

GRAND JETÉ

An Angela Masters Detective Novel

By Mike Worley

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Dedication

To my wife and editor, Nancy, without whose love and support this project would not have been possible.

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Other books by Mike Worley:

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One

Aleksey Matiskov sat at the kitchen table in his double-wide mobile home on the outskirts of Santa Rosa, California. The sun was setting over the mountains to the west and the Russian was drowning his sorrows in vodka. This was real vodka, not that weak clear stuff the Americans called vodka.

“Clear vodka is for baby,” he often said. Americans, weak as they were, drank clear vodka, if they drank it at all. Many Americans he knew drank wine, a symbol of weakness if there ever was one.

No, a real man, a strong and proud Russian man such as himself drank real vodka – yellow in color and poured from a bottle with a label depicting a bull goring a man. This vodka was made in Moldova and had the bite, and some said the taste, of gasoline but it was just what Matiskov needed at that moment.

He gazed blurry-eyed at the bottles before him on the table. He had already drained one, and he was well along into the second. The third, its top still sealed with red wax, sat ready if he needed it.

A video tape of the world-famous Bolshoi Ballet played on the small television in the dining room – a reminder of what once had been.

What had begun as a great honor and a great adventure had turned into a disaster. Matiskov had been an assistant ballet master and choreographer at the Bolshoi when he was given a new mission. At the direction of Soviet General Secretary Yuri Andropov himself, the 49-year-old Matiskov had come to the United States with his wife and son to take a post as the ballet master and choreographer of a small but growing ballet company in the Napa Valley of California. The assignment began with great expectations, expectations which were soon dashed.

The young dancers were all, in the opinion of the great master Matiskov, undisciplined and untrained. Nevermind that they all brought years of training to the company. It was American training, training clouded with such notions as dancer input and concern for the dancers having sufficient ‘free time’ for other pursuits.

“I try my best to instill kind of discipline expected of Russian dancer, Cheryl. It is my job,” he slurred to the woman in the kitchen. His method consisted of hours and hours of unrelenting practice under the tutelage of a strict and unforgiving taskmaster, but some of the young women had complained about his style. After several arguments with the company owner, an American woman with more money than sense in Aleksey’s mind, he was summarily fired.

In itself, that was an unheard of action to the proud Russian. While he, like many of his countrymen, abhorred many of the tenets of the Soviet system, at least a person could not be fired by some civilian, even from a ‘private’ company, without the slightest hint of government approval. After trying for several months to secure another position in a ballet company, without an iota of support from the American government, the best job Aleksey had been able to find was that of a security guard at a local mall.

Matiskov took another deep swallow of the jaundiced liquid, its satisfying burn igniting his senses as well as his esophagus. After his termination from the ballet company, Matiskov often expressed his disdain of America and his wish to return to the Soviet Union.

However, his wife, Svetlana, had easily acclimated to the American lifestyle and had no desire to return. This resulted in loud, screaming fights between the couple, sometimes joined by their young son, who always sided with his mother. Before long, Svetlana moved out of the comfortable apartment they occupied not far from downtown Santa Rosa, taking their son with her.

Shortly after taking the security guard position, Aleksey had received a notice Svetlana was divorcing him under American law and seeking custody of the boy. “*Suka!*” Matiskov spat when the paper was served on him by a deputy sheriff – “bitch!” “They can keep their precious America!” Matiskov did not contest the divorce or the custody arrangement.

Just as Matiskov had reached the decision to visit the Soviet Consulate in San Francisco to arrange for his return, an American woman entered his life. Cheryl was a few years older, but had an infectious smile and a way of making everyone around her comfortable. She was ‘round and plump,’ the ideal woman in Aleksey’s eyes.

Their marriage had held such promise. In the company of the outgoing and friendly woman, Aleksey had momentarily forgotten about his longing to return to Mother Russia. Cheryl had a way of instilling confidence in the Russian, despite his unfamiliar surroundings.

Matiskov took another long swallow of the Moldavian hooch and looked again across the kitchen at Cheryl. "You never have chance to see how magical ballet can be, especially under my direction," he slurred to Cheryl. She did not answer.

In time, however, the realities of his mundane job as a security guard clashed again with his privileged upbringing in Moscow and the longing to return to Mother Russia returned. The thought of how far he had fallen – from rubbing shoulders with the Soviet General Secretary to working long hours as an anonymous and unappreciated security guard – again grated on the proud Russian's mind. Only by returning to the USSR could he hope to reclaim his former glory.

Cheryl Matiskov, however, would have none of that. She knew almost nothing about the Soviet Union but what she thought she knew was not good. "I'm not interested in a dreary existence, standing all day in a line to buy a loaf of bread and perhaps a few root vegetables," she had told him.

"I am a loyal American," Cheryl said. She did not see a move for herself to the Soviet Union as anything but a traitorous act, a defection of the likes of John Reed and Lee Harvey Oswald. I'm definitely not in that company, Cheryl told herself. Unmentioned was the contradiction that she wholeheartedly supported Aleksey's move to the United States and his turning his back on his native land by remaining there.

"Would the Soviet government let me pursue my dedication – proselytizing for God and my church to our neighbors?" the deeply religious Cheryl would ask, almost rhetorically.

"Unfortunately, that would not be permitted," Aleksey would answer, almost apologetically.

That truth, more than anything else, hardened Cheryl's resolve to resist her husband's pleas.

On this clear, sunny afternoon in mid-September, the couple had another bitter fight over the now ever-present disagreement about living in Russia. While the harsh words flew as they had on other such occasions, today was different. Cheryl had committed an unpardonable sin in the eyes of the proud man – she laid hands on him in anger.

In reality, it was just a minor push. In the midst of their argument, Cheryl had shoved Aleksey in the chest, exclaiming, “If you want to go back to your precious Russia, then just go and leave me alone!”

Matiskov looked over again at Cheryl, sadness reflected in his eyes. “Why couldn’t you understand?” he pleaded.

His eyes welled with tears. She looked so peaceful, lying there on the floor of the kitchen. She had always been such a calm creature, except when the subject of moving to Russia came up. Aleksey wanted with all his heart to take his peaceful and caring wife to his beloved Mother Country, but her physical reaction in pushing him set off a deep-seated challenge to his masculinity.

As Cheryl pushed him and then turned away crying, his rage boiled over. He picked up the closest implement his hand could reach, a Cutco chef’s knife Cheryl had been using only moments before. In a blind fury, Aleksey thrust the thin, razor-sharp blade twice into his wife’s back, lacerating her kidney, spleen, and liver.

A sturdy Russian woman could have withstood such a blow, Aleksey told himself, only marginally aware of the ridiculousness of the thought. But Cheryl was a weak American and now she lay on the kitchen floor – dead.

Two bottles of vodka later, Aleksey’s addled mind slogged through his options. Certainly, a trip to an American jail would halt, probably forever, his ability to return to his homeland. The lowly station of a security guard now seemed exponentially higher than that of a murderer, and the strong drink didn’t help to blunt Matiskov’s new reality. He struggled to clear his mind to plan his next move.