

**A VISIT FROM  
GRANDFATHER FROST**

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UNEXPECTED PATHS

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*For Ollie, Brandon, and Emi, who show me the joy of the  
holidays.*



## A VISIT FROM GRANDFATHER FROST

*Bukharin-Fisher Residence*  
*Geneva, Switzerland*  
*January 6, 2018*

**T**he turning of a doorknob from a room down the hall pulled Mai Fisher from much-desired sleep. Being head of a global espionage organization meant long days and occasional sleepless nights, but she'd promised her family this first Christmas in their new country, she'd be home.

The patter of small feet in the hallway and down the stairs brought her fully awake. She sighed. Ivan was up again. Since the Christmas tree had gone up a week ago, he'd gotten up in the middle of the night, every night, to go wait, he explained, for "*Ded Moroz*."

Grandfather Frost. The Russian version of Santa Claus.

She muffled her groan in her pillow. She'd set the alarm for 0400 so she and Alexei could perpetuate the myth of not only *Ded Moroz* but Santa Claus by putting presents beneath the tree. At just after two in the morning, Ivan might stay

awake, and there'd be no need for the pretense. She and Alexei had always had their differences, and this was a new one. She didn't want to lie to the child about Christmas, and Alexei wanted to continue what the child's real grandmother had started. Mai's reticence, he'd decided, was because she hadn't accepted the boy as their son.



### *A WEEK EARLIER*

As he settled onto his side of the bed, Alexei Bukharin said, "Have you made arrangements to be home for Orthodox Christmas?"

"Yes. Quigg and I are going to swap. I'll be on site tomorrow, regular Christmas Day, and he'll be there for Orthodox Christmas."

Mai Fisher burrowed under her covers and closed her eyes.

"I confess," Alexei said, "I'm excited to see Ivan's face on Christmas Day. All he can talk about is being good so Grandfather Frost will bring him presents."

"He's always good," Mai murmured, "without a myth inducing it."

"It's not a myth to children."

"No, it's an enormous lie adults tell children to elicit a few hours of good behavior. I hate lying to him."

"It's a harmless lie that gives him joy."

Mai sighed. She wasn't going to get to sleep after all. She turned over until she faced Alexei. "I hated all the lying we did to Natalia," she said, "for years and years until she figured it out and pushed back."

"That was different. Hiding the reality of our being spies was a safety and security concern. It's not the same as

allowing a child who lost his only relative six months ago to continue to believe in Grandfather Frost.”

“Either Alex Jr. or Barrett E. will likely spill the beans anyway,” Mai said, of Natalia’s twin sons. “They informed me yesterday there wasn’t a Santa Claus because it was a physical impossibility for him to go to every house in the world in twenty-four hours. A wonderful piece of reasoning, but they said they wouldn’t tell Rachael M. and Ivan.”

“You didn’t tell them to go ahead, did you?”

“No, but I was tempted.”

“Mai, this is important to Ivan. Let’s not add another trauma on top of the other.”

“God, Alexei, learning there’s no Santa Claus isn’t a trauma.”

“It could be for him.” Alexei rolled onto his back, eyes on the ceiling. “This attitude of yours isn’t surprising. You consider him an unwanted distraction.”

“I do not!”

“You still won’t warm up to him.”

Mai raised up on one elbow. “Where the hell are you getting this?”

“You tolerate him, Mai. That’s the extent of your emotions toward him.”

“And you’re bloody close to sleeping in another room. Ivan is not a distraction to me. You and I were on the verge of being empty nesters again, and he came along to make us a family once more. Something we needed or we’d have easily slipped into our own separate worlds.”

She, too, flopped on her back, the gulf of the large bed between them. She hated arguing in bed. There were much more pleasant things to do there, but Alexei always seemed to bring up hot topics at bedtime, and not the hotness she found desirable.

“I hate having to pretend there’s a Santa Claus. Or a

Grandfather Frost," she murmured. "It's stuff and nonsense. Dishonest stuff and nonsense."

"He drew those pictures for you today and—"

"And I gushed over both of them, Alexei. They were adorable, and it was sweet, and I think they're precious."

Ivan had drawn his version of their holiday tree, with a tall man standing next to it. Popi, Ivan had explained. Though Alexei was tall, he wasn't as tall as the eight-foot tree, except perhaps in Ivan's six-year-old eyes. He'd drawn Mai as well, dressed all in black as she often was, and had used a bright red crayon for her hair. Between them, holding their hands, was Ivan himself. He'd labeled each one of them: *Попи* (Popi), *Мама* (that looked the same in Russian or English), and *Иван* (Ivan). The other picture was of Grandfather Frost. He looked like the usual Santa Claus only by virtue of the long, white beard, but Grandfather Frost was a resident of Siberia. He wore blue breeches and tunic, a long blue crystal-embroidered, fur-trimmed brocade coat, and a blue, fur hat with two curving horns that met above his head. He carried a staff of ice and a blue sack full of gifts.

The drawings were adorable, they were sweet, and she did think they were precious.

"You don't love him," Alexei said, after a pause long enough she'd almost fallen asleep.

She turned her back to him. "Keep this up, and I'll doubt I love you," she muttered.

The mattress shifted as he turned, too, and moved closer. "Mai, he needs to see he's loved, and he needs to see that from you."

"Alexei, you know I've never been effusive with children. It's not me to gush all over him that he's loved. He is."

"I'm not sure he knows that."

"I see what this is."

"All right. I'll bite. What is this?"

“You’re having second doubts about being a father at seventy-four—not the only one in the world, I’m sure—and you’re transferring your doubt to me.”

His sigh was warm against her neck. “Ah, I see we’ve had one too many sessions with shrinks.”

“Alexei, I’ve had the same doubts. Having Alex, Barrett, and Rachael around is one thing. We can give them back to their parents when we’re pooped. We can’t do that with Ivan.”

“Ah, ah, don’t say we’re stuck with him.”

“I was *not* going to say that.”

“There was no way I was leaving him for a Russian state orphanage.”

“We’ve already had that discussion, and I agree with your decision. He’s here. He’s our son, and we’ll give him the best life we can.”

“Including Grandfather Frost?”

“What answer will let me get some sleep tonight, Old Man?”

He spooned against her back. “You were singing a different tune about this old man last night.”

“Well, he wasn’t accusing me of not loving our child then.” She reached behind her and found something interesting. “Will that get me some sleep?”

He moved his hips away from her. “Go to sleep. We’ll save that up for another time.”



*One Week Later*

*Orthodox Christmas Eve*

MAI LISTENED for the sounds of Ivan coming back upstairs. No such luck. She turned her head to see Alexei hadn’t

stirred, or was pretending he hadn't heard. Another sigh, and she rose from bed and tip-toed downstairs in her yoga pants and long-sleeved tee-shirt. She found Ivan where she expected to find him, in the family room, sitting on the floor, staring up at the Yule tree with its twinkling white lights.

She had to admit the scene was right out of a sappy Christmas card, the child sitting there in his Christmas-themed one-piece pajamas, gazing at the tree, the soft light dancing over his features. It stirred emotions in her she thought she'd buried with each of her failed pregnancies.

Mai stood beside him, and he looked up at her and smiled. That face, so innocent and trusting. She was glad he didn't look like his father, whom Mai had bested back when she was a spy. Ivan's biological father had been a poor excuse for a human being, but Ivan looked nothing like him. Mai doubted she could have warmed to Ivan had he resembled Sanel. Ivan's dark hair and eyes, like his grandmother's, made him resemble her, if nothing else. He had a broad forehead and those killer cheekbones like Alexei's. Somehow, it seemed, he was destined to be their child.

"Mama," Ivan said. He'd called her that almost from the moment he'd seen her, and she hadn't put a stop to it. Natalia had called her Mums, but no child had ever called her Mama, until now. "Is not the tree beautiful?"

Alexei had worked on Ivan's English constantly for the past six months so Ivan could go to school after the holidays, but Ivan hadn't quite grasped the concept of contractions.

"It's indeed beautiful, but you should be in bed," Mai said. She cringed inwardly as she spoke the next words. "Grandfather Frost won't come if you're awake."

"I thought he maybe comes early, so I want to check. But I like the tree and the lights and to watch them." He looked at the tree and back up at Mai, tears now in his eyes. "I miss Baba," he said, his voice so small she had to strain to hear.

Well, shite, she thought. Though her knees and back would admonish her later, she sat on the floor beside him, and he crawled into her lap, clutching the teddy bear Alexei had given him when he'd rescued Ivan.

"Baba" was Ivan's grandmother, a former Russian spymaster whose death had precipitated that rescue. Ivan had mentioned her a great deal in the first weeks after her death, but hadn't for several months.

Leave it to the holidays to bring up things best forgotten, she thought.

"You haven't talked about Baba for a while," Mai said, smoothing his soft hair. "Does Christmas make you think of her?" He nodded, his head bobbing beneath her chin.

"We would have tree. Not as big as this, and it was all pink with silver balls and colored lights," he said.

Gad, Mai thought. She hadn't believed Valeriya Alekseevna to be tacky, but sometimes tacky appealed to a child.

"She would tell me Christmas story," Ivan murmured. He looked up at her again. "Can you tell Christmas story?"

"What story?" Mai asked. Please, she thought, don't let it be the Bethlehem-Jesus-in-a-manger story.

"The one about *babushka*."

His *babushka*? Oh, wait, there was that story Alexei would tell Natalia at Christmas.

"Do you mean the story about Babushka and the three wise men?" Mai said.

Ivan nodded.

Bloody hell, she hadn't heard that story in years, not since Natalia was twelve or so. And, in fact, it wasn't even a Russian story. Alexei had found it somewhere and told it to Natalia the first Christmas after she'd come to live with them. He'd decided even though an American had written it, it was a very Russian story.

"I'll try to remember it," Mai said, "but you may have to help me."

He gazed at her, again with the face of innocence, love shining in his eyes. She was way too old to be this child's mother. Alexei lamented the same thing about being his father. How could they be a family long enough for Ivan to become a man?

"Let's see if I can remember how it goes," Mai said. "In a small Russian village lived a woman named Babushka. She liked to keep her house tidy and clean, always sweeping, dusting, polishing. People in the village thought she had the most beautiful house and garden."

"And her cooking was best," Ivan said. "Like Popi's."

"Yes, his cooking is wonderful, isn't it? One night all the villagers were talking about a new star that had appeared in the sky, but she was too busy with her cleaning to look. She said, 'Such a fuss about star. There are uncountable stars. What's one more?'"

Mai used a thick Russian accent for Babushka, and Ivan giggled.

Mai continued, "The villagers tried to get her to look but she said, 'I'm behind in my work, so behind I'll have to work all night,' and she set to cleaning her house. She could hear the sounds of celebration about the star, but she ignored them and kept up her cleaning until it was almost dawn."

"Then, three men did loud knocking at door," Ivan said.

"Not simply three men but three kings, from faraway countries. I think Babushka was annoyed they had interrupted her cleaning," Mai said, "but she was polite when she answered the door. What did they say to her?"

"Villagers say your house is best in village," said Ivan, "and we will stay here."

Mai had to stifle her laughter at the serious, demanding tone Ivan had taken. "Babushka couldn't understand why

they wanted to stay at her house, but the village had a reputation to uphold.”

“What is re-put-a-shun?” Ivan asked.

“The village always welcomed travelers passing through, gave them food, places to stay,” Mai said, improvising. “It was known all over the world as a safe place for travelers, even when they were strangers. So, Babushka couldn’t hurt the village’s reputation. She let the men inside. The kings were amazed at Babushka’s beautiful house, with all the pies and breads she had made. She had the kings sit at her table, and she served them all her best foods. ‘Have you come a long way?’ she asked them.”

“And one king said, ‘We have come from far away.’ Oh, his name was Caspar. He was Caspar the king, not Casper, ghost who is friendly.”

Again, Mai bit back her laugh. He was so serious in making sure she understood that. “That’s right. And the one named Melchior said, ‘We are following the new star.’ That new star again, Babushka thought. Why pay so much attention to that when there is work to do? ‘Where will the new star lead you?’ she asked. ‘We don’t know,’ they said, ‘but we believe it leads to a newborn king.’”

“I think they meant baby Jesus.”

Now they were moving into uncomfortable territory, but having a debate about theism with a six-year-old was definitely not kosher. No pun intended, Mai thought.

“Indeed they did,” she said, “and they asked Babushka if she’d like to come with them and bring the baby king a gift like they were.”

“What presents were they bringing?” Ivan asked.

He’d probably understand gold, but not frankincense and myrrh. “Gold, rare spices, and wonderful perfumes.”

“Not toys?”

“This was a long time ago, and there were few toys.

However, Babushka did have some toys. Long ago, she'd had a son, but he'd died. She'd kept all his toys in a cupboard. Thinking of her son made her sad. Like you when you thought of your Baba. But Babushka went back to her cleaning, of course. As she worked, the third king, Balthasar, said, 'What we hear of this new king is that he is the king for all. I'm sure he would welcome you, and I saw the toys you have in the cabinet. What a wonderful present they would be. When the star reappears tonight, come with us.' Babushka wasn't sure. The toys were all she had left of her son, and sometime she looked at them to make sure she remembered him. She promised the kings she'd think about it."

Ivan sighed and said, "I had picture of Baba when she was young and pretty. Before she was sick. I could not bring it with me." Tears leaked from his sad eyes, and Mai used her sleeve to dry them.

"Do you want me to stop the story?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I want to hear it," he said.

"All right. Well, Babushka worked all day to straighten her house while the kings slept, and she wondered and wondered if she should go with them. She worried she didn't have decent clothes to wear for a new king. She worried no one would take care of her house while she was gone. She worried so much, she was surprised when it was night again. She told the kings she'd follow in a day and after she found a gift. They were disappointed, but they wished her well and left. Babushka went to the cupboard with all her son's toys. They'd been in there a long time and were dusty and dirty. Babushka couldn't give them to the new king like this, so she cleaned and cleaned each toy until they were bright and shiny again. However, she was so tired she fell asleep, and when she woke she realized the kings were far ahead of her. She put on her best cloak, put the toys in a basket, and went after the kings."

“Did she find them?” Ivan asked.

“She didn’t, but she went from village to village, always asking about them. Finally, she reached a big city with a palace, and she asked a guard if he’d seen the three kings and if he knew about the new baby king they’d come to see. Babushka was sad to learn not only had the kings left a few days before to return to their countries, but the new baby-king had as well. His birth upset the ruler of the city, and the baby-king had to leave.”

“Like I had to leave Russia?”

“Not exactly. No one was upset by your birth, but because your Baba was sick, she arranged for you to come live with us.”

Ivan nodded again. “Are you glad I come to live with you?”

“Very glad,” Mai said. “You see, Babushka was upset she didn’t get to see the baby king, and the story says she wanders from village to village with her basket of toys, looking for him still, that she loved him so much she wanted to find him, even if it took forever. But you’re right here, and Popi and I don’t have to look any further than your room.”

The sigh he gave was one of contentment, followed by a long yawn, and Mai held him until he was asleep. She heard a whisper of movement from behind her and looked over her shoulder. Alexei came from the darkness into the room.

“You got it mostly right,” he murmured, with a smile.

“Good. I made most of it up.”

“He liked it. That’s all that matters.”

“Can you take him back up to bed? I have to make a phone call.”

“Now? I thought you left your deputy in charge so you could spend time with your family.”

Honestly, sometimes she wondered how they’d managed to stay together forty years.

“I did. Just a small matter. A check-in. No more than five minutes,” she said.

He bent down and picked up the boy, cradling him in his arms. “Five minutes. No more.” He winked at her. “I’ll be waiting.”

When she was sure Alexei was upstairs, Mai let herself into her secure home office, made a call, gave explicit instructions, hung up, and went back to bed.



*Bukharin-Fisher Residence*  
*Orthodox Christmas Day*

ALEXEI DECIDED if his wife looked at her work phone one more time, he was going to take it from her. He smiled. The fact she’d put up a fight was a tad arousing.

His immediate family was around him, and he felt a certain contentment, a fullness of heart he’d seldom had in his work. His granddaughter Natalia and her husband, Alex, sorted the prodigious amount of toys each of their children had received. The twins, Alex Jr. and Barrett E. had claimed the kitchen counter to assemble some enormous Lego kit, but at least they were quiet under their seventeen-year-old uncle Sergei’s supervision. Alexei’s son Peter and Peter’s wife Bridget sat off by themselves talking in quiet tones. Alexei hadn’t seen his son this happy in a long time. Ivan and Rachael M. were using the hallway as a track for the three-wheeled scooters they’d both gotten from Grandfather Frost.

And Mai checked her phone again. An admonition on his lips, Alexei stopped when he saw her expression, one of relief, tinged with happiness.

What was that, he wondered. An op she was worried about? An agent out of touch who was found?

He was about to ask her when Natalia reminded him it was time to put out the Christmas Day meal: roast pork and a roast goose, meat dumplings, vegetable salads, several different fruit pies, and the kozulka, Christmas cookies in the shape of a goat, deer, or sheep. Ivan had picked the deer, “like Rudolf with red nose,” he’d said. Alexei had made certain each one had a dot of red frosting for a nose.

In the midst of arranging the buffet and setting the table, the doorbell rang, and Alexei frowned. If that was someone from Mai’s office...

“I’ll get it,” Mai said and rushed for the front door.

Alexei’s scowl deepened.

“What?” Natalia said to him. “You’re all frowny.”

“Today was supposed to be family only. No work,” he said.

“Ease up, Pops. You know someone wouldn’t have come from the office until it was earth-shattering.”

“Exactly what I’m afraid of.”

Mai wasn’t at the door long. She returned to the family room, where Rachael M and Ivan had put the scooters aside to read through the books they’d received. Rachael M helped Ivan with his pronunciation of some of the words.

“Who was at the door?” Alexei said. His tone must have betrayed his displeasure because Mai looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Ivan?” she said. “That was an assistant from Grandfather Frost. He forgot to leave one of your presents.” Mai held a small package wrapped in shiny red paper and garnished with a gold ribbon.

“Another present for me?” Ivan asked and came to her.

Mai gave it to him, and he carefully tore the paper away. Rachael M came to look over his shoulder. He pried open the box and gave a squeal, not of fear or anger or disappointment but of such utter delight it rendered Alexei motionless.

Ivan babbled excitedly in Russian and ran to Alexei. “Look, Popi, look! It is Baba! A picture of Baba!”

Alexei looked at what the boy held in his hands. A simple wooden frame holding what had to have been a surveillance photo of Alekseevna taken a few years ago, but it was a face-on shot, candid, as if she were unaware of the scrutiny. Ivan placed kiss after kiss on the glass.

But how... Oh. The overnight phone call. Mai had had someone from The Directorate pull up a photo of former FSB Director Valeriya Alekseevna from a dossier somewhere, had it printed, had it framed, had it wrapped, and had it brought here.

Alexei looked at Mai, the woman he'd loved for a long time. Her smile was secretive, as befitted who she was, and when she looked at Ivan in his joy, it was with love.

The End

December 24 - 25, 2017  
Staunton, Virginia

Happy Holidays from my house to yours!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

P. A. Duncan is a retired bureaucrat but one with an overactive imagination—at least that's what everyone has told her since she first started making up stories in elementary school, prompted by her weekly list of spelling words. A commercial pilot and former FAA safety official, she lives and writes in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. A graduate of Madison College (now James Madison University), she has degrees in history and political science. Her love of politics continues to this day.

She is an officer on the Board of Governors of the Virginia Writers Club, one of the oldest writer organizations in the country.

Her fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies. When not writing, editing, reading, reviewing books, singing in a UU choir, watching the Yankees, or cheering on Dale Earnhardt, Jr., she delights in spoiling her grandchildren.

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