

RED RETURNING ³

Deeper
Than
Red

A NOVEL

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 Kregel
Publications

Deeper Than Red: A Novel

© 2014 by Sue Duffy

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc.,
2450 Oak Industrial Drive NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505.

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ISBN: 978-0-8254-4267-4

Printed in the United States of America
14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 / 5 4 3 2 1

To my grandchildren, the storytellers to come

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the following for their enormous help in crafting the Red Returning trilogy . . .

To concert pianist Marina Lomazov—on whom the character of Liesl Bower was loosely based—for the exquisiteness of her music and her willingness to guide me in selections featured in this trilogy.

To my son, BM1 Brian M. Duffy of the U.S. Coast Guard, for his hands-on knowledge of weaponry, boarding procedures, and Homeland Security protocol.

To my husband, Mike Duffy, for his expertise in boats and navigation.

To my brother, Scott Railey, a former charter captain, for his knowledge of fishing the Florida Keys.

To the works of authors Josh McDowell, Don Stewart, and Texe Marrs for their coverage of cults and the occult in such books as *The Deceivers* and *New Age Cults & Religions*. Other research materials included books and brochures gathered on-site at the medium colony on which Anhinga Bay Spiritualist Camp was based. Yes, I went inside their bookstore where Mr. Fremont would have worked. Yes, I dared to wear a cross around my neck. And yes, what happened to Tally in this story happened to me.

To the global intelligence gatherers and analysts at Stratfor, to which I subscribe because they know things the rest of us don't.

To my family who allowed me such long stretches of isolation to complete this and all my novels. I love you more.

Chapter 1

Moments after the Russian president's motorcade pulled away from the Kremlin, one of the phones in Evgeny Kozlov's bag vibrated. He turned from the window overlooking a dingy Moscow street and glared at the canvas appendage to a life on the run, always ready for the grab and escape.

With one last visual sweep of the street, he crossed to the unmade bed and retrieved the phone. Noting the familiar code that flashed onto the screen, he answered with only a clipped "Yes."

"Something is not right," Viktor Petrov alerted. "President Gorev just left for his village near the Volga to meet his wife and children for the weekend. He left with his usual security detail in three cars, except for the drivers. At the last minute, they were all replaced."

Evgeny went still. "Replaced with whom?"

"New recruits. I don't know their names. Part of their training, I was told." Viktor had worked for the Federal Security Service, a Russian intelligence network, since its former days as the Soviet KGB.

Evgeny could hear his old friend begin to wheeze and the discord of traffic in the background. "Where are you?"

"Near the office." That would be Lubyanka Square across town, now pulsing with rush hour traffic that Thursday afternoon.

Evgeny grimaced. Surely Viktor was out of range of his agency's hawk-eyed surveillance systems, always monitoring their own. Surely time hadn't dulled the old agent's serrated wits. "Are you safe?" Evgeny asked, hearing a horn bleat somewhere on the square.

"More than you. Are you in the same place?"

Evgeny glanced around the decomposing room in what the Americans would have called a flophouse. But no one searched for him there. Not this moment. "I will leave immediately."

"Evgeny, Gorev is a good man. Ineffective, but honest."

"Honest always loses." With his free hand, Evgeny shoved clothes and toiletries into another bag on the bed. "I will signal you from the road. Hurry back to your office."

He dropped the phone into his jacket pocket before closing the door behind him and picking his way down a stair littered with refuse and one drunken human form crumpled into a corner of the landing. Evgeny had known far better than this in his life, at least in material matters, though the old days of ready cash and heady power had also carried the stench of betrayal to everything he'd once known to be good and just. The penniless orphan who'd escaped his lot and landed solidly within the fraternal clutch of the Cold War KGB wouldn't have dared question its integrity or authority. His survival had depended on blind devotion and unwavering obedience . . . until his great unraveling in the realm of Liesl Bower.

He paid his bill to the woman at the front desk and hesitated at the door before entering the street. Through the glass, it seemed a normal summer afternoon in the sluggish bowels of the city. He looked back at the cashier. Her black-lined eyes were still fixed on the lurid magazine photos she'd barely turned from to take Evgeny's money. He was glad to see they weren't the frightened, darting eyes of one who'd just been instructed to act normal until the man in room 14 had exited the door, then duck.

He stepped confidently from the hotel and hurried to the faded-blue Fiat parked around the corner, knowing he was already fifteen minutes behind the motorcade. He was glad for the sight of the boxy little car wedged between two sanitation trucks. The money he'd deposited in

various banks while still a well-compensated KGB agent was dwindling rapidly. Viktor had supplied the little car and new plates.

Evgeny wound his way toward one of the ring roads skirting the Kremlin. Between buildings he glimpsed the towers in the great wall and the golden domes of cathedrals enclosed by it. He sensed the heartbeat of his motherland, feeling its erratic pulse. But he feared the things underfoot in the back rooms of power, things that threatened the country he loved, though it had never loved him back.

Leaving the ring artery, Evgeny turned onto a freeway leading northwest out of the city, his accelerator foot slammed to the floor.



President Dimitri Gorev had long preferred retreating to his modest family farm rather than the stately dachas provided him and Russian presidents before him. He'd always been a man of the soil whose deepest regret had been his inability to deliver a better life to those who'd toiled the earth through Soviet oppression and into the hope of a new day, which never seemed to dawn for them.

He was a man of the common people, despite the luxurious, and heavily armored, Mercedes sedan in which he now rode. His usual complement of security agents was with him on this routine weekend transport—except his customary driver, who'd been pulled that morning. So, too, had the drivers in the other two cars. Gorev chose not to concern himself with the abrupt switch after his security chief assured him it was a necessary training exercise for the young men.

He'd survived one assassination plot, thanks to a young American pianist. Liesl Bower had discovered the code that exposed the coup conspiracy of Gorev's countrymen Vadim Fedorovsky and Pavel Andreyev. Both had been executed.

That had left one—Ivan Volynski, the mastermind of the conspiracy, who would have launched a wave of terrorist strikes against the United States . . . if he hadn't been incinerated over the East River in New York six months ago. That had created something of an implosion in the shadow

world of the Kremlin, where Gorev knew Ivan's people still bred. The man's death had not ended those back-corridor murmurings of subversion that still threatened the present administration. After the foiled assassination plot, Gorev had purged the ranks as best he could. He'd held exhaustive interrogations and surveillances that had employed old Soviet KGB tactics. In the end, he'd rooted out only a handful of insurgents, and the taunts to him persisted, one coming that very morning in his own village, which was normally a stronghold for him. Someone had displayed a public notice referring to "the late Dimitri Gorev."

Was he reading too much into the threats? Imagining others? Was it not true that his own prime minister had averted his eyes from Gorev too many times? That Arkady Glinka had gradually withdrawn from all but required interaction with his president?

There was no doubt that something was still festering in the underground of his government. It was time to draw a sword and attack. But first, this brief respite in the village of his birth. He leaned back against the seat and watched regiments of birch trees parade by. Just a few more miles and his gentle wife would wrap him in her arms. His children would run barefoot through the yards to greet him, and the Kremlin would fade away, for a while.

He watched the lay of the land begin its descent to the river ahead, a lethargic tributary of the Volga where Gorev had fished as a child. He turned to the guard seated beside him. He was a middle-aged man employed by the Federal Security Service and recently assigned to the president's personal detail.

"Yuri, where did you grow up?" Gorev asked.

"In Moscow, sir." The man glanced past Gorev at the view through the window. "I am afraid I have never known the country life, though I intend to when I retire in a few years. Then I can fish every day."

Gorev waved a hand toward the river. "I will show you where I caught my first fish. Just ahead, the road will bend sharply to the south to follow the riverbank. Then it will wind through the woods, a remote stretch of road with fish pools along the way."

Now past the turn, Gorev leaned forward in his seat to catch the first

spark of sunlight off the water. Just then, the driver suddenly stomped on the brake and sent the unbelted Gorev lurching forward, impacting the back of the seat before him. Its occupant, one of Gorev's most trusted aides, emitted a painful cry as his head slammed into the dash. Instantly righting from his own fall, Yuri grabbed his gun from the holster beneath his coat.

Gorev turned on the driver. "What are you doing?" he demanded angrily. But the young man didn't answer. Instead, he flung open his door while simultaneously lowering the bulletproof windows. Gorev spun in his seat toward the tail car and saw its driver also leap from the vehicle.

Feeling the rush of air from the now-open windows, Gorev turned back to see his driver running hard toward the tree line. From those same trees emerged a swarm of gunmen bearing down on the motorcade, their weapons raised.

"No!" Gorev shrieked as more gunmen advanced from the opposite side of the road. Before Yuri could open fire, the president grabbed the gun from the man's hand and squeezed off only one round. It hit the fleeing driver in the back and dropped him just short of the trees. It was judgment, a death sentence carried out by a man just seconds from his own execution.