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An Agent of Deceit

Written by Chris Morgan Jones

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CHRIS MORGAN JONES

AN AGENT OF DECEIT

PAN BOOKS



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For Suzy

1999

High in the air Webster watches the unbroken desert flow past, a deep copper red in the dawn, the sand ridged like waves rolling down towards the south. Next to him Inessa lies curled up, sleeping through the jolts of turbulence and the drunken songs of the Russian engineers across the aisle.

Below, the sand gives way to grass on the vast Kazakh plain and in the distance, if he presses his face to the window, he can see the Altai mountains rising and stretching east into China. He glances across at Inessa; she's small enough to be comfortable in her rigid seat, her knees pulled up against her chest like a child. It's rare to see her be still, rare for her to be silent.

She opens her eyes for a moment, moves a lock of black hair off her forehead and goes back to sleep. Webster tries to rearrange his aching legs against the seat in front. Five hours overnight from Moscow. He wouldn't suffer this for anyone else.

Oskemen is Kazakh now but shows its Russian past: wide highways lined with thickly planted poplars, tall Soviet blocks on scrappy ground, grand imperial buildings and gold-domed churches. The city is hot under the hazy sun and the wind blows powerfully from the plain, bending trees into the road.

The plant is sixty miles away, across a low mountain range. As Webster drives, Inessa rails against its owners, a group of

Russians who pilfer from their workers, steal from the government and seem happy for everything they own to slowly die. He has heard this before, has read her articles, but listens again willingly.

Coming down from the mountains on a twisting road they see a band of heavy grey cloud hanging in the broad valley where the plant stands. The grass at the side of the road is yellow and sparse; young trees, recently planted along the verge, sag limply against their supports; the fields all around lie untilled. The air, fresher in the mountains, has become warm and thick. A mile or two ahead, over the meagre, low town, black smoke leaks from a dozen pairs of chimneys.

The town is a barracks for the plant. Twenty thousand people live in the uniform apartment blocks, buy food at the two supermarkets, learn at the three schools. There is a street of shops, a police station, a dusty park.

At the hospital they talk to doctors who treat brittle bones and pneumonia, to children who never smile and hide their teeth as they talk, to workers in their thirties who have the bodies of old men. No crops grow in the valley. Over decades waste has been dumped in an unlined pit and chemicals have seeped unchecked into the water table. The new owners arrived five years before and nothing has been done.

No one from the company will talk to them and they stand for a while in the heat, arguing to no purpose with a guard sitting in his hut by the gates. Behind him the plant seems to bully the town. Twelve immense, blockish halls hold the furnaces, and from each one chimneys rise a hundred feet in red and white stripes. Webster takes photographs, trying to capture its immensity; it would take a quarter of an hour to walk to the compound's furthest point. Two police officers arrive, sweating in their peaked caps and military uniforms, and move them on. Inessa resists but it's clear they should go. They have enough.

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The sun is low in the sky, setting early behind the black ridge of mountains, and it's dark by the time they reach Oskemen. At dinner Inessa is more furious than he has ever seen her. She makes him promise that they will fight this injustice, the betrayal of these people.

Webster sleeps restlessly in the hotel's hard, clean bed. An hour before dawn, half-conscious, he hears a key turning in the lock and as he pulls back his covers the door opens, the fluorescent light flickering on. Two policemen in uniform walk into the room, pushing aside a member of the hotel staff. One stands over Webster so that his cap blocks out the light and tells him in calm, even Russian to stay in bed; the other searches the room, opening drawers, emptying a bag onto the floor. Webster, squinting, tries to stand up, but the first policeman stops him. His colleague tears the film from Webster's camera in three long pulls and starts leafing through his notes.

Webster makes a grab for his book but is pushed backwards onto the bed. As the policemen shut the door behind them they tell him to leave the country on the first flight out.

His camera sits on the chest of drawers, its hinged back open, and scattered over the thin hotel carpet lie yesterday's clothes.

He runs to the floor above, bounding up the tiled steps three at a time in his bare feet. He wants to share his rage. Inessa's door is open, and with a bolt of fear in his chest he looks inside. She's gone.

The night manager is in his office, sitting in an armchair watching television, the sound down low. His forehead is pinched in a frown, and when Webster asks him where the police station is he won't meet his eye.

He runs the whole way, the two bags on his back swinging

wildly, his lungs tight and his breath beginning to rasp. It is six now, and an even grey-blue light is waking the city. Cars pass but he sees no one. At the front desk, out of breath and angry, he tells an officer that he is a journalist and if they don't release his friend now he will call the British embassy and every newspaper editor he knows. The officer looks at him indifferently for a moment, goes to fetch a colleague, and they arrest him.

His cell has grey painted walls, no window, and two bare wooden boards for beds; he's lucky to have it to himself. With his head in his hands he sits under the single, bare bulb, its light finding every stain and crack in the damp concrete floor. This isn't the first time he has been in such a place, and for Inessa this is routine; but a strange fear sits in his chest and he wants to see her, to reassure her that they will soon be released. The silence is broken by occasional noise: a scream, wild singing, a metal door slamming shut. To pass the time he smokes and begins to write his story in his head.

No one comes to question him, and he wonders how long this will take. Towards the middle of the day he hears the cell doors opening in turn and readies himself for something to happen, but it's only a guard bringing food. As he pokes at his tray he hears voices shouting over each other in Kazakh, commands being yelled and heavy boots running past. The commotion doesn't stop. His door opens again and two policemen lead him away, one on each arm, refusing to answer his questions. As they step into the corridor he turns his head and sees three officers standing by the open door of a cell. One of them, his broad chest a patchwork of medals, stands back with his arms folded. There is a stretcher at his feet.

Webster wrenches an arm free and shouts Inessa's name, feeling dread in his throat. As they take hold of him again and

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march him away he rages and shouts, twisting and straining, but they drag him on, his feet stumbling on the floor. Then a shout like a crack echoes off the walls and the men holding him stop and turn. The officer with the medals beckons once. Slowly they walk Webster back down the corridor until he is level with the cell.

Inside two officers hold a prisoner to the wall, his face pressed against it, his arm twisted up behind his back. He wears a white shirt, filthy and splashed with red. On the floor lies Inessa, on her back, one knee up, gazing at the wall. Her jeans are soaked and dark, her T-shirt crimson. Her neck is taut, and streaked across it, as if drawn with a thick brush, is a single vivid line of blood.

Webster shouts and tries to break free. Strong hands hold him back.

He is handcuffed and locked, still struggling, his head full of noise, in the back of a police van. As the road climbs away from the city all he can see through the barred windows is blank sky.

After two hours they come to a stop. The engine is still running and he can hear shouting in Russian. The doors are opened, the cage unlocked, and at a crouch he shuffles out, his face screwed up against the sudden light. One of the policemen, unable to look him in the eye, unlocks his handcuffs and hands him his bag. The van turns in the dust and drives away.

Soldiers with machine guns stare at him. This is the border. He is back in Russia.

2009

CHAPTER ONE

Lock lay on his back and let the heat scour his body for places to burn. There was no wind, and against his closed eyes the sun blazed red. Now and then some lurking anxiety began to tug at him but he flicked it away: he was not in Moscow, and that was enough. For a while he felt his whole body glow amber and there was a lightness in his chest. How much better he felt here.

Around him people lay prone on loungers. A waitress walked past with soft, brisk steps on the sand. Murmurs of conversation reached him, easing him to sleep; then, loud and insistent, one side of a phone call – in Russian, of course, it would be. He caught only the odd word, but recognized the tone: commanding, expectant. He opened his eyes and wondered whether he should have another drink. For a moment he stared up into the immaculate sky, bathing in the heat, then raised himself up on an elbow and winced at the pain in his back. His wretched back.

Oksana lay next to him, perhaps a yard away, on her front, her tan fresh. Her face was turned to him but her eyes were shut and he couldn't tell if she was sleeping. He looked down at himself. His skin was pale. He had been in the sun for three days but it still looked grey.

That morning his back had woken him early and he had left Oksana sleeping while he went for a run, dressing in the bathroom in order not to wake her, his shirt tight about him

and his running shoes strange on his feet. Just before dawn Monte Carlo was cool and calm, framed by a sky lightening at the edges from the darkest blue, and Lock, heavily at first and then with a sort of arduous fluency, had jogged past the marina along a coastal path that headed away from the rising sun into the west. His back stopped hurting and he ran on, breathing ever more deeply, cursing the oily air of Moscow and rejoicing in the world emerging from the twilight. And then abruptly the path had stopped, where Monaco simply stops. His breath harsh in his throat, Lock had pulled up and bent over, his hands on his knees, and felt the weight of his body gently rocking as his heart thumped in his chest.

He would go again tomorrow and pace it better, perhaps find a longer trail. Now, though, he wanted a drink. He gestured to a waitress to bring him the same again and after a minute she arrived with a Scotch and soda. He sat up and drank. His father's drink. How he would have scorned the crushed ice and the long, dainty glass – scorned Monaco, come to that. Holidays for him had meant walking in the Harz mountains or sailing on the Ijsselmeer, Lock and his sister serving as reluctant crew. Activity was one constant, the other a Primus stove that lived neatly in an aluminium case and burned purple meths stored in old water bottles. On it Everhart Lock would cook beans and eggs and bacon with tireless enthusiasm, refusing to let Lock's mother work on her holiday. He was a tall, serious man who was always in motion and whose instinct was to make for wilderness, where people were few, and air was in rich supply. Cities were for work. God, how he would have hated to pay money to sit with the rich in a beach club (where, Lock thought with resentment, he had still needed to slip that ridiculous maître d' two fifty-euro notes to secure a decent spot near the sea), to lie in the sun all day surrounded by yachts and car showrooms and concrete apartment blocks, to eat only at restaurants – to sit

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like a prisoner in this tiny, moneyed enclave trapped between the mountains and the sea. But Lock felt comfortable here. This was his place, a part of his world. Life was easy, manageable, contained.

He had first come here nearly fifteen years before to meet Maître Cricenti and form a company for Malin, the first of what must now be hundreds. Cricenti was tiny, barely five foot, but like a true Monégasque carried himself with a pride that felt ancient and unassailable. In his office hung nineteenth-century prints of the palace and portraits of Princes Rainier and Albert; flags on poles leant in every corner. He had impressed on Lock, without really saying it, that by choosing Monaco he would be conferring on his company the glory of a seven-hundred-year tradition, a tradition of dignified and bloody-minded independence that would set it apart from the humdrum world of taxes and government interference. This was not some vulgar Caribbean island where the unscrupulous hid their wealth; no, this was a glorious relic of a time, not so distant, when tiny, colourful kingdoms outnumbered nation states and kings could decide how things would be done. Here one's assets and one's conscience could be safe.

Lock had enjoyed the pitch, flattered himself that he bought none of it and signed up. That was the birth of Spirecrest Holdings SA, a ready-made company with a meaningless name that Cricenti had merely brought down from his well-stocked shelf and presented to Lock for signatures, and payment. Lock soon learned that with one's Monégasque société anonyme came such paperwork that the meagre tax benefits were more or less cancelled out, and before long he was going elsewhere for his companies; the long, close relationship he had imagined for himself and Maître Cricenti never came to be. But ever since he had been fond of this place and its neat, heady fiction.

‘Richard?’

He looked over at Oksana. Her voice sounded low and full of sleep.

‘Ah, there you are,’ he said. ‘I thought we’d lost you. Would you like a drink?’

‘What time is it?’

‘Five.’

She breathed in deeply, a half-yawn. ‘I didn’t want to sleep.’ Here they spoke English, in Moscow mostly Russian.

Lock looked at her again. Looking at Oksana was something he found himself doing often. He was astonished by her – not by her being with him, which he understood, but by her flawlessness. Sometimes he was buoyed by it; more often it seemed to mock his own ageing body and the ever-present compromises of his life. She had been born in Almaty, in the crook of the Tien Shan mountains, at the edge of an immense red desert, and Lock wondered whether this was why her beauty seemed always so unexpected. In a normal life, she would have been far beyond his reach.

‘What shall we do this evening, Richard?’ she said, looking at him now.

‘Anything you like. What would you like to do?’

‘I like the Sass restaurant. Can we eat there? And then the Casino. I think Jimmy’s is boring.’

How right she was. What Lock loved about Oksana – would have loved, if he had let himself – was that she had a clear idea of what she wanted from him and his money, and it did not include dancing with hundreds of leathery men and their beautiful girlfriends in a nightclub that, absurdly – embarrassingly – spelt its name with a Z. Jimmy’z. A few years before Lock might have looked forward to a night in Jimmy’z and the opportunity to ogle and preen, but not now. The place was full of men in their sixties, even their seventies, who plainly never stopped to doubt their standing or prowess