

KIEV, MAY 1986

Vasyl and Larysa Marchenko sang along with “A Hard Day’s Night” as they dressed for the May Day parade. Vasyl put on the brown suit he wore every year, then hurried to the hallway mirror to adjust his necktie. Larysa scooted in front of him to weave a rose-flowered headband into her straight, blond hair. While Vasyl ducked out on the balcony to look at his tomato plants, she tied a scarlet ribbon around their seven-year-old daughter’s ponytail. Meanwhile, Dmitry, who was itching to march with his friends, knotted a red neckerchief over the shirt of his Young Pioneer uniform and paced by the door.

“Do you think Katya will need a sweater?” Larysa called to her husband. “She’s wearing a short-sleeved dress.”

“Hardly! It’s hot enough for the beach,” Vasyl boomed,

striding into the kitchen. “Now, who wants a balloon?” He encircled his daughter’s small hand in stout fingers stained with red ink from yesterday’s printing job.

“I do,” shrieked Katya.

Dmitry yanked the hallway door open and raced down the stairwell ahead of his father and little sister. Larysa turned off the record player and followed them down the stairs. All four had reached the second-floor landing and were out of earshot when the phone rang. The bell pealed through their kitchen, where washing up from breakfast sat in the sink, and the living room, where crooked French doors hung open to a balcony crammed with pots.

The Marchenkos exited their block and joined the crush of celebrants pouring down Marshal Tymoshenko, a wide boulevard eight miles north of the heart of the city. Men wore suit jackets studded with red stars. More than a few women showed off costumes unpacked once a year, embroidered blouses with puffy sleeves and flowers woven into braided hairdos. At Minska Station the family boarded a crowded car for the metro ride to Khreshchatyk, Kiev’s central street. After disembarking, the four jostled through throngs lining the street. Musical instruments appeared everywhere, with silver flutes and trumpets glinting in the morning sunlight.

On the corner where Dmitry’s Pioneer group was gathering, Ilya, a skinny boy with dark curls fringing his face, waved a red banner. Dmitry charged off to meet his friend. While Vasyil fetched a balloon from a man surrounded by children dressed in

their holiday best, Ilya's mother beckoned to Larysa. After years of attending pageants and their sons' sporting events together, Larysa, who worked as a translator, and Maria, a teacher, had grown close.

Larysa approached her friend with a smile. As they leaned forward to kiss each other's cheeks, however, she saw furrows creasing Maria's forehead. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I'm worried about my sister. Iryna and my niece were evacuated from Pripjat. They're staying with me." Maria's answer came in a rush. "Iryna's husband works at Chernobyl, you know, at Reactor Three, not the one damaged by the fire."

"When were they evacuated?" Larysa had never seen Maria this rattled. "Were they in danger?"

"The authorities insisted it's only a precaution. They put out the fire. They said the reactor was fine, but they herded everyone into a thousand buses Sunday afternoon. No pets allowed. Only one suitcase each."

Maria's words struck Larysa like a blow to her solar plexus. She had heard about the Chernobyl accident on television Monday night, of course, and like everyone else she suspected the accident might be more serious than the terse announcement suggested. After all, Moscow never acknowledged failings unless the outside world forced its hand. But then yesterday, Larysa's neighbor had told her that Western newspapers were reporting two thousand corpses stacked on Kiev's streets, which anyone could see was preposterous. Chernobyl was some sixty miles north of the city, and Larysa had no family near the

nuclear plant. Until now she hadn't given the accident much thought.

"My sister's out of her wits. They put her husband up with workers ordered to stay at the station. My niece cries for their dog. You cannot blame her. Who will feed the poor thing?"

"Did they tell your sister when she can return home?" asked Vasyl, who had caught much of the conversation. He inched closer to his wife and Maria.

"Three days, the authorities claimed. My sister refuses to go outside. Saturday was so hot in Pripyat she brought her nursery school class outdoors for an hour. Natasha, my niece, went with her friends to a rooftop to watch the glowing reactor. All the kids wanted to get a look. Now, Iryna fears they're both contaminated—"

Maria stopped talking and stiffened. A man behind them was telling his companions something about October Revolution Hospital clearing wards for Chernobyl patients. Maria, Vasyl, and Larysa strained to make out the man's words over a cacophony of music and voices.

Whispers about the nuclear plant rippled through the crowd. No one knew what to believe. Everyone, it seemed, knew someone from the Chernobyl area or had caught unjammed Voice of America broadcasts warning of radiation spewing from the reactor. Yet Kiev was awash in pageantry as always on May Day. Crimson banners flapped under a clear blue sky, and stirring songs filled the air. Waves of children marched past Party officials in the reviewing stand. There was nothing about

the celebration to arouse suspicion, nothing unusual about the holiday—except the weather. It was not just hot. It was beastly.

Maria turned her pinched gray eyes on Vasyl. “What are they saying at your shop about the accident?”

“Nothing beyond what we heard on TV. You know, we only print posters and honor certificates.” Vasyl paused, giving Maria a thoughtful look. “I’m no scientist, to be sure. Still, I think radiation in Pripjat must be serious for authorities to take such an overt action as evacuating an entire city of forty-five thousand people.”

“That is what I believe.” Maria nodded, her lips forming a taut line. Raising her arm, she used her sleeve to wipe beads of sweat off her forehead. “They would tell us if there’s any danger here, would they not?”

Larysa’s startled look betrayed her doubt. Kiev was the Soviet Union’s third largest city, with two and a half million people, tens of thousands of whom were filling Khreshchatyk Street. “How could they not?” she murmured, more to herself than her friend. She reached down to untangle the string of Katya’s pink balloon from the ribbon on her ponytail.

Vasyl said nothing. He was lost in thought, his eyes scanning the hot blue sky, the square crowded with children, and the chestnut trees thrashing in a stiff breeze from the north.

WASHINGTON, APRIL 1990

Vickie cut a swift path through Lafayette Square, scarcely noticing the wind dusting her gray suit with cherry blossom petals. A flush of pride filled her chest when she caught sight of the White House. Three months ago, she'd been waiting tables in a Hoosier backwater, but whether by dumb luck or divine providence, here she was in the nation's capital. Even more miraculous, she'd finally found a purpose. From the time she was eight, Vickie had been dogged by the idea that she was meant to do something important. Why else had her life been spared, and her little brother's life taken? Exactly what she was supposed to do, however, had always eluded her until she landed this reporting job. Exposing corrupt corporations harming the Earth and its innocent creatures struck her as a worthy mission—and one she'd embraced with her entire being. But despite throwing

herself into reporting, she had yet to publish a single byline story. Nor had she cracked the code for acquiring what she perceived to be the most critical asset of every bona fide Washington journalist: a reliable source.

She pictured her editor, Thane, hunkered down with his honey-tongued White House source. Thane had boasted during the morning editorial meeting that his source was about to spill why the Hubble Telescope was beaming back blurry pictures. The mystery behind that billion-dollar glitch would make the front page of all the Newhart chain's newspapers. Meanwhile, she was headed to a nuclear utility meeting no one else had wanted to cover. The Nuclear Regulatory Council's vote on whether to allow a downed power plant near New York City to restart would be lucky to rate two inches on the back pages, and she needed a big story to save her job.

Vickie's fleeting euphoria evaporated, replaced by the cold dread that seeped into her gut whenever she thought about her looming three-month review. Somehow, she would have to find an important story. Fighting back a wave of despair, she exited the park, crossed H Street, and entered the historic Hay-Adams Hotel. Midway down a chandeliered corridor, she spotted a room where three dozen electric utility executives sat around tables adorned with orchids. A scrawny-necked official in a plaid bow tie stopped her at the door. Glancing at her press pass, he pointed to a long table bookended by two lone reporters. She scanned the room for TV cameras and saw none. Not a story the networks planned to cover, she thought, taking a seat and pulling her tape recorder from her shoulder bag. She popped in a fresh cassette as a few onlookers straggled into chairs for the public beside the

press table.

NRC Chairman Patton advanced to the podium, and Vickie pushed the record button. She harbored a sliver of hope he might veer off script and “commit news,” as her colleagues dubbed those rare occasions when a spontaneous nugget of truth escaped the practiced mouths of bureaucrats. No such luck. He droned on about nuclear plant “assessment methodologies.” Meticulously attired executives stifled yawns and peeked at their Rolexes. To her right, she noticed Mitch Sanders from *The Times* doing a crossword puzzle. To her left, Joe Polk of United Press studied the sports page. After forty mind-numbing minutes Patton finally concluded: “We have unanimously approved restart of the Hardwick Nuclear Power Station.” A handful of CEOs started to clap, but a booming voice drowned out their applause.

“The people vote no!” shouted a baritone with a black braid snaking down his back. His voice clattered off the walls like thunder in a canyon. Bolting up from a chair four feet from Vickie, the man thrust out his right arm. Her heart leapt into her throat as something bright flashed in his hand. She flinched, anticipating an explosion, but almost simultaneously she saw the flash was simply the corner of a shiny yellow banner. Emblazoned on the unfurling satin fabric were three red triangles in a circle and the words, “Stop Chernobyl Here!”

“The public portion of this meeting is over. We are going into closed session now,” the bow-tied official intoned, appearing at the podium. “Members of the public and press are asked at this time to exit the room.”

Vickie picked up her tape recorder and notebook. She eyed the protester, wary of what he might do next, but he offered no

resistance to the official who materialized by his side. Waving his banner like a Cub Scout in a Fourth of July parade, he filed out with the other onlookers. The utility executives chatted as if nothing noteworthy had happened. Mitch and Joe chuckled as they collected their newspapers. Judging by everyone's reaction, she got the idea that this protester was no stranger to NRC meetings. She hurried to a pay phone in the lobby and dialed Sean on the news desk to give him the unanimous Hardwick plant restart vote.

"No surprise there," Sean responded in his good-natured drawl. He begged off for an incoming call before Vickie could tell him she planned to go schmooze with staffers on the Hill.

Heading to the hotel door, Vickie replayed in her mind the moment the protester shouted and jumped up from his chair. She hoped no one had noticed her flinch. One thing DC reporters never did was betray their emotions, especially fear. Pulling her shoulders back with resolve, she stepped outside determined to find a story lead.

She was about to hail a cab for Capitol Hill when she spotted the protester. His glossy braid swung over his blue Oxford shirt as he knelt on the grass in front of St. John's Church, rolling up his banner. He didn't strike her as the least bit intimidating kneeling there. In fact, he looked more thoughtful than many of the activists she had observed marching on Constitution Avenue chanting slogans for one cause or another. She wanted to ask him why he believed the Hardwick plant was like Chernobyl, but she was reluctant to waste more time on this assignment. She was still weighing whether to approach him when Mitch and Joe sauntered past without a second glance. Not surprising, she thought. No doubt her editor also would shun this guy as an anti-nuke flake.

Yet something in the determined cast of his face drew her interest. She decided there was no harm in taking five minutes to ask him a few questions.

“Victoria Evans with Newhart News. Could you tell me why you were protesting in the meeting?” she asked, walking up to him. “What do you mean by stop Chernobyl here?”

“Before Chernobyl blew four years ago, Soviet scientists claimed their reactors were as safe as samovars. Tea pots! So harmless you could plop one down in Red Square. Scientists here are every bit as cocky. That Hardwick nuke’s a fire hazard, and their evacuation plan’s a farce. Can you imagine if it blows, twenty miles from the Big Apple?” He stood up, towering over Vickie. “There’s fifteen million people in Metro New York. The feds should give them all KI.”

“What do you mean, KI?” Vickie thrust her tape recorder closer to his face.

“Potassium iodide. In nuke explosions radioactive iodine is released, which causes thyroid cancer, especially in children. If kids are given KI pills right after a nuke blows, their thyroids fill up with good KI and don’t absorb the bad radioactive iodine. I know of a doctor who’s finding kids in Poland given KI right after Chernobyl exploded aren’t getting thyroid cancer like kids in the Soviet Union, who didn’t get KI. I can fax you some info on this.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Vickie paused, impressed. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Gareth Will.”

“Are you with an organization, Gareth?”

“CANWAP, Coalition against Nuclear Weapons and Power—two sides of the same coin. Remember that. Hey, can we get

something to eat? I'll fill you in."

Vickie hesitated, leery of getting mired in a lunch that would probably yield nothing. Three months here had taught her that Washington runs on status. Credentials, job title, and pedigree mean everything. A long-haired, no-name environmental activist would warrant little more than a colorful quote to spice up a bland story. Still, Gareth did seem to know about nuclear power plants, and she didn't have anything else. Roaming the corridors of the Senate and House buildings chatting up interns had failed to land her anything newsworthy yet. A cup of coffee would not take long, she calculated, then she would head to the Hill.

"Sure, we can grab a bite at Park Café." Vickie pointed west on H Street.