened. Liesl paid a surprise visit this afternoon and accidentally picked it up with other music on my desk. I didn't realize it was missing until she'd left. It worries me that something so toxic is in her hands, and she has no idea what it is. I was careful to raise no alarm when I called her. She is returning it to me tonight, just another sonata.

I will join you in three days, my love. The agency will take care of us, and we will begin our lives again. I am overjoyed.

Your devoted husband,  
Schell

No matter how many times he read it, the damning irony remained. At the moment he killed Devoe for trying to expose one of Russia's most critical and highly placed informants, the girl stood before him with the mole's identity in her hands—and Kozlov let her go.

The locks clanged loudly in the door. Only three other people in the building had clearance to this room. He suspected which one it was now pushing the heavy door open.

"I knew I would find you here," said Pavel Andreyev, his smooth, square face set like granite. He approached the table and looked down at the letter, shaking his head. "I do not need to remind you of the urgency in finding this . . . sonata. The Americans cannot possibly know what we found at the cabin, but they are tracking us this moment, I am afraid. Without the letter, they stumble in darkness. But not for long." He bent toward Kozlov, who tensed even more. "You must be quick," Andreyev ordered. "And this time, Evgeny, you cannot fail."

Kozlov returned the letter to the box and slammed the lid shut. "My people are in place," he responded tersely. He barely looked at Andreyev as he pulled a file from his briefcase

and spread its contents on the table—maps, field reports, dossiers, and photos. One photo, in particular, drew Andreyev’s eye.

“Miss Bower?” he asked with a trace of admiration.

“Taken outside the White House last night.”

Andreyev studied the young woman wrapped in velvet, her golden hair swept over one shoulder. “A pity.” He tossed the photo back on the table. “You know what to do.”

# Chapter 4

Liesl arrived early at Juilliard Friday morning, determined to break free of her brooding. Before going in, she sat on a bench in the school's plaza and sipped the last of her coffee. It was an unusually clear autumn day, and the city seemed to cheer the Atlantic's temporary victory over pollution. The sea had swept the air with its pure, sweet breath, reminding Manhattan that it was, indeed, an island. Liesl tilted her head to drink in the airy elixir. Now invigorated by the rush of oxygen, the caffeine, and the growing swell of students scurrying across the plaza, she fairly bounded into the school and up the steps to her first class.

Later that day, she joined a few other teachers leaving the school for a nearby coffee house. As they crossed the plaza, she tugged on a light-weight jacket, pulling her long, honey-gold hair free of the collar with one hand while gesturing animatedly with the other. She was telling a funny story about a near-sighted tuba player in a marching band, her face aglow with the camaraderie of the moment, when she noticed a woman standing directly in her path. Liesl paused in her story long enough to side-step the woman, only glancing at her face as she passed. But a glance was all it took.

Liesl stopped and turned around slowly. Her eyes locked on Ava Mullins, and the last twelve years—that porous cushion between her and Devoe's murder, the one so easily dislodged—completely vanished.

As the woman moved toward her, Liesl turned to the others and fretfully excused herself. "I . . . I'm sorry," she told them, trying to calm her voice. "I'll have to catch up with you."

As they moved away, Liesl turned back and glared at the woman, now only a few feet from her. "What do you want?" Liesl demanded, unable to conceal her alarm.

"Don't be afraid of me," Ava said.

Liesl felt as though she were frozen in place, though her pulse hammered wildly.

Ava waved an arm toward the whole of Lincoln Center. "You're only 35, and look where you are," she said in a tone of triumph. "At the top of your world, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

She seemed to wait for Liesl to respond. When no response came, Ava said, "I've come here to help you."

Liesl studied the older woman, guessing she must be mid-fifties by now. Her body was trimmer, fitter than Liesl remembered it. But the woman's face was hard and lined, her short hair streaked with dingy gray. "How did you know where I was?" Liesl asked bitterly.

The woman moved a little closer and in a near-whisper said, "It's what we do. You know that."

Liesl squeezed her eyes shut. *Why won't they leave me alone?*

"Will you walk with me, Liesl? Somewhere that's, uh—"

"Safe?" Liesl blurted.

"I think 'private' is a better word."

Liesl swallowed hard. "Aren't you afraid to be seen with the traitor's accomplice?"

"You know I don't think that. I never did."

Liesl's face suddenly lost its sharp edge and her lips trembled.

"Come with me, Liesl. I just want to know how you are."

As they left the school, Liesl caught Ava scanning their surroundings. “Look hard, Ava. Make sure there are no boogeymen in the shadows.” Liesl shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans and walked faster, forcing Ava to try to match Liesl’s longer stride.

A block off Broadway, Ava steered Liesl inside a small café that was almost empty at this mid-afternoon hour. They settled at a table in a back corner. Liesl watched Ava as she ordered coffee for them, even though Liesl had said she wanted none. She remembered the last time she saw Ava Mullins. It had been in the back of a paneled van near the Harvard music school, with two other CIA agents recording the conversation. No, Liesl recalled more vividly, it had been a relentless interrogation.

Liesl looked sharply at her. “You didn’t bring me in here to talk about my career. Someone at the White House told you about the man I saw there, and that maybe I was followed. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

The waiter brought coffee. Ava stirred milk into hers and took a sip. Liesl didn’t touch hers. “I’m waiting,” she said flatly.

Ava put down the cup. “The call came from Langley.” She paused to take another sip.

*That’s right, Ava. Stall. Think of the right thing to say.*

“The driver wasn’t certain your limo was followed,” Ava reported. “But Ben Hafner thought it suspect enough to report it immediately—even before taking you to his home.”

“Oh, you know that, too. So what color nightgown did I wear to bed that night?” Liesl ripped open a package of sweetener and dumped it into her coffee, stirred it loudly, then plopped the spoon onto the table. The coffee sat untouched.

“We don’t have time for your contempt, Liesl, even though you probably have good reason to unload it on me. We were hard on you, I admit. But I’m hoping to put that behind us to deal with more important things.” She paused. “Now, I must repeat a question I asked you long ago. Did Dr. Devoe ever entrust any special sheet music to you?”

Liesl’s eyes widened. “Reams of it!” A smirk curled about her mouth. “It’s what *we* do, remember? You were once one of us.” Liesl felt like she was spinning out of control, ashamed of her behavior but unable to stop it.

Ava shifted in her seat, her eyes darting quickly about the restaurant, which remained mostly empty. “I’d like to explain something to you,” she said, turning to face Liesl, who noted the woman’s usual no-nonsense demeanor was still intact. “Please try to understand. And keep your voice down.” Ava looked once again about the café, then at Liesl. “I spent twenty years teaching music at Harvard. For seventeen of those years, that was all I did, that and raise my son in peace after a disastrous marriage. But one day, I was asked to give more. To do things that were extremely uncomfortable for me.” Ava looked down at her coffee, placed her hand over the top of the cup and let it warm her.

Liesl listened quietly.

“I was asked to pry into the life of a fellow teacher, as you already know. To betray a friend whom I discovered was an enemy. I had been too immersed in my own world to understand that there were some in this country who, for some warped ideology or more money in their bank account, would sacrifice the rest of us. And then I understood that sometimes, even someone like me can stop someone like that.”

Liesl raised one eyebrow. “Are you suggesting I become a spy like you?”

“Of course not. I’m suggesting that you try to understand what people like me sometimes have to do to protect people like you.”

Finished with this conversation, Liesl grabbed her shoulder bag and stood up to leave, when Ava said, “Who do you think asked for you to play at the White House on Tuesday?”

Liesl looked down at her. “My agent booked it,” she snapped.

“What your agent doesn’t know is that the Russian ambassador *insisted* that you appear.”

Liesl didn’t take another step.

“Didn’t you think it odd that you were asked to play for the Russians? And with such short notice?”

“I studied in Moscow. I play the Russian masters. Everyone knows that.”

“What everyone doesn’t know is that just one week ago, after it was reported where Eugenia Devoe had been living all these years, her little cabin in the woods was torn apart by someone looking for something. Someone who got there before we did.”

Liesl blanched, the news hitting hard. She hated to think how tormented Mrs. Devoe must have been the last years of her life. But Liesl failed to see the connection Ava was trying to make. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Maybe nothing at all. But we can’t be sure. That’s why I’m here.”

“To do what?”

“To stand by and make sure you’re all right.”

“Or to see what kind of information you might get out of me . . . again. Well, too bad. I don’t know anything more than I did twelve years ago. But I would like to know what *you* were looking for in Mrs. Devoe’s house.”

“Sit down, Liesl.”

In almost painful submission, Liesl lowered herself to the edge of the chair.

“All you know of Schell Devoe’s link to Russian intelligence is what we told you after his death,” Ava began. “You probably don’t realize that this man you trusted, whom all of us on the faculty admired, could have been executed by our government for all his years of smuggling State Department files to Russia.

“And why did he do it?” Ava continued, not waiting for any response. “It began innocently enough. His love for everything Russian became such a blind obsession, he eventually disconnected from the rest of us. A simple request from someone he admired and trusted in Russia led to Devoe’s first smuggling of secret documents supplied him by the State Department spy. Whatever stabs of conscience Devoe might have suffered were soothed by the huge payments he received from Moscow.”

“How did you know all that?”

“When I . . . when *we* caught him, he talked a lot. I think he was ready to. And then he told us something so incredible, we turned him and made him work for us, to go after something critical for us to know.”

“What?”

Ava smiled and shook her head. “You know I can’t tell you that. But we knew he’d just uncovered the information when he was killed.” She looked intently at Liesl. “If it’s true you were followed and there is any connection to Evgeny Kozlov’s presence in the U.S., then it’s possible the Russians think you have knowledge of that information.”

Ava slid a few bills from her wallet and left them on the table. Then she reached back into her purse and handed several business-type cards to Liesl. They were all alike. “Put one by your bed, one in your purse, and one in your car. Call me at that number any time day or night.”

Liesl held up a hand and refused the cards. “I don’t need them. I don’t have any secret information for anybody. I’m not a spy!”

Watching intently as more patrons entered the café, Ava said, “Let’s go. I’ll walk you back to the school.”

But outside the restaurant, Liesl balked. “I don’t want you to go with me. I want you to leave me alone.”

The cards still in her hand, Ava reached over and dropped them into Liesl’s bag. “If anything strikes you as odd, call me. It might be an encounter with someone you don’t know, a message, maybe something out of place. It might be nothing at all, but let me make that judgment.”

As Liesl started down the sidewalk, Ava called to her. “And Liesl, he loved you like a daughter.”

# Chapter 5

Liesl hurried blindly away from Ava Mullins and her parting words, but she couldn't distance herself quickly enough. The words found their mark and she swatted them from her mind as if they were stinging insects. A curse. *I am no one's daughter.*

As the faces streamed past her on Broadway, no eyes met hers. None were welcome, none trusted. That's the way it should be, she'd told herself since she was ten years old, hiding in the bell tower of St. Philip's Church and wondering why God called himself a father when the world was so full of bad ones.

*Don't trust Ava Mullins, either,* she warned herself.

As she neared Juilliard, Liesl glanced at her watch. The next class she was to teach wouldn't start for a couple of hours. She looked east toward Central Park and took off like a homing pigeon. She could almost smell the hay-like warmth of the Sheep Meadow as it lazed beneath a generous sun. Even a half hour of rest there would be worth the walk. The broad, grassy patch of urban "country" had always cheered her during her frequent stays in New York. It demanded nothing of her but her company, inviting her to unfurl her long limbs and stretch like a contented cat on a sunny sill.

As she cleared the tree line bordering the meadow, a sudden wind hurled a blast of cold into her face, making her catch her breath and drawing her to a halt. Something about it made her think of Max and that prankish trek across Moscow. She longed for the carefree innocence of even that short time, just a couple of music students on fellowship at the Moscow Conservatory, cutting class for a winter's romp through town. She so yearned to relive it that when she now stepped into the light of the meadow, her mind saw it blanketed in Russian snow. In cinematic recall, she saw Max scramble up the fire escape to the snowy rooftop of that small shop, snatching his violin from its case as he climbed. She watched him treacherously assume the theatrical stance of the lone Fiddler on the Roof, then gleefully stroke the opening notes of that iconic musical.

Now, as she lowered herself to the brown, withered grass of the meadow, Liesl remembered more of that long-ago day. At first, Max's impetuous act had been just a giddy, boyish stunt, something to make Liesl laugh and show off his athletic prowess. But the more Max played from his high perch and the more people gathered to stare, the more intense his violin. There he was, an Israeli, a transplanted Russian Jew commanding a rooftop in the heart of Moscow, his violin wailing and moaning not from a Broadway score, but from somewhere deep inside him.

Liesl smiled at the memory as she half reclined against the gentle slope, tilting her face to a sun that would soon dip behind the skyline. For now, though, it wrapped her in its warmth, and she was glad for the others who shared in it. Some tossed Frisbees to each other, couples huddled closely against the chill, a dog ran barking after its owner jogging the periphery of the field. Nearby, a man in a gray parka, its hood drawn snugly against his head, stretched out on his stomach with a book and a tall coffee. Children ran in orbits around their mothers, and a pair of old men played chess on a park bench, snatches of their conversation reaching Liesl in a foreign tone. A Baltic tongue, she guessed.

*Max would know,* she thought. Then she wondered why thoughts of him came tumbling back. But of course, she knew. She'd just snagged a trip line that ran from Moscow to Boston where a masked killer had locked eyes on her just seconds before he pumped three bullets into the man who, reportedly, loved her like a daughter.