

VALENTINA GOLUBEVA

St. Petersburg DNA Panorama Codes



TRUE STORIES. TIMELESS CITY



TUCULART
EDITION

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Valentina Golubeva

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Chapter One

The Measure of the Soul

Nikolai wandered along the Neva embankment beside his best friend, Aleksandr, and had been silent for so long that his silence had begun to speak for him. St Petersburg, so familiar to them, kept them company on that fateful evening: the damp air settled upon the granite, the lamps were reflected in the water as long zigzags of shifting colour and gold, and boats were already gathering near Palace Bridge—the city was preparing to reveal what made it unique without uttering a single word.

Nikolai and Aleksandr had known one another for almost their entire lives. The same street in Gatchina. The same lyceum. The same circle of neighbourhood friends, where they argued themselves hoarse, dreamt without restraint and were certain that roughly the same great life lay ahead for all of them. Then came the same university, the same examinations, the same sleepless nights before the exam period and the same conversations about the future.

Yet before long, the future they had imagined proved different for each of them. Aleksandr now ran a major company, made decisions with assurance and entered meeting rooms as though the very space parted before him. At home, his wife and three sons awaited him—clever, strong and self-possessed, already in their youth resembling men who knew where they were going.

Nikolai was the head of a department. It was a decent position, with a respectable salary and the regard of his colleagues. Yet for a long time, an uncomfortable feeling had lived within him: as though he occupied only part of the space his life was capable of holding. As though there were further floors, rooms and galleries within him, but the doors leading to them were closed. He had entered his second marriage cautiously, and he and his wife were only planning to have children. Whenever the conversation turned to the future, Nikolai felt not joy but tension. It was as though every major event required an inner capacity that he lacked.

At one point, he stopped beside the granite parapet and said sharply, almost angrily:

‘Sasha, I don’t understand. We began from the same place. We studied together, grew up together and seemed to be following the same road. Why does everything happen on a larger scale for you? Your work, your family, your money, your decisions. I’m not envious... though perhaps I am, a little. More than anything, I want to understand. What is wrong with me?’

Aleksandr looked at his friend intently. Not with superiority. Not with pity. But with that rare warmth found only between people who have shared a childhood. He had been waiting for this conversation for a long time. He was glad that Nikolai had asked of his own accord. For prosperity truly can drive people apart. One person’s success sometimes becomes an invisible wall between two friends. Aleksandr did not want that wall. Their friendship was too rare, too genuine, too deeply imbued with Gatchina’s frankness and loyalty.

He was about to answer when his gaze fell upon the line of boats near Palace Bridge. The city itself supplied the image. Aleksandr nodded towards the water.

‘Look.’

Nikolai turned. Evening was thickening over the Neva. The boats rocked gently, awaiting their hour. Palace Bridge was still closed, and all movement seemed restrained, contained and limited. The water was broad, mighty and alive—but the passage for large vessels remained blocked.

‘Do you see the bridge?’ Aleksandr asked. ‘Even while its leaves are closed, the Neva remains the Neva. It does not grow smaller. It loses none of its power. But its potential as a transport artery is limited. Small craft can pass. Large vessels cannot.’

Nikolai remained silent. Aleksandr continued:

‘It is the same with a person. Each of us has a certain capacity of soul. I do not even mean in terms of talent. I mean how much of life a person is capable of allowing to flow through them. How much responsibility they can bear. How much love they can receive. How much money they can possess without fear. How much happiness they can permit themselves. How much of the new they can let in without panicking.’

He paused and looked at the bridge.

‘Sometimes people think their river is small. In truth, the leaves of their bridge are simply closed.’

These words struck Nikolai more precisely than any advice ever had. He suddenly realised that throughout his life he had been trying to increase his speed without opening the passage. He took on more tasks, read more books, worked until late at night, compared himself with others, became irritated and exhausted, then pulled himself together again—yet the ceiling within him remained unchanged. He kept increasing the water pressure without opening the bridge.

‘What should I do?’ he asked softly.

Aleksandr smiled.

‘Look within yourself. But be honest. Find your inner obstructions. Not polished excuses, but the real bolts—the ones holding your bridge leaves shut. Draw them back. Then your life will have room for what cannot fit into it now.’

At that moment, Palace Bridge began to open. Slowly, solemnly, almost theatrically, its leaves rose above the Neva. The space around them was transformed. What had been an obstacle only a minute earlier became a gateway. The water seemed to take on a new magnitude. The boats sprang to life. A passage opened for large vessels.

Nikolai watched and felt something click into place within him. Not loudly. Not dramatically. But irrevocably. He returned home a different man.

That same evening, he began searching for material on inner limitations, cognitive patterns, family scripts, the psychology of decision-making, self-efficacy and neuroplasticity. He read academic papers, listened to lectures, made notes and recalled phrases he had heard in childhood but had never questioned: ‘Keep your head down’, ‘Big money is not for people like us’, ‘Family gets in the

way of a career', 'A safe middle ground is better than risky growth', 'Happiness loves silence, while success breeds envy', 'A man must endure' and 'It is too late to begin again.'

He wrote these phrases down one after another and suddenly saw the truth: they were not truths at all. They were the bridge leaves.

For years, they had stood within him, masquerading as common sense. Nikolai began working through them carefully but without mercy. He asked himself questions he had never before dared to answer: 'Who said that I am not capable of more? Why do I consider scale dangerous? When did I decide that a good life was meant for other people? What am I truly afraid of: failure, or succeeding?' Each answer opened a new passage.

A month later, he was summoned to meet with senior management. Nikolai walked into the office calmly. In the past, he would have prepared himself in advance to defend, explain and justify himself. Now a strange stillness had settled within him. He no longer felt like a man asking permission to grow. He felt like a man who had finally taken up the space that was his.

The conversation lasted forty minutes. He was offered a promotion. The new position carried greater weight, the remit was broader and the salary was several times higher. In the past, Nikolai would almost certainly have said, 'I need to think about it.' Now, however, he understood clearly: life was testing not his competence, but his capacity.

He accepted.

That evening, his wife met him at the door with such a look on her face that Nikolai was frightened at first.

'What has happened?'

Without a word, she held out a pregnancy test. Two lines. Some news does not enter life through a door. It enters as light.

Nikolai sat down on the edge of the sofa and could not utter a word for a long time. Then he held his wife so tightly that it was as though he were holding not only her, but the whole of his new future. He understood: the bridge leaves had opened not only in his working life. They had opened in love. In trust. In his readiness to become a father. In his right to receive more than he had previously allowed himself.

Soon afterwards, their beloved, long-awaited daughter was born. At her christening, amid candles, hushed voices and solemn light, Nikolai caught Aleksandr's eye. After the service, they stepped out into the courtyard of the church. St Petersburg was beside them once more—in the air, the stone, the lines of the rooftops and the cold sky, which had somehow always known how to make important moments more profound.

'Do you remember our conversation beside Palace Bridge?' Nikolai asked.

Aleksandr smiled.

'Of course. You looked as though you were either about to become a philosopher or hand in your notice.'

‘That was when I understood for the first time that what was inside me was not weakness. There were patterns within me. Patterns instilled in me since childhood. I thought I was thinking for myself, when in reality I was merely repeating other people’s limitations.’

He looked at the tiny bundle in his wife’s arms and added softly:

‘The first barrier I removed was the most important one: I stopped believing that my life had already been determined. Resetting the old patterns allowed me to imagine new realities. And then to believe in them without the slightest trace of doubt. Everything turned upside down—truly upside down—and divided my life into a before and an after.’

Aleksandr placed a hand on his shoulder.

‘So, the bridge opened.’

Nikolai smiled.

‘Yes. And it turned out that great ships could sail along my Neva.’

From then on, Nikolai often returned to that evening. Not only in his memory, but through images.

In the Stories from the Petersburg’s Emporium project, he encountered the very St Petersburg that knows how to explain life without moralising. The finest photographic and video perspectives on the city became more than beautiful images to him; they became visual keys to inner revelations.

Palace Bridge was no longer a postcard. It became a metaphor. The Neva was no longer a river. It became an image of human strength. The opening leaves of the bridge were no longer an architectural detail. They became a reminder: sometimes a person does not need to become someone else.



It needs to reveal what is already there. And therein lies the particular magic of the Petersburg’s Emporium. It shows you the city in such a way that, suddenly, you see yourself within it. Your closed bridges. Your unused routes. Your depth. Your capacity.

Seen from the right angle, St Petersburg can become a mirror of destiny. And once a person has seen their true self, they can no longer live as before. For there is life before the moment when you comprehend your own capacity. And there is life after.

Chapter Two

New Holland — A Deal Worth a Million. Stories of Places from the Petersburg's Emporium

'Reflection' — Andrei's Story

Sometimes, to see your true self, you need to look not into a mirror but into the waters of a St Petersburg canal. The water does not flatter. It shows the truth.

That day, Andrei's deal fell through. That deal. The crucial one. The one he had spent months preparing for, sacrificing weekends, evenings and sleep. Everything collapsed within fifteen minutes of negotiations.

He walked home. He did not want to get into his car, take the metro or see anyone. He simply walked with his head bowed, replaying the same day over and over in his mind. And it had begun badly.

What he had left at home. That morning, he had quarrelled with his wife. Over something trivial. Because once again he was leaving early and coming home late. Because for the hundredth time she had said, 'You are never at home,' and for the hundredth time he had replied, 'I am working for our family.' Yet, for some reason, his family did not feel that he was.

He had not seen his son for a week. He had said, 'I'll call you in fifteen minutes,' but those fifteen minutes had become lost among the pile of contracts on his desk...

'Who am I doing all of this for?' Andrei wondered as he walked along the grey pavement. 'For my family? But where is that family? I am losing it.'

New Holland

His route took him through New Holland. Andrei had been there hundreds of times and would usually pass through without raising his eyes. Yet that evening, something made him stop. He looked at the canal. And froze.

The architectural masterpiece of the island was reflected in the dark, motionless water: the old red-brick walls, the elegant arches and the lines perfected over centuries. The reflection was so sharp, so flawless, that at first Andrei could not tell where reality ended and its mirror image began.

At that moment, as he gazed at the reflection, he suddenly remembered the laws he had forgotten. Lines from the writings of Hermes Trismegistus came back to him—the very lines he had read long ago, in another life, when he had still believed that the world was governed by intelligible laws.

'As above, so below. As within, so without.'

It was as though an electric current passed through Andrei. The reflection in the canal was perfect because the island itself was perfect. The water merely repeated what stood above it. But what of his own life? His outer world—the failed deal, his increasingly distant wife, someone else’s son—was merely a reflection of what was taking place within him.

‘How could I have forgotten?’ Andrei whispered. ‘I have spent so many years tilting at windmills. Fighting circumstances, other people and the world. But the person I needed to fight was... myself.’

An honest conversation with himself: Andrei stood beside the water and, for the first time in many years, looked at himself honestly. Without excuses. Without saying, ‘But I am doing my best.’

He did not like what he saw. He examined the person he had become—both at work and within his family—and realised that he alone was responsible for every way in which he had fallen short of his own expectations.

He wanted to earn more. Yet his wardrobe spoke of a tired man without ambition. His speech was hesitant and disjointed—during those crucial negotiations, he had failed to persuade anyone—and his body betrayed a man who had neglected himself for years.

He himself was failing to reach the goals he had set. That meant he was also falling short of his family’s expectations. His wife dreamt of a strong, confident husband beside whom she could feel secure. His children wanted to be proud of their father and spend time with him. And what did he give them? Weariness, absence and an endless refrain of ‘I’m busy’.

‘They expected me to bring them joy,’ Andrei realised. ‘But all I ever brought home were problems.’

The Boat on the Moika

At that moment, a private motorboat swept along the Moika: light, white and swift. On board were people who were happy, laughing and truly alive.

Andrei watched them disappear into the distance and suddenly felt not envy but clarity. Those people were no better than he was. At some point, they had simply made a choice—to live differently. To become different. And the world had responded in kind.

The boat disappeared around the bend, leaving widening circles on the water that shattered the island’s perfect reflection. At that moment, Andrei finally brought his old way of life to an end. Right there. On the Moika Embankment. Beside the reflection of New Holland.

An Evening of Change

Andrei did not wait for Monday. He did not wait for ‘a new year and a new life’, nor did he wait for ‘the right moment’.

That very evening, he began to change. He joined a gym—his first training session was in two days’ time; he bought a new suit—the sort that made him feel a million dollars; and he found a public-speaking tutor so that his words might finally begin to persuade.

Three simple decisions. Three steps. Yet those steps came from within—from a new understanding of himself.

When the Inner Changes the Outer

And the outward changes were not long in following the inward ones.

The law Andrei had remembered beside the canal began to work. First at work. A new project appeared out of nowhere—larger and more interesting than the deal that had fallen through. Andrei now conducted negotiations differently: confidently, precisely and persuasively. People believed him. Then came the changes at home. His wife seemed to grow younger when she saw the transformation in her husband. The sparkle he had not seen for years returned to her eyes. She looked at him as though she had fallen in love with him all over again.

‘You seem like a different man,’ she said to him one evening. ‘No. You are the same man I once fell in love with—only better.’

And the children? They began coming round more often for family dinners. Once again, laughter filled the table. There were conversations, jokes and plans again. Once again, they were a family. Self-improvement has no end!

Andrei did not stop. He understood the most important truth: change is not a destination but a way of life. He continued improving himself—his body, his speech, his work and his relationships. With each new change, he became more convinced of one simple truth:

Self-improvement is as infinite as a reflection in water, descending into depths that have no bottom. He no longer tilted at windmills. He worked upon himself, and the world obediently reflected every inward change he made. As above, so below.

As within, so without.

Andrei now visits New Holland often. Alone. In the evenings, when the water in the canal becomes a mirror. He looks at the island’s reflection—at its perfect lines, refined over centuries—and remembers the evening when his entire life turned through 180 degrees.

Sometimes he brings his son with him. They stand beside the water, and Andrei tells him about the laws of the Universe. About how the outer world is always a reflection of the inner one.

Boats carrying happy people pass them on the Moika, and Andrei smiles. Because now he is one of them.

Have you ever noticed that the outer world is always a mirror of what is happening within you? Sometimes, a single reflection in a St Petersburg canal is all it takes to see your true self—and find the courage to change.

There are places that carry within them a certain programme of change. They attract those who are ready to change and repel those who have become fixed and unmoving.

Andrei often returned in his thoughts to that evening. To the reflection. To the canal. To the moment when his life was divided into a 'before' and an 'after'. Each time, he asked himself the same question:

'Why here? Why New Holland?'

Was it chance? Or was there something more behind it? The answer came when he happened upon the history of the place. Everything fell into place. A person can transform a place. Every place in St Petersburg is more than mere architecture. It bears the energetic imprint of the people who created it, restored it and invested their souls in it—especially those who set its revival in motion.

The restoration of New Holland was initiated by Roman Abramovich. Not merely a businessman, but a man who had succeeded both in business and in family life. A man who had built an empire while also raising children. A man who understood the value of both money and human relationships.

When such a person undertakes a project, he leaves a part of himself within it. This is how a creator's energy shapes a place. Consider it for a moment. When a person invests not merely money in a place, but their vital energy, their story of success and their values, that space begins to work like a tuning fork. It becomes attuned to a particular frequency. Then, when someone enters it—especially at a moment of personal crisis—the place begins to resonate with them.

'You are not here by chance,' New Holland seems to say to everyone who pauses beside its canals. 'I was created by people who know how to turn ruins into masterpieces. People who passed through crises and emerged stronger. People who know that anything can be restored if the will exists.'

Andrei himself was a coincidence that was no coincidence at all. Now he understood. His decision to stop at New Holland had not been accidental. The failed deal, the quarrel with his wife, the week without his son—all that pain had brought him to the one place in the city that had literally been 'programmed' for transformation.

New Holland itself had experienced more than one rebirth. Once it had served as a military warehouse and fallen into decline. Then came neglect, ruin and abandonment. After that, a man arrived who saw potential in the ruins. Today, it is one of the most vibrant, living and breathing places in St Petersburg. An island that had travelled its own path of rebirth became a magnet for those who needed to be reborn themselves. Such is the influence of an owner's personality upon the field around them.

There is a law in this world that is often overlooked: the creator's energy permeates the creation. Everyone who comes into contact with that creation receives a part of this energy.

Abramovich is a man who built a business from nothing, raised a large family and knows how to create order from chaos. When he invested his resources in New Holland, he also invested his programme in it: a programme of revival, a programme for transforming ruins into beauty and a programme for overcoming circumstances. Now, everyone who comes here at a turning point in their life connects to this energetic field.

Andrei had not merely stood beside the water and gazed at the reflection. He had absorbed the energy of the place. The energy of a man who had once said, 'I will restore this,' and then did so. A place destined for transformation. New Holland cannot remain static. It is destined to undergo

transformation, because each of its creators invested this programme within it—the programme of eternal renewal. Whoever sets foot upon this island with an open heart will never leave it unchanged.

The island remoulds. The island transforms. The island returns people to their essence. It is impossible to remain one's old self here. New Holland is the alchemical laboratory of St Petersburg.

Andrei is no longer the man who walked through the park with his head bowed. He now knows that places of power exist. That they are not accidental. That they are created by people—through their success, their energy and their belief in rebirth. Now, when he comes here with his son, he shows him more than beautiful architecture. He shows him a living lesson in transformation:

‘Look, son. This island was once a ruin. Now it is a paradise. Do you know why? Because there was a man who believed that a garden could grow from any ashes.’

His son looks at the reflection in the canal just as Andrei once did. And Andrei knows that one day this young man, too, will come here during a difficult moment in his life. The place will recognise him. And it will help him. Because it helps everyone who is ready to change.



The Energy of a Place Is Not a Metaphor

Many people believe that the ‘energy of a place’ is a poetic exaggeration. Yet those who have undergone a transformation at New Holland know that it is real. As real as the red-brick walls, the smooth surface of the canal and the reflection of an arch in the evening water.

The energy of the owner's personality is not an abstraction. It is an imprint that remains in the stone, the air and the water. Everyone who comes with a pure intention gains access to that imprint—to the programme of revival, the code of transformation and the key to the best version of themselves.

There is only one question: ‘Are you ready to accept it?’

New Holland is waiting. It is waiting for everyone who has grown weary of their old self; everyone who is ready to look at their own reflection without turning away; everyone who is ready to say, 'I will put this right. I will restore it. I will become better.' For this place knows that anything can be restored: ruins can become a masterpiece, devastation can become beauty and despair can become a new life. All that is required is the first step: to stop beside the canal, look at the reflection and remember who you truly are.

Chapter Three

Added Value or Losses from an Expert's Digital Capital

A Few Words About the Digital Footprint

Evening St Petersburg knows how to speak in signs. Sometimes, a single spark—quite literally—is enough to change the course of one's life. This was what happened to Marina K., the owner of a well-known women's business community in St Petersburg. While walking through Catherine Garden, she saw a fire performance. Tongues of flame swept past the monument to Catherine the Great—and at that moment, words from an interview with the expert Viktor Shkipin that she had watched that morning flashed through her mind. The interview had explored the importance of a personal brand. From that moment onwards, one thought never left her: a digital footprint is not what you publish, but what people think about you when they Google your name. It either brings you contracts while you sleep or takes them away—just as imperceptibly.



An expert's digital footprint encompasses everything they leave about themselves online: publications, interviews, photographs, comments, public appearances, testimonials, media mentions, old posts, stories, videos, reposts and profiles on professional platforms. It can function as an asset that increases the expert's value or as reputational ballast that quietly drains away money, status and opportunities. Your digital footprint is your amplified reputation. It works for you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—even while you sleep.

But do you know what your digital image looks like? What does it bring to your career? Added value or losses?

This marked the beginning of a long journey in redefining the meaning of Marina's self-presentation.

Marina immersed herself in studying the digital personae of leading experts around the world and made a discovery: every one of their publications had been meticulously considered—from the quotation to the camera angle. The most difficult part was letting go of 90 per cent of her usual content, which proved to be little more than informational noise, aligned neither with her status and objectives nor with professional ethics.

Without hesitation, she removed everything unnecessary. She retained only the ideas and substance that would lead her towards her cherished goals over the next five years. She heeded the advice of a specialist in aligning an expert's digital footprint with their professional standing and realised that today people Google your name before you have even had time to extend your hand in greeting. An expert's online image either opens the doors to the highest tier or quietly closes them.

When moving to the next level of one's career, the first task is to analyse what the internet says about you and determine how to correct it when the image it presents does not correspond to reality. The results will then follow: invitations to speak at international events, a several-fold increase in the value of one's services, enthusiastic feedback and even an outward transformation—because inner clarity is always reflected externally.

Having understood the deeper meaning of the digital footprint, Marina introduced a regular practice into her business community: the analysis of real-life cases that immediately demonstrated why a digital image either brings in millions or quietly destroys a career. Within a few months, every member's affairs had begun to prosper.

The first category comprises cases in which a digital footprint creates added value. An expert is discovered without advertising.

Consider a simple example. A management consultant regularly publishes analyses of business cases: how to reduce staff turnover, how to build an effective sales department and how a business owner can withdraw from day-to-day operations. What happens? The human resources director of a large company searches online for a specialist in 'How to reduce staff turnover in a sales department'. The search leads to the expert's article. As a result, the expert is invited to conduct a strategic session and subsequently to participate in a corporate project.

What, then, is the added value in this situation? One well-presented piece of expert material can generate a high-value lead, a corporate contract, an invitation to a conference and, even before the first meeting, a higher level of trust.

The principal effect is that the expert does not sell themselves directly—their digital footprint does the selling for them.

Second, publications increase the value of a consultation.

Consider another situation. Two experts provide the same service. One simply writes, 'I offer consultations.' The other has articles, interviews, videos of public appearances, client testimonials, case studies demonstrating results, professional photographs and quotations from the media.

What happens in this case? A client compares them online. Consequently, the first is perceived as a service provider, while the second is seen as an expert with an established reputation.

The added value is readily apparent. The second expert can charge not 5,000 roubles for a consultation, but 25,000–50,000 roubles, because their fee is substantiated by their image. The digital footprint transforms price into status.

Third, the expert begins to receive invitations to speak.

A financial expert regularly publishes analytical commentary on markets, investments, taxation and the mistakes made by entrepreneurs.

What happens in this situation? The organisers of a business forum are searching for a speaker. They see that the person already has a clearly defined position, articulate speech, publicly available materials, demonstrated expertise and a visibly professional image. As a result, the expert is invited to speak.

Is there added value here? Following the appearance, the expert's recognition increases, as do the value of their services, the trust of major clients and the number of incoming enquiries.

A strong digital footprint makes an expert an easy and appealing choice for organisers.

Fourth, photographs and a coherent visual style strengthen professional status.

Imagine that an expert publishes not random selfies but carefully constructed visual content: business portraits, meaningful images from events, working processes, public appearances, successful meetings and a professional environment.

What happens here? The audience unconsciously reads the following message: 'This person moves in the right circles. They are in demand. Their services command a premium.' It naturally follows that the expert receives higher-quality enquiries.

Once again, added value is created. The visual image helps a person move from the category of 'a specialist who provides a service' to that of 'an expert who is invited and chosen'.

At the next stage, testimonials become digital capital. The expert collects not merely words of gratitude, but structured testimonials explaining the original task, what was done, the result that was achieved and why this particular expert is recommended.

What happens in this case? A prospective client sees evidence of results.

Consequently, the fear associated with making a purchase diminishes, and the decision to book a consultation is made more quickly.

The added value comes from well-presented testimonials capable of replacing dozens of sales posts. Testimonials are more than social proof. They are an asset founded upon trust. An expert comment in the media can then increase the capital value of the person's name. The expert provides commentary for a business publication.

What happens in this case? When the expert's name is searched online, the results now show not only a personal page, but also a mention in an authoritative source. Consequently, clients perceive the expert as someone whose opinion commands attention.

Where does the added value lie? Even one high-quality media mention can increase trust, the value of consultations, the likelihood of being included in an event and the probability of receiving an invitation to participate in a major project.

Finally, there is the last case: the personal brand does the work of cold selling.

The expert maintains a professional blog systematically—not haphazardly, but according to a strategy comprising authoritative posts, case studies, videos, personal values, a clear professional position and social proof.

Clients naturally begin to warm to the expert before making contact. By the time they come for a consultation, trust has already been established. The expert therefore does not have to spend a long time explaining why their services command a high fee.

The added value here lies in the fact that a strong digital footprint shortens the client's journey from interest to payment.

Then come the cases involving losses caused by a poor digital footprint.

First, old posts undermine a new reputation. An expert may wish to enter the premium market, while their older publications contain harsh statements, toxic comments, political disputes, complaints about everyday life, disparaging remarks or reposts associated with conflict.

In such a case, a prospective client Googles the expert and sees not a professional, but an emotional person whose position appears unstable. The client therefore chooses a competitor.

An old digital footprint can consequently negate an entirely new professional positioning.

Another problem follows: too much personal content diminishes professional status. An expert may publish photographs of food, complaints about everyday life, family conflicts, random selfies, memes, emotional stories and everything else without any form of selection every single day.

Understandably, the audience ceases to regard that person as a professional. The expert becomes someone familiar and relatable, but no longer someone of high professional standing.

As a result, it becomes more difficult for this person to raise their fees, sell expensive consultations, work with a business audience or receive invitations to important events.

Excessive openness can devalue expertise.

A mismatch between image and price presents another problem. An expert may charge 50,000 roubles for a consultation, while their digital image consists of poor-quality photographs, a chaotic social-media feed, no case studies, no testimonials, no publications, no evidence of professional standing and an abundance of random content.

The client consequently thinks, 'What justifies such a price?' Even if the expert is genuinely highly competent, their digital footprint does not support the fee. A price must be substantiated by the image surrounding it.

It must also be remembered that an unsuccessful interview can remain in search results for years. Several years ago, an expert may have given an interview in which they made a controversial statement, attempted an ill-judged joke or expressed themselves too categorically. Today, that expert may work with an entirely different audience, yet the old video continues to appear in searches.

Prospective partners may well decide against working with the expert because they wish to avoid reputational risks. The internet remembers for far longer than people expect it to.

Nor should one forget that conflicts in comment sections deter clients. An expert may argue publicly in comments, respond aggressively, become defensive or disparage the opinions of others. Observers consequently conclude that the expert may be difficult to work with.

Even when the conflict itself was insignificant, it demonstrates the person's style of communication. For a business client, this represents a warning sign, because a comment is also part of an expert's professional reputation.

The final problem in this series is informational noise, which obscures what truly matters. An expert may have a large number of publications, but they have not been organised coherently: business today, the weather tomorrow, a holiday next, followed by a repost of someone else's news and then something personal...

Self-Awareness

...The performers' fire had long since gone out. Yet the spark that had ignited within Marina that evening beside the monument to Catherine continued to burn quietly. She now looked at St Petersburg differently. Each morning, the city offered her a new palette: the mist of dawn above the Neva, the golden Admiralty spire in the rays of sunset, the austere symmetry of the railings in the Summer Garden and the bold contrast of graffiti upon the walls of New Holland. In the past, she had walked straight past such things. Now she saw them.

It was here, in the Petersburg's Emporium, that Marina discovered the principal secret of a strong digital footprint: it was not merely a matter of words and case studies. It was a matter of visual literacy.

The community gave her something that could not be purchased through any course: an extraordinarily rich collection of the finest photographic and video perspectives on St Petersburg. Hundreds of meticulously composed images in which every bridge, palace, embankment and narrow street became not simply a backdrop, but a language. A language of status, taste and depth.

Something began to change. The more she looked, the more finely attuned her perception became: where to place an emphasis, what light to choose and which detail could say more about her than a thousand words. The chain of associations within her mind blossomed like a garden in spring: one image gave rise to ten, and ten to a hundred.

Marina realised with surprise that visual literacy was developing her just as profoundly as conventional educational courses. Yet it did so more gently, more deeply and more naturally—not because she was obliged to learn, but through her love of beauty.

Her digital footprint ceased to be 'content'. It became an art of meaning and success.

It became her.

Then one day, while rereading enthusiastic messages from new clients, scrolling through invitations to forums and catching the reflection of her new, calm and confident gaze in a shop window on Nevsky Prospekt, Marina understood a simple truth: there is life before the Petersburg's Emporium, and there is life after it. Between the two lies a chasm. Before, there had been noise,

haste, random images and a blurred identity. Afterwards came clarity, depth, recognition and that particular magnetism towards which people of status and major opportunities are naturally drawn.

The city had not changed. Marina had changed, because anyone who has once learnt to perceive the beauty and meanings of St Petersburg can never again see the world as they did before. That spark now burns within everyone who becomes part of the Petersburgers' Emporium and Marina K.'s business community.

Welcome to life after!

Chapter Four

How the Neva Broke Through Maxim's Production Ceiling

Sightseeing boats approached Palace Bridge in an unbroken procession.

The white night hung over St Petersburg as though the city had suspended the ordinary laws of time for a few hours. The waters of the Neva shimmered with multicoloured silver, while the night's greatest marvel counted down towards its appointed moment.

The opening of the bridges in St Petersburg is more than a spectacle. It is a moment when consciousness divides in two—like the leaves of an enormous gateway—and a person suddenly sees not only the city, but also themselves in a parallel reality.



Maxim stood beside the water and watched Palace Bridge slowly rise into the sky. At that very moment, his consciousness began to rise with it. Until recently, Maxim had considered his dream strange, almost frivolous: to live in a house upon the water, in a genuine modern houseboat, surrounded by reflections, white nights, bridges, boats and that distinctive freedom of life upon the water which could never be explained to anyone who had not stood beside the Neva at night.

He had heard about new materials, daring forms of construction, engineering solutions and people who chose such a life not for the sake of fashion, but because they could no longer live in any other way. Houseboat people were different. They did not merely live beside the water. They lived according to another rhythm. They awoke to a view of a city whose mood changed every day. They ate breakfast not before a wall, but before the movement of light. They thought differently, dreamt differently and made decisions differently.

Maxim understood with increasing clarity that this philosophy was close to him—not superficially, like a beautiful picture in a magazine, but profoundly, at the level of his inner configuration, his personal code and the very DNA of his development.

The boats continued towards Palace Bridge one after another. Suddenly, Maxim caught himself thinking, ‘What if there were queues like this for my snack bars—in every hypermarket across the country?’ The thought was audacious, perhaps excessively so. Yet those are precisely the thoughts that break through ceilings.

He imagined the shelves of nationwide retail chains. People choosing his product above all others. Queues, repeat purchases, recognisable packaging and scale: a production operation that no longer struggled to keep pace with demand, but confidently led the market forwards.

Then came the principal realisation: his product needed a new value. It could not merely offer flavour, a convenient snack or yet another bar on a supermarket shelf. It needed an idea in which people wanted to believe. It needed to become a product chosen not merely to satisfy hunger, but to shape a person’s state of being.

Maxim closed his eyes. He knew that St Petersburg possessed a particular energy. Here, thoughts acquired greater dimension. Desires became more honest. Dreams, if one gazed at the water for long enough, suddenly began to demand a plan. He made a wish. At that very moment, an idea seemed to enter him through the sound of the Neva, the light of the white night and the slow sweep of the rising bridge:

‘The bars must become more than a snack; they must become an alchemy of inner states. There should be a special range containing unusual micronutrients, each of which triggers a chain reaction, changing a person’s state and the succession of events throughout the day, the week... their life. The new customer chooses their own particular micronutrient to reset their state and selects the inner impulse they need.’

Therein lay the magic of transformation: not a medical formula or an extravagant promise, but a subtle, beautiful and contemporary product philosophy—food as a small ritual through which one’s state of being could be changed.

Maxim opened his eyes. Palace Bridge was rising before him, while a new version of his business was rising within him. At first, he felt afraid, because a genuine idea always exacts a price: rebranding, new packaging, research, technologists, increased production capacity, negotiations with retail chains, a team, money, risks... actions for which, only yesterday, he had not been prepared.

Maxim understood that if he accepted this idea, there would be no turning back. The old level would become too confined. The old production operation would become too small. The old way of thinking would become too safe. Yet that was precisely the sign. If a dream does not frighten you, it may be too small.

Maxim then did what distinguishes an entrepreneur from a mere dreamer. He did not wait for the perfect moment. He telephoned Kristina. He had met her at a diplomatic reception held during the 2026 St Petersburg International Economic Forum. Their conversation that evening had been light, almost social. Yet Maxim remembered what mattered most: Kristina spoke about scaling a business as though expansion to the nationwide and international levels were not an unattainable summit,

but a route that could be mapped intelligently. She spoke about entrepreneurs who came to her with a strong product but indistinct positioning—and emerged with a new strategy, new partners, a clearly articulated meaning for their brand and a road towards the major market.

Maxim was no longer speaking out of curiosity. He spoke like a man whom the Neva had just pushed away from the safety of his familiar shore. Kristina listened carefully. Then she said, ‘You do not merely have a product. You may have an entirely new category. You should not be selling bars. You should be selling an alchemy of inner states.’

Her words brought everything together. Then began the very chain reaction which, only an hour earlier, Maxim had regarded solely as a concept for his product.

Yet St Petersburg has a way of confirming ideas through events.

By one of those coincidences that are not coincidences at all, it emerged that Kristina’s partners were engaged in houseboat manufacturing and water-based development. They were the very people, the very environment and the very philosophy of life upon the water of which Maxim had dreamt while standing beside Palace Bridge.

One acquaintance led to another; one conversation led to a strategic session; one idea led to a new brand; one evening beside the Neva led to a plan for scaling production. The work began—not chaotically or emotionally, but with precision, maturity and entrepreneurial discipline. The visual concept was renewed, the positioning was reconstructed and a range of bars designed for different moods and moments of the day was created. Production began preparing for growth. The product acquired new meanings that divided people’s lives into a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. The packaging became more than beautiful: it became an expression of the houseboat owner’s DNA.

Most importantly, Maxim’s thinking was transformed. He ceased to see himself merely as a producer of snack bars and became a strategist shaping his customers’ philosophy of life. He began to think like the creator of a nationwide brand.

A year passed. On St Petersburg City Day, fireworks blossomed above the city. Their lights fell into the Neva, dissolved upon the water and flared across windows, faces and glasses. Maxim stood on the deck of his new home upon the water—the very house overlooking St Petersburg. His dream was no longer somewhere in the future, upon a vision board, among saved images or in conversations about ‘someday’. It had become the space in which he welcomed his guests.

Music played inside his houseboat. Laughter mingled with the sound of the water. On the table lay bars from the new range—no longer an experiment, but a brand that people knew, discussed and purchased.

One of the guests said, ‘Maxim, this is incredible. How did you achieve all this?’

He smiled and looked at the Neva. The answer was simple. It had not been devised in an office, extracted from a spreadsheet or suggested by the surrounding commotion. St Petersburg had shown it to him—St Petersburg as a point of transition.

Some cities embellish life. Others turn it in an entirely new direction. St Petersburg belongs to the latter kind. It does not merely offer beautiful views. It gives a person an entirely new scale of perception. Here, a single perspective can become a solution, one evening beside the water can

mark the beginning of a strategy and one bridge can become a symbol of transition. The residents and visitors of St Petersburg possess a subtle ability to transform desires into actions. They observe, remember, gather images, perceive associations and turn their impressions into new routes, products, projects, brands and destinies.

For them, the Petersburger's Emporium becomes a space where the finest photographic and video perspectives on the city function as far more than beautiful pictures. They become fuel for thought, a means of cultivating visual literacy, keys to new ideas and visual messages from a city that knows how to speak to those who are prepared to listen.

On that white night, Maxim came to the Neva with a dream of a home upon the water and departed with an idea that broke through the ceiling of his production operation. This is sometimes how things happen in St Petersburg: you look at a rising bridge, yet what you truly see is your own life beginning to rise; you watch a procession of boats, while within you there appears an image of customers queuing for your product; you make a wish, and the city answers not with a miracle, but with action. This happens because the true magic of St Petersburg lies not in fulfilling dreams, but in compelling a person to become someone capable of fulfilling them.

The Petersburger's Emporium is a place where perspectives upon the city become perspectives upon a new life.

You become part of it—and one day you realise that your ceiling has not merely been broken through: its boundaries have dissolved through synergy... And there it is—a parallel reality made manifest!

Chapter Five

Quantum Relationships. Code Word: CARRIAGE

Quantum Consciousness

Maria first heard the expression ‘quantum consciousness’ at one of the gatherings held by the Petersburg’s Emporium community. The phrase sounded beautiful, almost magical. It held something of physics, something of philosophy and something of hope. Maria, being honest and inquisitive by nature, decided to understand what it meant.

She read articles, listened to lectures, copied phrases into the notes on her phone and rewatched videos on her way home as the rain-soaked façades of St Petersburg drifted past the bus window. Yet the more deeply she immersed herself in the subject, the more difficult it became to explain it in simple terms. She particularly wanted to explain it to Sergei. Sergei was a practical man: he valued clarity, precision and phrases free from fog.

‘Masha, just explain it to me plainly,’ he would say, taking off his glasses and wearily rubbing the bridge of his nose.

‘What does “changing our consciousness” actually mean? Are we now going to meditate instead of paying the mortgage?’

Maria remained silent. Not because she did not know the answer, but because she knew too much and could not reduce it to two simple words. Yet she needed him so badly to understand when love begins to move in circles.

Her life with Sergei was good. Precisely that—good. It was not bad, broken or empty. They shared breakfasts, shopping lists, holiday plans, conversations about renovations, a mortgage, work, exhaustion, family group chats, obligations and the familiar evening question:

‘What’s for dinner?’

Yet somewhere between grocery deliveries, paying the bills and Sunday trips to the DIY shop, something essential had disappeared. They had lost the feeling that they were moving together towards an adventure. Life had come to resemble a carefully prepared spreadsheet: income, expenditure, deadlines, objectives and responsibilities.

Maria increasingly found herself experiencing a strange sensation: it was as though she and Sergei were not living, but merely maintaining their own life script. And that script had not been written by them. It had been passed down imperceptibly by their parents, acquaintances, advertising and society—by that persistent notion that ‘this is how normal people are supposed to live’.

First education. Then work. Next marriage, followed by a mortgage. After that, a new flat. Then a country house. The next step was a larger car. Then came a holiday ‘like everyone else’s’. Endless renovations. Work. And then the entire cycle began again.

Maria did not want to destroy their relationship. On the contrary, she wanted to save it. Not from infidelity or dramatic arguments, nor from some catastrophe, but from a far quieter enemy: the routine that does not kill love at once, but slowly renders it invisible. She sensed that if their relationship was to reach a new level, they needed more than a higher income, more frequent holidays or new furniture. They needed to change their way of thinking.

But how could she explain this to Sergei? How could she tell him that their happiness did not have to be reached solely through hardship, loans, constant tension and the pursuit of other people's aspirations? How could she tell him that a dream might arrive in another way?

Not through struggle, but through trust, attentiveness, inspiration and unexpected doors opening where no one had planned them.

An Epiphany on a St Petersburg Street

That day, they were walking through the centre of St Petersburg. The city was in one of its distinctive moods: damp air, a pale sky and façades upon which the past conversed with the present. Sergei walked beside her with his hands in the pockets of his coat. Maria was once again attempting to explain quantum consciousness to him.

'You see, it isn't about doing nothing,' she said. 'It's about no longer thinking solely in terms of the old tools.'

'What tools?' Sergei asked with an amused smile.

'Well... formulaic ones. Predictable ones. The kind we seem to have been given together with the instruction manual for adult life.'

Sergei looked at her with that particular smile in which affection, patience and gentle masculine irony were combined.

'Masha, what you're saying sounds beautiful. But I still don't understand.'

She sighed. At that very moment, they saw a carriage—a genuine horse-drawn carriage. It moved slowly along the street, its wheels creaking softly. The horse drew it forwards at an unhurried pace. Inside sat tourists, smiling and filming on their phones as though they had captured a fragment of old St Petersburg within a contemporary frame. Cars swept past the carriage one after another—fast, gleaming and noisy. They overtook it effortlessly, scarcely noticing it at all.

Maria stopped. Everything within her suddenly fell into place. It was as though thoughts that had long remained scattered had finally formed a single, lucid image. She seized Sergei by the sleeve.

'Sergei, look!'

'At what?'

'Do you see that carriage?'

'Yes, I see it.'

'That's us.'

He looked at her more closely.

‘What do you mean?’

Maria pointed towards the carriage being patiently drawn by the horse.

‘That is us and our plans at present. It is how we imagine our best life: a mortgage, loans, a new flat, a country house, cars, travel, status, all those things we “must” have, that it is “time” to achieve and that are “what everyone else has”. We are sitting inside that carriage, believing it to be the only way of reaching happiness.’

Sergei said nothing. Maria continued, her voice growing increasingly confident.

‘The quantum principle begins when you suddenly understand that a dream does not have to travel by carriage when other speeds, other roads and other possibilities already exist all around you. It means being capable of abandoning formulaic tools for achieving your goals.’

She looked at him as though she were speaking not merely about the carriage, but about their entire life.

‘It means dreaming without imposing your old methods of fulfilling that dream upon destiny. You no longer say, “It can only happen through a mortgage”, “only through a loan”, “only through exhausting work”, “only as our parents did it” or “only in the accepted way”. You allow yourself to dream—and then release the dream.’

Sergei was no longer smiling. He was listening—truly listening.

‘And then,’ Maria said quietly, ‘destiny finds its own path of least resistance towards the dream—a path best suited to the point we have reached in our development. Not someone else’s path, not one imposed upon us, but our own.’

Another car passed them, followed by another. The carriage continued to move slowly and gracefully, but to Maria it was no longer merely a tourist attraction. It had become a sign. Sergei gazed at her for a long moment, then at the carriage and then back at Maria.

‘So, what you are saying,’ he began slowly, ‘is that we can want a better life without having to drag it upon our own shoulders like that horse?’

Maria smiled.

‘Yes.’

‘And we don’t have to choose only the paths everyone else considers correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘And if we stop clinging to one particular script, other possibilities may appear?’

‘Precisely.’

Sergei smiled, but differently this time—not sceptically, but warmly.

‘Now I understand.’

A New Game for Two

From that day onwards, a strange, remarkable and intensely vivid period began in their lives. They did not become different people overnight. They did not leave their jobs, abandon their responsibilities or turn their lives into an endless conversation about the Universe. But they began to notice things—and that proved more powerful than any abrupt transformation. They learnt to recognise patterns, initially in major decisions.

‘Do we definitely need that particular kind of flat? Or do we simply think it is “time to move somewhere larger”?’

‘Do we genuinely want a country house? Or does it seem as though adult life somehow does not count without one?’

‘Do we dream of travelling there because that is where we truly wish to go? Or because everyone else keeps posting photographs from that place?’

Then they began to notice patterns in their conversations.

‘Wait,’ Sergei said one day in the middle of an argument. ‘I’m speaking in my father’s voice.’

Maria laughed.

‘And I’m replying in my mother’s.’

They fell silent. Then they both began to laugh—not maliciously or nervously, but like children who had discovered a secret passage in a wall. They suddenly saw that even their arguments were often not truly their own. They were not arguing as Maria and Sergei, but as an entire chorus of inherited family scripts, social expectations and old fears.

‘Well,’ Maria said, wiping away tears of laughter, ‘I think we may just have moved a little closer to quantum consciousness.’

‘Congratulations to us,’ Sergei replied solemnly. ‘One pattern eliminated.’

From that moment, they had a new game. Whenever either of them noticed an automatic reaction, they would say:

‘Carriage!’



The word became their password. Maria would begin to worry that they were ‘falling behind’ acquaintances who had already bought a second car. Sergei would say:

‘Carriage.’

And she would stop.

Sergei would become irritated and insist that he urgently needed to ‘sort the matter out like a man’—to apply pressure, accelerate events and force a result. Maria would gently ask:

‘Is that really you speaking—or is it the carriage?’

And he would pause to think.

Sometimes they laughed, sometimes they argued and sometimes Maria cried, because releasing old scripts proved far more difficult than speaking beautifully about it during a walk. Yet each time they returned to what mattered most: they no longer wanted to drag their dream upon their own shoulders. They wanted to move towards it fully alive.

When a Dream Arrives by Another Route

Gradually, their life began to change—not with a bang or as a miracle from an advertisement, but subtly, almost imperceptibly. Maria stopped accepting projects that drained her strength merely because she believed that she ‘had to hold on to stability’. Suddenly, space opened for the work that had long been calling to her. Sergei began to speak about what genuinely interested him, rather than only about what appeared ‘promising’. Unexpectedly, he received an offer in a field he had never previously considered in earnest. They stopped planning holidays as obligatory periods of recovery from burnout. Instead, they began to arrange small journeys within St Petersburg: new routes, courtyards, bridges, coffee houses, embankments and conversations without telephones.

Then one day they understood that their life together had once again become a journey for two—not a perfect one, but a genuine one. In the past, they had constructed happiness like a project, with deadlines, objectives, workloads and control. Now they regarded it as a space within which they could be attentive, courageous and honest.

Most remarkably, their dreams had not disappeared. On the contrary, they had become more vivid. Maria and Sergei simply no longer clenched them in their fists. They dreamt while allowing the world an opportunity to surprise them.

The Petersburgers’ Emporium as a Place Where Perspectives Change

Later, Maria often recalled the gathering at the Petersburgers’ Emporium where she had first heard about quantum consciousness. She understood that sometimes a person does not need a ready-made solution. Sometimes they need a new way of seeing, a new perspective and a new inner vantage point from which familiar life suddenly becomes not a dead end, but a map of possibilities.

At the Petersburgers’ Emporium, Maria found more than ideas. She found a language through which she could speak to herself, to her husband and to her destiny. Her relationship with Sergei did not become a fairy tale. It became better, deeper, freer, more honest and stronger.

They now understood that love is not a carriage that must be dragged with the last of one's strength along an ancient road. Love is a living space in which two people can choose trust over fear every day. Creativity over convention. A path of least resistance over hardship.

Epilogue

Some time later, Sergei himself said to Maria:

'You know, I think I now understand what quantum relationships are.'

She smiled.

'And what are they?'

He looked out of the window. Beyond the glass, the lights of evening St Petersburg were coming on, reflected in the rain-slicked asphalt.

'They are what happens when we stop trying to remake each other to fit an old dream. Instead, together, we become the kind of people whom a new dream can find of its own accord.'

Maria remained silent, because she could not have expressed it any better herself.

And somewhere in the city, perhaps, that same carriage was once again passing by—beautiful, old-fashioned and obstinate. Yet Maria and Sergei now knew that one could admire it without having to live inside it. True closeness begins where two people cease to carry the past upon their shoulders and ask one another for the first time: 'What if our best life can come more easily, more brightly and by an entirely different route?' The most exciting journey of all begins with that question.

Chapter Six

The Unique DNA of a Petersburger

Prologue. A City on the Border Between Worlds

St Petersburg has always stood on more than the banks of the Neva. It has stood on a border. On the border between Russia and Europe. On the border between an imperial capital and a northern port. On the border between the sound of Orthodox bells and a Lutheran choir. On the border between the Russian breadth of soul and the Western habit of measuring, recording and calculating everything. Here, the stone was cold, but the people were warm. Here, the wind from the Gulf of Finland brought European rigour, while an infinite, gentle strength flowed from the Russian heartland: songs, tales, crafts, faith, patience, devotion to family and the ability to endure.

For many years, St Petersburg was the capital of Russia—a place to which the finest minds, craftsmen, architects, musicians, soldiers, merchants, philosophers, engineers and artists were drawn. Germans, Finns, Swedes, Frenchmen, Italians, Poles, Armenians, Tatars, Jews, Karelians, Vepsians, Russians from different provinces and countless other people met here, each bringing to the city their own language, cuisine, way of thinking and form of prayer. To all of this was added the diversity of social estates.

The result was a distinctive St Petersburg code.

At the Petersburger's Emporium, Louise saw an old photograph for the first time.

It showed a family: a stern bearded man, a woman in a pale dress with the slender fingers of a pianist, two children and a sign behind them:

‘Ivanov and Müller Trading House. Tea, Books and Drawing Instruments’

Louise gazed at the sign for a long time.

‘Ivanov and Müller?’ she asked. ‘Were they business partners?’

‘More than partners,’ the keeper of the Emporium replied with a smile. ‘They are the history of St Petersburg embodied in a single family.’

And so the story began.

Nikolai Ivanov was the son of a Russian merchant from Tver Province. He believed in open roads, a man's word and agreements made face to face. To him, a person mattered more than a piece of paper. He could shake someone's hand and consider the deal concluded. Yekaterina Müller was the daughter of a German pharmacist from Vasilyevsky Island. She believed in order, precision, bookkeeping and calculation. To her, every kopeck had to be recorded, every risk identified and every agreement formally certified.

When they married, their relatives on both sides did not immediately understand the union.

The Russians said:

‘She is too cold. Everything must be done according to the clock and according to the rules.’

The Germans said:

‘He is too freewheeling. He decides one thing today and another tomorrow. How can anyone conduct business like that?’

Yet Nikolai and Yekaterina looked at one another and learnt. He taught her Russian hospitality: when there is always room at the table for one more person, even when scarcely any food remains. She taught him how to plan: when love for one’s work must reside not only in the heart, but also in the account book.

He would say:

‘We must take a risk. Great fortune comes to those who are unafraid.’

She would reply:

‘We must take the right risk. Great fortune favours those who calculate the consequences.’

That was precisely how their shared business was born.

Their shop was unusual even by the standards of St Petersburg. One shelf held tea brought through merchant connections from the Russian heartland and from eastern lands. Another displayed German drawing instruments. Books were sold beside the window: Russian lives of the saints, French novels, German treatises and albums depicting views of St Petersburg. Nikolai was responsible for connections, negotiations, personal relationships and bold decisions. Yekaterina was responsible for contracts, quality, packaging, deliveries and risk assessment. He saw the market as a realm of possibilities.

She saw it as a system of obligations.

He would ask:

‘Whom can we help?’

She would add:

‘And how can we ensure that it will still work ten years from now?’

In this way, two different perspectives strengthened one another. And therein lay the whole of St Petersburg.

At home, their differences revealed themselves even more vividly. Nikolai wanted to travel to Staraya Ladoga and Novgorod, to monasteries and the ancient roots of Russia. Yekaterina proposed Vyborg, Riga and Stockholm—to see how harbours, schools, workshops and museums were organised. In the end, their children saw both.

They knew that Russia meant depth and boundless expanses. Nikolai told the children epic tales, taught them not to fear difficulties, to respect their elders and to keep their word. Yekaterina taught them languages, music, precision and the habit of asking:

‘Why?’

Thus, the children grew up not between two worlds, but within both worlds at once. Nikolai’s home was open: if someone came to the house, they had to be fed. Yekaterina’s home was well ordered: if someone came to the house, everything had to be arranged so that they felt comfortable, peaceful and surrounded by beauty.

Their guests would say:

‘The Ivanov-Müller household is a special place. There, the Russian soul and European order do not quarrel.’

On Sundays, Nikolai took the family to a church service and then for a walk beside the Neva. Yekaterina took them to a concert, lecture or exhibition. From childhood, their children understood: a person must nourish the soul, the mind and the sense of beauty. Their daughter Sofia became that new kind of St Petersburg woman. For her, there was no choice to be made between ‘Russian’ and ‘European’. She did not divide the world so readily into what was hers and what belonged to others. From her father, she inherited breadth of vision, intuition and the ability to understand people. From her mother, she inherited discipline, attention to detail and a love of order. She could speak to a merchant in the language of trust, to an engineer, in the language of calculation, to an artist, in the language of images, to a scholar, in the language of ideas.

It was here that the uniqueness of St Petersburg was born. A child of St Petersburg often grew up not within a single tradition, but at the crossroads of many traditions. From childhood, such a child heard different intonations, observed different ways of life and learnt to translate not only words, but meanings. In this way, a distinctive ability emerged—the ability to unite the seemingly irreconcilable. It was no coincidence that great schools of thought arose and flourished here.

The School of Music

St Petersburg heard church singing, European symphonies, folk songs and military marches. A powerful musical tradition was formed here—from the Conservatoire to the great composers, from Rimsky-Korsakov to Shostakovich. The music of St Petersburg often sounds like the city itself: austere, tragic and majestic, yet filled with an inner light.

The School of Art

The Academy of Arts, architects, sculptors and painters—all of these created a distinctive visual culture. People here were taught to do more than draw. They were taught to see form, proportion, light and the dignity of space.

The School of Mathematics

The St Petersburg mathematical tradition is a particular source of pride. Precision, abstraction, rigorous proof and the ability to think systematically—all of these became part of the city’s intellectual identity.

Ballet, Engineering, Literature and Medicine

St Petersburg proved to be a city of schools in every respect. Not merely institutions, but genuine schools of thought. For centuries, something fundamental had been taking place here: different traditions did not merely collide; they learnt to work together. In business, this cultural code reveals itself particularly vividly.

One partner thinks with Russian breadth:

‘We must choose a direction. If we sense that the moment has come, we move.’

The other thinks with Western structure:

‘First, we calculate the risks, test the hypotheses and construct a model.’

One says:

‘Trust is what matters most.’

The other replies:

‘Trust is wonderful, but a contract is necessary as well.’

One sees strategy as a historical mission. The other sees it as a road map. One knows how to inspire people. The other knows how to prevent the system from disintegrating. When they do not attempt to defeat one another, the strongest possible alliance is born. Such a business does not fly blindly. Nor does it remain motionless out of fear. It knows how to dream—and it knows how to calculate.

Within a family, this code is equally invaluable. St Petersburg families born at the intersection of cultures often possess the most important ability of all: the ability to see a situation from both sides. In the upbringing of children, this becomes a source of strength. A child is taught: ‘be free, but responsible,’ ‘respect tradition, but do not fear the new,’ ‘remember your ancestors, but speak to the world,’ ‘have roots, but do not lose your wings.’

From childhood, such a child understands: different perspectives do not always mean conflict. Sometimes they mean richness. Such children learn to reach agreement more quickly. They perceive people more sensitively. They move more easily between different environments. They understand history more profoundly.

That is why children raised at the meeting point of different cultural codes often possess a rare gift: contradictions do not break them—they know how to transform contradictions into creativity.

Louise closed the old album.

Beyond the window, St Petersburg murmured: a tram chimed at the crossroads, the wind stirred the signs, somewhere in the distance a bell was ringing, while tourists photographed the façades without suspecting how many destinies were concealed within every stone.

‘So being a Petersburger is not a nationality?’ she asked.

The keeper of the Emporium smiled.

‘No. Being a Petersburger is a way of uniting worlds.’

‘And the DNA?’

‘Cultural DNA. The memory that this city was built not upon sameness, but upon a complex harmony. For centuries, people of different origins, languages, customs and social estates lived here. They argued, fell in love, formed families, opened shops, built houses and taught their children. From all of this, a distinctive kind of person emerged.’

‘What kind?’

‘Someone who can be Russian in depth, European in form, northern in endurance and global in scale.’

Louise looked at the Neva. And suddenly she understood: St Petersburg was more than a city. It was an immense family history in which almost everyone was the descendant of an encounter.



Epilogue. The Uniqueness of St Petersburg

The uniqueness of St Petersburg does not lie in everything having proceeded smoothly here. Quite the opposite. Different mentalities, philosophies and ideas about family, power, work, beauty, risk and the future all met here. Yet it was precisely within this tension that strength was born.

St Petersburg learnt to live upon the border not as a line of division, but as a birthplace of the new. Here, Russian warmth of spirit encountered European structure. Here, imperial scale encountered private initiative. Here, faith encountered science. Here, art encountered mathematics. Here, family memory encountered world culture.

A Petersburger is therefore a person with a distinctive inner constitution. Such a person can argue with themselves. They can doubt and still act. They can love tradition while remaining open to the new. They can see beauty both in the austere line of a bridge and in a chance gleam of light upon wet cobblestones.

Children of St Petersburg born into families of different cultures often carry within themselves not conflict, but a precious synthesis. They become interpreters between worlds—in family life, art, science, business, education and urban culture.

This is what distinguishes St Petersburg from the rest of the world. It is more than a city upon a map. It is a laboratory of human connection. Here, different bloodlines became one family. Different ideas became one school. Different traditions became one destiny.

And if St Petersburg possesses a cultural DNA, this is what it says: Remember your roots. Look further. Unite the best. Create the future.

That is why the life of a Petersburger is always more than a biography. It is a continuation of the history of a city that once became a window onto Europe, and then a mirror of Russia, in which the entire world saw her complexity, depth and genius.

Chapter Seven

The Code of Masculine Character. An Insight into Masculinity

At Kazan Cathedral

Pavel stopped beside Kazan Cathedral by chance. At least, that was how it seemed to him at first. The day was clear and passers-by moved quickly, for each of them carried within themselves not only their daily affairs, but their own Universe. Pavel was walking without any particular destination. He simply wanted to take a stroll, clear his head and escape the anxious thoughts that had lately been growing ever more persistent.



His work no longer brought him any joy. At home, he was silent more and more often. He spoke briefly to his wife, Darina, spent less time with his son and rarely telephoned his mother, excusing himself on the grounds that he was busy. He appeared to be living the normal life of an adult man, yet an unsettling question sounded ever more frequently within him: ‘What is my true value?’

It was at that very moment that he raised his eyes and saw them. Against the majestic façade of Kazan Cathedral stood two figures—Kutuzov and Barclay de Tolly, military commanders whose memorials had been erected in the very heart of the imperial capital not for the sake of beauty, but for the sake of remembrance. It seemed to Pavel that long shadows extended from the monuments—not physical shadows, but historical ones. The shadows of people who, in their time, had possessed no right to hide, to refuse or to shift responsibility onto others.

Suddenly, Pavel recalled some words from an interview with ‘that very same Kharsky’ which he had once heard and, for some reason, had never been able to forget: ‘Every self-aware person must answer this question: who will pay for his existence in adult life? Who benefits from this particular person living on planet Earth?’

At the time, the phrase had seemed harsh to him, even strange. Yet now, standing before the figures of Kutuzov and Barclay de Tolly, Pavel understood that those words contained not cruelty, but precision. Adult life does not ask whether becoming strong is convenient for you. One day, it simply places you before the façade of your own cathedral and says: ‘Answer me. For whose sake do you live? What do you bring into this world? Whose life is better because you are here?’

Pavel looked at the commanders and, for the first time in a long while, made no attempt to justify himself. He realised that he had spent far too much of his life waiting: waiting for the right opportunity to appear, for circumstances to become easier, for someone to support him, notice him, invite him or make him an offer. Yet the men whose bronze figures stood before him had not waited for ideal conditions. They had acted.

Then another quotation from Kharsky came to mind: ‘The goal is not the most important thing. What matters is finding the instrument with which to achieve it. Most people stop once they have defined their dream. Only those who have gained true insight work tirelessly to find the instruments through which it can be realised.’

At Home

Pavel walked slowly along the cathedral. Suddenly, he understood that for many years he had confused dreaming with movement: he had dreamt of a better life, a strong family, a respectable income, respect, inner strength and a son who would be proud of him. Yet the dream alone changed nothing. It needed an instrument: not a beautiful desire, an inspiring image or conversations about the future, but daily action. Pavel began to recall exactly what actions he had taken after becoming a husband and father.

That evening, Pavel returned home and took an old volume of War and Peace from the shelf. He had not intended to read for long. He merely wanted to leaf through it. Yet the book opened as though it had been waiting for him. Once again, he encountered the images of the commanders: Kutuzov—outwardly slow and weary, scarcely resembling the hero of a formal portrait, yet behind that simplicity lay extraordinary inner strength: patience, wisdom, an understanding of the people, the ability not to succumb to turmoil and to make a difficult decision when everyone expected a spectacular gesture; and Barclay de Tolly—reserved, cold in the eyes of many, misunderstood and condemned, a man who had been forced to withstand pressure, mistrust and accusations while continuing to do what he believed was necessary to save the army.

As Pavel read, he felt that masculine character did not mean a loud voice, harshness, the ability to argue until one prevailed or an outward display of confidence. Masculine character meant the ability to bear responsibility even when others failed to understand you. It meant possessing the strength to make a decision when every possible choice would be difficult. It meant being prepared to serve as a source of support, not because anyone would praise you, but because there was no other way.

Kutuzov bore responsibility for the army and the country. Barclay bore responsibility for a strategy that many refused to accept. And Pavel? For the first time, he asked himself honestly: ‘For whom am I responsible?’

For several days after that walk, Pavel did not feel like himself. He went to work, answered messages, bought groceries and spoke to Darina, but another conversation was taking place within him. He longed to draw even slightly closer to those heroic figures that stood frozen beside Kazan Cathedral.

But where should he begin? Enrol on a course? Change jobs? Start a business? Leave? Set himself a great objective? Draw up a five-year plan? He sensed that all of these things might be important, but none of them was the first step. The first step had to lie closer to home.

One evening, Pavel's mother telephoned him. Her voice was cheerful, though slightly hesitant.

'Pasha, come to dinner at my house. I miss all of you terribly—you, Darina and my grandson. I haven't seen all of you together for such a long time.'

Pavel was about to give his customary reply: 'We'll see. I have a lot to do.' Yet, for some reason, he could not. After a pause, he said:

'All right, Mum. I'll speak to Darina.'

He telephoned his wife.

'Darin, Mum has invited us to dinner. She says she misses you and our son.'

There was a brief silence at the other end of the line.

'Let's go,' Darina said. 'It really would make her happy.'

Pavel suddenly realised that Darina had never expected great feats from him, only simple involvement.

Nothing unusual happened at his mother's dinner table. There were potatoes, salad, hot tea and familiar family conversations. His son laughed and showed his drawings to his grandmother. Darina helped to set the table. His mother looked at all of them as though that evening were a genuine celebration for her.

Suddenly, Pavel saw what he had failed to see before: his mother was not growing any younger, his wife cherished sincere attention and care, and his son looked at him and learnt how to be a man not from words, but from example. If Pavel wanted to become strong, he did not need to begin with grand historical gestures. He needed to begin with his family—with those who were already beside him and those to whom it genuinely mattered that he lived upon this planet.

That evening, he understood that a man's first true actions are performed neither in a public square, nor in his manager's office, nor before an audience of strangers. They are performed at home, where one ceases to be a boy waiting to be understood and becomes a man who creates a source of support himself.

An Instant Coming of Age

Pavel made no grand speeches and did not announce that a new life would begin on Monday. Something within him simply changed. He became more attentive to his mother. He telephoned her not 'out of obligation', but because he had understood that a connection with one's family line was not sentimentality, but a foundation. He began to see Darina differently—not as someone obliged to

‘understand his difficulties’, but as the woman beside whom he was responsible for the quality of their life together. He began to spend more time with his son—not merely entertaining him in between other tasks, but being truly present: listening, explaining, playing, teaching and asking questions.

He began to take responsibility for everything he had previously postponed: decisions, conversations, household matters, financial plans, family arrangements and the atmosphere at home. Most remarkably, the world responded—not immediately, but unmistakably. Pavel began to conduct himself differently at work: more calmly, with greater composure and closer attention to his tasks. He stopped complaining about the absence of prospects and began searching for an instrument.

Where could he grow? Which skill should he strengthen? Whom should he speak to? What responsibility could he assume? What problem could he solve in such a way that his value would become evident?

After some time, he was offered a more responsible position. This was not because destiny had suddenly become kind, but because Pavel had become someone upon whom others could rely. No, his trials did not disappear: deadlines were missed, negotiations were difficult, mistakes were made, sleep was lost, there were conversations he wished to avoid and days when retreat seemed easier than continuing. At such moments, however, Pavel returned in his thoughts to Kazan Cathedral, to Kutuzov, to Barclay de Tolly, to the pages of Tolstoy and to those people who had made decisions not under ideal conditions, but under the pressure of fear, exhaustion, incomprehension and enormous stakes. Pavel would tell himself: ‘My trials are nothing compared with theirs. Therefore, I must continue.’ He did not diminish the significance of his own difficulties. He simply stopped using them as an excuse.

The changes became most noticeable at home. Darina seemed to blossom. Pavel began to support her not merely in words, but through his actions. He listened to her ideas, helped to free up her time, assumed some of her responsibilities and took an interest in her creative work not out of politeness, but with genuine respect. Darina wrote songs and performed her own work. Previously, she had lacked confidence, time and inner permission. Now, beside her stood a man who did not drag her down through anxiety and irritation, but helped her to grow.

Gradually, her creative work began to find an audience: first among friends, then at small venues, followed by recordings and, later, messages from people who wrote to her: ‘Your song touched me straight in the heart.’ Darina became a popular performer of her own songs.

As Pavel watched her, he understood another important truth: masculine strength reveals itself not in suppressing another person’s light, but in the ability to create a space in which that light can shine more brightly. Their union grew stronger before their eyes. Friends who were experiencing crises in their own relationships asked them with increasing frequency:

‘How did you do it?’

Pavel did not know how to give a brief answer. Deep within himself, however, he understood that it had begun neither with relationship psychology, nor with a motivational course, nor with outward

success. It had begun when, one day, he looked at the shadows of the military commanders and ceased to evade the question of his own responsibility.

One day, after a particularly difficult day at work, Pavel became aware of a new state within himself. In the past, whenever a problem arose, he had immediately descended into a negative scenario: 'Everything has fallen apart! Another run of bad luck! What if it doesn't work? What if they blame me? What if we lose money? What if I make a mistake? What if everything collapses?'

Such thoughts drained his strength even before he had begun to act.

Now, he behaved differently. As soon as a difficulty arose, he did not feed his fear. Instead of replaying a catastrophe in his mind, he began to envisage the path towards a solution. He saw himself acting, saw the conversation that needed to take place, saw the decision that needed to be made and saw the result that had to be achieved. The task then seemed to cease being a trial. It became a route.

Pavel called this his insight into masculinity: 'At a moment of difficulty, you must not allow yourself to be distracted by a negative scenario. You must immediately visualise your actions and the result—and then the best possible solution will reveal itself.' It was as though his consciousness were being reconfigured. It was as though, at the point of choice, reality truly began to arrange itself differently—not around fear, but around action.

Sometimes he smiled and called it 'quantum consciousness'—not as a scientific formula, but as a personal metaphor. While a person observes fear, they strengthen fear. When a person observes action, they strengthen action.

Gradually, Pavel noticed a remarkable pattern. The more tasks he solved in this way, the less chaotic life appeared. In the past, events had repeated themselves in circles: the same conflict, the same exhaustion, the same lack of money, the same unpleasant conversations with Darina and the same feeling: 'I am trying, but nothing is changing.'

Now, the cycle began to break. This was not because the problems had disappeared, but because Pavel no longer responded to them as his former self. The quantity of sound decisions began to translate into quality of life: the family became calmer, his work more promising, their finances more manageable, their relationship deeper, his son more confident, Darina freer in her creative work and Pavel himself more mature.

Life became more interesting—not easier in any simplistic sense, but genuinely more interesting, because every challenge was now not a punishment, but an exercise in character.

Several months later, Pavel once again found himself beside Kazan Cathedral. This time, he was not lost. He stopped before the monuments to Kutuzov and Barclay de Tolly and felt a profound sense of gratitude. Those bronze figures had said nothing to him. Yet it was they who had once compelled him to hear what mattered most. A man does not become a man when he speaks about his objectives, nor when he dreams of a magnificent future, nor even when he triumphs. A man becomes a man at the moment when he accepts: my life must be of use to someone; my strength must protect someone; my decisions must improve the world around me; my family is not an obstacle to my growth, but the first territory of my heroic endeavour.

Pavel looked at Nevsky Prospekt, at the stream of people, at the façade of the cathedral and at the city where history always speaks to those who are prepared to listen. At that moment, he understood that St Petersburg preserved more than architecture; it preserved character. Questions were encoded within its stone, its squares and its monuments—questions that everyone would one day have to answer: ‘Who are you? What do you bring into the world? Whose life is better because of you? What instrument have you chosen for your dream? And are you prepared to answer not with words, but with your life?’

Afterword from the Petersburger’s Emporium

In St Petersburg, it is impossible simply to pass history by. One day, it will inevitably stop you beside a cathedral, a monument, an old house or a granite embankment—and ask you what matters most.

Pavel’s story is not about war. It is about a man’s heroism in peacetime. It is about how a person ceases to live in expectation and begins to become a source of support—for his mother, his wife, his son, his work, his city and the future. True masculine character does not begin with a grand promise. It begins with a quiet decision: ‘I take responsibility upon myself.’

From that moment onwards, life truly rises to a new level of quality. Most importantly, it becomes more interesting to live.

War and Peace:

‘Kaysarov!’ Kutuzov called to his adjutant. ‘Sit down and write the order for tomorrow. And you,’ he said, turning to another, ‘ride along the lines and announce that we shall attack tomorrow.’

While the conversation with Raevsky continued and the order was being dictated, Wolzogen returned from Barclay and reported that General Barclay de Tolly wished to have written confirmation of the order issued by the field marshal.

Without looking at Wolzogen, Kutuzov ordered that the instruction be written—the very instruction which the former commander-in-chief, quite reasonably, wished to possess in order to avoid personal responsibility.

Through some indefinable and mysterious bond that maintains the same disposition throughout an entire army—a disposition known as the spirit of the army and constituting the principal sinew of war—Kutuzov’s words, his order to engage in battle the following day, were conveyed simultaneously to every part of the force.

It was far from being the actual words or the order itself that travelled along the final links of that bond. Indeed, the accounts that people related to one another at opposite ends of the army bore no resemblance to what Kutuzov had said; yet the meaning of his words spread everywhere, because what Kutuzov had said arose not from ingenious calculations, but from a feeling that dwelt within the soul of the commander-in-chief just as it dwelt within the soul of every Russian person.

When they learnt that the following day we would attack the enemy, when they heard from the highest ranks of the army confirmation of what they longed to believe, those exhausted and wavering men took comfort and courage.’

Chapter Eight

A Request for the Vibrations of St Petersburg's First Line

A New Project

I recently began a new project—‘Digital Media Tools Courses for Senior Executives’. A good auditorium, comfortable chairs and a high-quality screen are not sufficient for a project of this kind. A top-level programme requires a different environment. I needed more than merely a location. I needed a ‘place of power’ from which to promote the media tools of the new age. A place where history does not hang upon the walls as lifeless decoration, but works as capital. Where every metre of space speaks to a person in the language of status, culture, meaning and continuity.

It was then that I formulated my request: I needed St Petersburg's first line—not only in the geographical sense, but in the realm of meaning as well—a line upon which the city resonates at its highest frequency. What followed was a chain of events that once again confirmed an ancient axiom: according to your request, so shall it be unto you.

Only a week passed. The Ryazantsevs, phylumism artists, telephoned me and invited me to the opening of their exhibition at the gallery of Elena Viktorovna Tsvetkova, a renowned designer, collector and owner of the Contemporary Heritage of Russia Jewellery House.

Elena Viktorovna is a person whose name in St Petersburg is associated not merely with beauty, but with culture of the finest calibre. For the fifth consecutive year, she has opened the cultural programme of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum—the city's principal annual event, where business, government, the international agenda and the nation's symbolic capital converge.

This is more than a biographical fact. It is a mark of recognition.

And so I found myself in her gallery. I stepped out onto the English Embankment and suddenly realised that I had been there for a long time already—not physically, but inwardly. Whenever I walked along the English Embankment, I would catch myself thinking the same thing: ‘If only I could establish myself here one day. If only I could create a project here. If only I could enter this line not as a passer-by, but as a participant.’

At that moment, I understood: this had been the first signal. The Universe had heard me. The English Embankment as a code of the city. Some streets can be described by means of a map. Others must be described through human destinies. The English Embankment belongs to the latter kind. Here, St Petersburg is especially precise in its message to the world. This is neither a picture-postcard façade nor the noise of tourism. It is the territory of a mature city, where diplomacy, history, architecture, water, power, culture and inner stillness exist side by side. It is the first line not only of the Neva, but of meaning itself. Here, St Petersburg reveals its true scale: imperial, European, Russian, intellectual and commercial. It is impossible to think small here. And it was here that a project for those who make decisions had to be born.

The second sign was my conversation with Elena Viktorovna. Some time later, during a business discussion, Elena Viktorovna remarked almost in passing:

‘There is a well-known restaurant two buildings away. I am friends with its owner and chef—Chef Marusya.’

The three of us immediately spoke by telephone. The conversation was swift, precise and businesslike, yet remarkably warm. We agreed to reserve VIP tables for a VIP delegation and chose an evening time.

Once again, the geography began to speak. The restaurant is situated between Palace Bridge and Blagoveshchensky Bridge. During the White Nights, therefore, one can observe from there the very spectacle for which people travel to St Petersburg from all over the world: breathtaking sunsets and the raising of two bridges at once—two bridges, two sides, two banks and two aspects of the city: the commercial and the poetic. All of this within a single programme.

Chef Marusya proved to be precisely the kind of person whom no one could have invented artificially. A restaurant owner, chef and food blogger, she is a woman of exquisite taste with a compelling personal story. Born into a Georgian family associated with renowned winemaking traditions and owning well-known Georgian wine brands featured in FORBES lists, she moved from Moscow to St Petersburg some years ago. As so often happens with strong people, she did not merely move to the city: she entered it through an enterprise of her own.

Georgian hospitality, Moscow energy and St Petersburg aesthetics—all of these qualities came together within her with remarkable harmony. Once again, I saw the very formula for which the ‘Stories from the Petersburgers’ Emporium’ are created: St Petersburg does not erase a person’s origins; it gathers their experience and transforms it into cultural capital.

This is especially important in business, because the business community has long since grown weary of faceless events. People need more than meetings. They need events that alter the very scale of their thinking.

The third sign was music at 56 English Embankment. As the sequence of gallery—restaurant—business programme was taking shape, another conversation occurred. The Italian conductor Kristina Deliso (Christian Deliso) told me that he was beginning a collaboration with Maestro Fabio Mastrangelo at the concert hall at 56 English Embankment.

The building at 56 English Embankment is the new, second historic stage of the F. I. Chaliapin Music Theatre, under the artistic direction of Maestro Fabio Mastrangelo. Christian Deliso worked in Venice for many years, has been active within the international music community and is acquainted with world-renowned figures in music and the arts.

Once again—the English Embankment. Once again—the first line. Once again—St Petersburg as a point of convergence between Russia and Europe, business and art, tradition and modernity.

By that moment, I could no longer describe what was happening as chance. There comes a point when separate events cease to be separate: first, the telephone call from the artists,

then Elena Viktorovna Tsvetkova’s gallery, followed by the conversation about the restaurant and, next, Chef Marusya.

after her came the White Nights, two bridges and VIP tables, followed by the conductor's telephone call and then the concert hall at 56 English Embankment. And all of it revolved around a single line.

The English Embankment began to assemble the programme by itself. I could barely keep pace as I recorded the way in which the space responded to my request. Thus, the cumulative effect—the critical mass of chance events that were anything but accidental—was transformed into an extensive cultural and educational programme for senior executives: not merely a course, not merely a dinner, not merely a concert and not merely an excursion, but a complete journey through St Petersburg at the highest level, a journey in which a person acquires not only knowledge, but a state of mind.



The Birth of the Programme

A new formula for senior executives: this was how a programme was born in which every component reinforces all the others.

1. Digital Media Tools for Senior Executives

First comes my course on contemporary media tools for executives, business owners, principal decision-makers and opinion leaders: how to manage one's public presence today; how to shape a personal and corporate brand; how to speak to an audience not at random, but strategically; and how to use digital channels not as noise, but as instruments of influence, trust and growth. Today, a senior executive can no longer remain merely a manager. They become a media figure even if they never intended to become one.

2. The Gallery and Jewellery Heritage

Next comes a meeting with Elena Viktorovna Tsvetkova: unique masterclasses devoted to precious stones, a tour of the Museum of Jewellery Art and a discussion about heritage, taste, symbols of status and objects in which time becomes tangible—this is far more than aesthetics. For a businessperson, it is a conversation about value, about the distinction between price and meaning, and about how heritage is formed—personal, familial, corporate and national.

3. A Gastronomic Reception with Chef Marusya

The guests then proceed to Chef Marusya's restaurant. There, between Palace Bridge and Blagoveshchensky Bridge, another part of the programme begins—informal, human and alive. The most important conversations often take place around a table. It is there that partners begin to hear one another differently. It is there that business communication is transformed into trust. And during the White Nights, St Petersburg works its magic: sunset, water, bridges, light, silence—the city as the setting for a momentous conversation.

4. The Musical Culmination

The finale is a concert programme upon the historic stage of the F. I. Chaliapin Music Theatre on the English Embankment. Music completes what knowledge, art and gastronomy began, because a powerful programme for senior executives must engage every level: intellect, taste, emotion, strategic vision and inner stature.

The Request and the Response

Why does this matter particularly to the business community? Efficiency alone is no longer enough for business today. Efficiency has become merely the basic standard. Genuine competitive advantage is now born at the intersection of other factors: culture, reputation, public presence, meaning, trust, the quality of one's circle and the ability to see beyond the immediate transaction.

This is precisely why St Petersburg is once again becoming the ideal environment for leaders. It is impossible here to make only short-term plans. The city itself compels one to think in terms of epochs, heritage, continuity and the mark one will leave behind. St Petersburg teaches something important: if you wish to exert influence, first learn to resonate; if you wish to build the future, feel the depth of the past; if you wish to be first, step onto the first line.

I increasingly find myself thinking that St Petersburg possesses its own frequencies: the tourist frequency, the everyday frequency, the business frequency and the cultural frequency. Yet there is another, exceptional frequency—the vibration of the first line. It cannot be purchased directly. One must mature inwardly before reaching it. One must formulate the request for it with precision.

St Petersburg's first line is more than an address. It is the state of a person prepared to act on the scale of the city, history and the future. When such a request is formulated honestly, St Petersburg begins to respond through telephone calls, meetings, chance phrases, the right people, open doors and coincidences far too precise to be accidental...

Thus, a new story from the Petersburgers' Emporium was born from a personal request. It is a story about how the city itself brings people together when their intentions correspond to its scale: the Ryazantsev artists, Elena Viktorovna Tsvetkova, Chef Marusya, Kristina Deliso. Fabio Mastrangelo,

the English Embankment, the White Nights, two bridges, jewellery art, digital media, music, business and St Petersburg. Everything came together within a single trajectory.

Now I know with certainty that a project does not always begin with a business plan; sometimes it begins with a properly formulated request addressed to the city.

My request was simple: a location for senior executives that was worthy of St Petersburg. The response proved to be something greater: the first line, where knowledge becomes status, meetings become alliances, culture becomes capital and an evening becomes a legend.

We do more than tell stories. We find the points at which St Petersburg begins to speak to the future.

P.S. The Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation is situated upon this very same line...

Chapter Nine

A Woman's Desire. An Incident at Semimostye (Seven Bridges)

A Story for Those Who Will Find Something of Their Own in the Answers

1. The massage therapist looked at Karolina's abdomen—and uttered a sentence after which her entire life changed.
2. She made a #wish at Semimostye and forgot about it. Then the extraordinary began.
3. Why does everything come easily to some women, while for others life seems to be on pause?
4. Karolina thought that she was simply tired. It turned out to be a matter of feminine energy.
5. A single massage session revealed what Karolina had failed to notice for years.
6. 'There is no energy there at all'—the words that marked the beginning of a new life.
7. She wanted a family, a career and travel. First, however, she had to reclaim herself.
8. The secret of feminine lightness that is rarely discussed aloud.
9. Her friends did not believe her until they saw Karolina's life begin to change.
10. Blocked feminine energy: the silent cause of major problems?
11. Why wishes fail to come true even when one tries very hard.
12. Karolina discovered the root cause—and her life began to gather positive momentum.
13. Feminine energy begins to flow abundantly—and the world starts to respond.
14. What a woman's body radiates when her soul has long been yearning for change.
15. Semimostye, massage and the mystery of feminine power.
16. She simply went to a spa and received the key to a new destiny.
17. How a single sentence from Natalia transformed Karolina's understanding of herself.
18. A #woman without energy—a life without movement.
19. When the light comes on within, everything changes outside.
20. It is frightening to imagine what may happen next if #selfdevelopment is endless.

One day, Karolina found herself at Semimostye, one of the most magical places in St Petersburg. There, where the canals converge within the enchanted reflection of the old city, where the water preserves the whispers of wishes and the bridges seem to connect not merely different banks, but different courses of destiny, she stopped for several minutes. Tourists were laughing around her. Some were taking photographs, some were gazing at the sun, while others were already dreaming of an evening cruise aboard a yacht on the Neva.

Karolina looked at all of this and suddenly felt something with perfect clarity: she too wanted a happy life—not some unattainable, cinematic life belonging to someone else, but a life of her own. She wanted to sail aboard a yacht beneath the rays of the brilliant St Petersburg sun, to have a respectable career, to feel fulfilled, to be a beloved wife, to become a good mother and to live not in a state of constant tension, but with a sense of inner abundance. She made this wish quietly, almost

in a whisper. She then continued her walk through St Petersburg and, as so often happens, forgot about her deepest desire. The city, however, did not forget.

The Encounter That Changed Everything

Some time later, Karolina's friends invited her to join them for spa treatments. It was an ordinary day among women: an opportunity to relax, talk, turn their attention to something different and offer themselves a little care. The programme included a massage. The massage therapist was called Natalia, an experienced and attentive woman with that exceptional professional eye which sees not only the muscles, but the overall condition of the person.

When Natalia began working with Karolina's body and examined the area around her abdomen, she suddenly said:

'There is no energy there at all.'

Karolina was surprised:

'What could that mean?'

Natalia replied cautiously but confidently:

'Perhaps your feminine energy is blocked. And that is a woman's principal resource.'

These words caught Karolina's attention. At first, she regarded them as something strange. Yet something seemed to click within her. Karolina had long felt that, outwardly, she was trying, acting, planning, working, socialising and smiling—yet something seemed to be missing inside her: not strength, motivation or beauty, but precisely a vibrant sense of feminine abundance—the principal resource of a woman.

After that encounter, Karolina began exploring the subject of feminine energy. She read popular materials, listened to specialists, watched lectures and spoke to women who had already followed this path. Gradually, she arrived at one essential understanding: when feminine energy is alive, free and abundant, many things in life begin to come more easily to a woman. This is not because every difficulty disappears or because the world becomes perfect, but because the woman ceases to act against herself. She begins to listen to her body, feel her desires, choose what is truly hers, accept care, trust life, build relationships from a position of dignity rather than anxiety, work from a state of strength rather than to the point of exhaustion, and love from a place of abundance rather than deprivation.

Karolina saw with increasing clarity that feminine energy was not connected merely with outward attractiveness. It influenced far more: relationships, motherhood, personal fulfilment, money, the health of the body and the disposition of the soul, the ability to rest, the capacity to accept the gifts of destiny and one's inner magnetism.

Most importantly, it affected the feeling: 'I exist. I am valuable. I am alive. I can.'

The Origins of Blockages

Natalia had told Karolina something important: blockages in feminine energy could arise in different ways. Sometimes a woman carried within herself the burdensome experiences of her family line—beliefs, fears, prohibitions and unspoken family patterns. These might include: ‘A woman must not want too much’, ‘Help everyone else first and only then think about yourself’, ‘It is dangerous to be beautiful’, ‘Money can only be earned through hard work’, ‘Happiness must be deserved’ and ‘The most important thing is to endure.’

At other times, as a woman passes through difficult circumstances, she seems to place layer after layer over her natural energy: exhaustion, resentment, disappointment, fear of intimacy, the need for control, shame, suppressed desires and the habit of doing everything herself. At some point, a knot forms within her: the woman appears to be living, yet she does not blossom; she appears to take steps, yet seems to make no progress; she appears to want love, yet cannot accept it; she seems to dream of fulfilment, yet continually postpones herself until later.

The most difficult thing for Karolina was to identify the root cause. It was not enough simply to say: ‘I have very little energy.’ She had to ask herself honestly: ‘Where did I cease to be myself? When did I forbid myself to have desires? Why is it easier for me to give than to receive? What am I truly afraid of? Which words spoken by my mother or grandmother, or arising from previous relationships and past experiences, are still living within me?’

The old saying proved true: where attention goes, power follows.

As soon as Karolina stopped running away from the subject and began looking at it calmly, the tangled thread started to unravel. She continued with the massages, began gently returning to her body, allowed herself more rest, reconsidered her attitude towards work, removed unnecessary commotion from her life and gave herself permission to enjoy beauty, pleasure and femininity. She began choosing not only ‘what is right’, but also ‘what feels good to me’. Gradually, her life began to change—not in a single day and not with the wave of a magic wand, but at a deeper and more enduring level, through an inward return to herself.

Her friends were the first to notice. Interestingly, Karolina was not the first person to recognise the changes. Her friends noticed them. One of them said:

‘You have become so calm. Not tired—truly confident.’

Another observed:

‘You used to be in a hurry all the time, but now you seem to live according to your own rhythm.’

A third confessed:

‘After spending time with you, I want to start taking care of myself too.’

Karolina began sharing her experience. She spoke about Natalia, the massage and the particular moment when the experienced massage therapist immediately recognised the imbalance in her energy. She explained that feminine energy was not an abstraction consisting of attractive words. It was a state visible in a woman’s walk, her voice, her choice of partner, her finances, boundaries, home, attitude towards children, ability to ask, ability to rejoice and capacity to remain true to herself.

Her friends began to experiment for themselves. Some went for a massage, some took up body-based practices, some allowed themselves to rest without guilt for the first time in many years, some began examining inherited family beliefs, while others wrote down their desires and realised that they had long been living according to somebody else's goals. Something remarkable began to happen to each of them. Life seemed to shift onto a more positive plane. This was not because their responsibilities disappeared, but because they acquired the energy to address them.

Feminine Energy and Ten Spheres of Life

Karolina noticed with increasing frequency that when a woman develops a sense of inner abundance, different spheres of her life begin to awaken. Esoteric traditions and natal charts often refer to numerous spheres: relationships, family, children, money, career, creativity, health, social circle, learning, travel and the spiritual path. Karolina saw in practice that when a woman's fundamental feminine energy is blocked, she may find it difficult to reveal herself in almost every area: in her career, she lacks the courage to declare her worth; in relationships, she lacks trust and acceptance; within the family, there is too much control and too little warmth; in motherhood, exhaustion overwhelms joy; in financial matters, she struggles to accept more; in creativity, she is afraid to express herself; when it comes to travel, it is perpetually 'not the right time'; within her body, tension replaces pleasure; in communication, she feels compelled to please everyone; and in her dreams, there is always another 'later'.

When the energy begins to flow more freely, however, a woman becomes different. She no longer asks the world for permission to live. She begins to live.

St Petersburg as a Place of Feminine Awakening

Perhaps it was no coincidence that all of this began in St Petersburg. The city itself resembles a woman with a profound soul. It is austere and tender, mystical and rational, cold on the outside and remarkably warm within. It knows how to remain silent, yet when it speaks, its voice remains with you for the rest of your life.

For Karolina, Semimostye became a point of entry—the place where her wish had been spoken, even though it was later forgotten. The spa became a door, the massage her first encounter with the truth, Natalia a guide and feminine energy the road that led her back to herself.

'Semimostye of Feminine Power'

For women who have grown tired of carrying the burden of life alone and wish to experience lightness, desire, beauty and inner flow once again. There is one state in which a woman lives from a place of tension: she controls everything, does a great deal, seldom rests, struggles to accept help, continually postpones herself until later and becomes tired even of those things that once brought her joy.

There is another state, in which a woman is fulfilled and possesses energy; in which she is gentle yet strong, beautiful yet independent of other people's judgement, loving yet unwilling to sacrifice herself, successful in business yet free from exhaustion, desirable yet, above all, alive for her own sake.

The story 'Semimostye of Feminine Power', created as part of the 'Stories from the Petersburg's Emporium' project, is devoted precisely to this idea. It is a story, a practice and a gentle reminder of what matters most: feminine energy is not a luxury, but the foundation of a woman's life. Through the atmosphere of St Petersburg, the image of Semimostye, Karolina's story and the profound practice of directing attention towards yourself, you will be able to approach the subject of your inner abundance with care. This story is for you if you feel that you have long been living on willpower alone; that you want love but are afraid to trust; that you are tired of always having to be strong; that your body is asking for care; that your desires seem to have fallen asleep; that your life lacks lightness; and that you are ready to reclaim yourself.



'Semimostye of Feminine Power' does not promise an instant miracle. It is an invitation to begin a journey—a journey towards the body, desires, femininity and inner freedom; towards a balance between family, love, children, work, rest and personal fulfilment. When a woman restores her energy, the entire space around her changes: the home becomes warmer, relationships become more honest, work more purposeful, money less troubling, leisure more joyful and life more expansive.

Karolina once made a wish for a happy life at Semimostye and then forgot about it. Her wish, however, did not forget her. It led her to Natalia, to massage, to the discovery of feminine energy, to an understanding of her blockages and to a new state of being. It is now almost frightening to imagine what lies ahead for a woman who has understood the most important truth: development can continue without end, and therefore so can blossoming.

'Semimostye of Feminine Power' is for those who are ready not to wait for a miracle, but to become its source: return your attention to yourself, unravel the knot within you, awaken your feminine energy and allow life to become lighter.

Stories from the Petersburg's Emporium—where the city speaks to the soul.

Chapter Ten

Competition Is Not a Battle. It Is Precision!

On the shortest night of 2026, St Petersburg seemed like a city with no intention of sleeping at all. The White Nights flowed across the façades, the water in the canals gleamed with iridescent silver, and the bridges rose above the city like the pages of an old book in which everything had already been written—yet every Petersburger still managed to find a line of their own.



Andrei and Vladimir were making their way back across Potseluev Bridge—the Bridge of Kisses. It had been an exceptionally long day. Since early morning, they had been discussing one difficult question: how to create a competitive proposition within the educational services market. At the same time, they had been reflecting upon the nature of competition. What they needed was not merely a course, a programme or attractive packaging, but a genuine educational product in which people would believe, for which they would cast their vote with a very special golden rouble, and which would attract not random participants, but precisely those who valued innovations created for pioneers.

Vladimir walked in silence, gazing at the water. Andrei understood what he was thinking. Providing education in St Petersburg was a distinctive undertaking. One could not enter the market here with something weak and simply say, ‘Well, we shall give it a try.’ St Petersburg is a city in which education has long formed part of the urban code. It is home to St Petersburg State University, one of the symbols of Russian scholarship and statehood; the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, where music sounds not like a subject, but like destiny; and the Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet, from which

art has made its way onto stages throughout the world. The city also possesses schools of art, engineering, medicine, maritime studies and theatre, each of which has left its mark upon the history of the country.

Some people choose Moscow for their studies, while others move to St Petersburg because they want more than a diploma: they seek an atmosphere, a tradition, a school and a sense of depth. If one creates an educational product here in St Petersburg, one inevitably finds oneself standing alongside a great tradition. This is not merely a privilege. It is a responsibility.

They stopped upon Potseluev Bridge. The waters of the Moika stirred beneath them. Suddenly, the two young specialists noticed a remarkable scene: several pleasure boats were moving almost simultaneously and in parallel across the water. One boat was decorated with warm strings of lights. Soft music was playing, a group of mature guests sat around a table, someone raised a glass, while somebody else looked at the city as though seeing it for the first time. The next boat was entirely different—bright and noisy, filled with dancing, laughter, loud music and youthful faces. A third proceeded calmly and almost ceremoniously: restrained design and a businesslike atmosphere, as though it were hosting a private meeting between partners or a corporate gathering for people accustomed to discussing deals even upon the water. The fourth was intended for families: children, blankets, tea, photographs against the backdrop of the bridges and quiet delight in the White Night.

They were all travelling along the same river, at the same time and in the same city, yet each possessed a mood of its own. Each was intended for its own company. Each had its own music, banquet, design, price and audience.

Andrei smiled and said:

‘You see, Volodya? Competition works in precisely the same way.’

Vladimir turned towards him.

‘What do you mean?’

Andrei nodded towards the boats below:

‘They are not interfering with one another. They are not trying to become identical. Each one has its own passenger. The same is true in the market for goods and services: every product will find its buyer. The only question is whether you understand exactly whom your product is intended for.’

The Principal Question in Business Is Not ‘What Are We Selling?’, but ‘Who Needs It?’

Andrei spoke calmly, but his voice had already acquired that particular energy which arises when a thought finally becomes clear.

‘Many people are afraid of competition because they assume that if others are already present, the market must be occupied. That is a mistake. The market is occupied only for those who do not understand their customer.’

He looked towards the Moika.

‘Consider this. A service may be intended for the mass market. In that case, its price must be moderate and affordable, while strong economic performance is achieved through sales volume. One needs more customers, greater repeatability and a more systematic process.’

Vladimir nodded.

‘And what if the product is unique?’

‘Then a different logic applies,’ Andrei replied. ‘If a product or service is created for a narrow audience with exacting requirements, its price will be significantly higher. This is a classic law of economics: the more precisely targeted the value, the higher the level of trust and the fewer the comparable alternatives, the higher the price.’

He paused.

‘The most important thing, however, is to understand the nuances that influence a competitive proposition.’

‘The dimensionality coefficients?’ Vladimir asked.

‘Yes,’ Andrei said. ‘A product cannot be assessed upon a single plane. It is not enough to say, “We have a good course.” Good for whom? At what price? With what result? At what level of status? With which instructor? With what reputation behind the organiser?’

He began counting the factors upon his fingers:

‘The audience—who these people are and what level they occupy; price—mass-market, mid-range, premium or exclusive; trust—why someone should choose you in particular; the outcome—what they will receive after completing the course; status—whether the product corresponds to the customer’s level; presentation—how the service appears at the first point of contact; reputation—who stands behind the product; and context—why it is needed at this precise moment. Once you understand how many factors influence the formation of an offering, a business begins to develop in an entirely different way. It proceeds not chaotically, but consciously. You no longer chase indiscriminately after everyone. You create a route for your own people.’

Vladimir smiled:

‘So, our educational course is not a mass-market boat with loud music?’

‘Certainly not a mass-market one,’ Andrei replied. ‘My course on contemporary media tools for senior executives is a high-calibre product.’

He continued:

‘For an audience of this kind, certain values are essential. Without them, these people will simply not entrust you with their time.’

Andrei began listing the factors once again:

‘Successful media case studies, so that participants encounter practice rather than theory; an instructor educated to DBA level, because senior executives need to know that the person before them is not some random expert; a strong course organiser—a prominent civic and governmental organisation that inspires trust; a clear practical benefit—not merely “listening to lectures”, but acquiring tools for managing public presence, reputation and communication; and a high-status environment, because executives care not only about the content, but also about the people around them. Senior executives do not simply buy knowledge,’ Andrei said. ‘They buy saved time, the quality

of the selection, trust, calibre and practical applicability. If even one of these elements is missing, they will not attend. Or the wrong people will attend.'

Vladimir considered this.

'So, a proper analysis must be conducted before the launch?'

'Precisely,' Andrei replied. 'It must be done while the product is still being developed. You then understand your target audience, its expectations, purchasing power and motivation in advance. Consequently, you can achieve not merely an attractive idea, but strong economic performance as well.'

They began descending from the bridge. St Petersburg's Kolomna district revealed itself quietly and majestically around them. The district does not proclaim itself loudly, yet anyone who understands the city knows that it possesses an exceptional concentration of culture. Andrei stopped and said:

'Here is another example for you, Volodya. Even the residents of the city choose their district according to their own inner code. You and I are now in Kolomna. A distinctive community lives here and has always lived here—the creative intelligentsia, musicians, actors, teachers and people of the stage and the arts.'

He gestured towards the familiar streets.

'Look at everything gathered together within this compact cultural quarter: the Mariinsky Theatre and its stages, the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, the music college and the Choral College, surrounded by an environment of theatre, music and art. This is not accidental. The district itself attracts the kind of person who belongs here.'

Vladimir looked around. There was indeed something remarkable within these buildings—something neither ceremonial nor intended for tourists, but profoundly inward. It was as though the city spoke here not through its signs, but through its intonation.

'The same is true of every district in St Petersburg,' Andrei continued. 'Each has its own face, its own pace and its own community. Vasilievsky, Petrogradskaya, Krestovsky, the Central District and Moskovsky District—each finds the resident who belongs there. Every resident has a location of their own. If we examine the matter more deeply, everything can be segmented down to the smallest details: the street, the building, the courtyard, the familiar route and the favourite coffee house.'

He smiled.

'That is segmentation—not within a table, but within the living city of St Petersburg. Competition is not a battle. It is precision!'

They continued walking beside the water. Vladimir was silent once again, but for a different reason: not because he was tired, but because the idea had finally taken shape. Competition no longer resembled a struggle in which everyone else had to be defeated. It had begun to resemble a map of the city: there was room upon the Moika for different boats, room within St Petersburg for different districts and room within the market for different products. The essential thing was not to attempt to become everything to everyone. A product without a particular recipient resembles a boat without a route: it may be beautiful, it may be upon the water and music may be playing, yet no one understands whom it is carrying or why.

A strong product always knows who its customer is, which pain point it addresses, what value it provides, why it costs precisely that amount and why the customer should choose it now.

Dawn had almost arrived, although during the White Nights it is difficult to know where evening ends and morning begins. Andrei and Vladimir walked through Kolomna, while the city around them appeared to confirm their conversation: every building, every theatre, every boat and every passer-by possessed their own place within the greater system. Vladimir then said:

‘Does that mean St Petersburg itself teaches us about competition?’

Andrei replied:

‘St Petersburg teaches precision. Everything here has an address. Even inspiration.’

He looked at the brightening sky and added:

‘In business, victory does not belong to the person who proclaims their presence more loudly than everyone else. It belongs to the person who understands their own customer with the greatest precision. Competition is not the fear that others are nearby. Competition is the art of finding one’s own people.’

Just as every boat upon the Moika has its own company, music and route, every strong product has its own audience, price and value. If you understand precisely whom your product was created for, the market ceases to be a battlefield. It becomes a river, and you become the captain of your own course.

Chapter Eleven

A Recipe for Scaling a Business at ‘The Petersburg’s Emporium’. The Story of Businessman Alexei

Sometimes the most profitable investment is an evening spent alone with beauty. Yet there is seldom any room for beauty in the schedule of a successful person—until the city itself intervenes.

Alexei arrived in St Petersburg on Wednesday. He was there on business. A business dinner on Thursday. Negotiations on Friday. A return flight on Saturday morning. Every minute had been planned—just like every aspect of his life over the previous ten years. He was the kind of person others described as ‘self-made’. His own company, employees, turnover and ambitions. Everything worked. Everything grew. During the previous six months, however, that growth had stopped: stagnation, a ceiling—a glass ceiling against which Alexei banged his head every day without understanding how to break through it.



The Evening That Began as Usual

On Wednesday evening, after his flight, Alexei sat in his hotel room on Nevsky Prospekt. He felt exhausted and irritable, haunted by the persistent impression that he was missing something.

‘Since I am already in St Petersburg,’ he thought, ‘perhaps I should at least see something worthwhile. There is no point sitting within these four walls.’

He opened his phone. He entered 'unique tour St Petersburg' into the search bar and scrolled, scrolled and scrolled: conventional coach tours, standard itineraries, 'palaces and canals in three hours'—he had already seen all of it, and none of it held any appeal for him now.

Then something unusual appeared among the recommendations—'The Petersburger's Emporium'.

The First Impression

Alexei tapped the link and froze. What opened before him was not another tourist aggregator. It was a collection: a compilation of the finest perspectives of St Petersburg—photographs and videos created as though by someone who saw the city with the heart rather than through the lens. Every frame breathed, every perspective told a story and every location was not merely beautiful—it was alive.

'Who took these?' Alexei murmured aloud.

He scrolled through the gallery and felt something respond within him—something he had long forgotten: the capacity for wonder. Then one location caught his attention: the English Embankment. The caption read: 'An iconic place for the project's founder. This is where ideas are born.'

An hour later, he was there. Alexei did not care for spontaneity. His entire life was built upon planning. That evening, however, he did something he had not done for a very long time: he followed an impulse. He called a taxi, and within an hour he was standing on the English Embankment. He was alone with St Petersburg in the evening, the Neva carrying its waters towards the Gulf, the silhouette of St Isaac's Cathedral in the distance and the granite beneath his feet preserving the memory of hundreds of generations. Alexei took out his phone, opened 'The Petersburger's Emporium' and began comparing what he saw: there was the same perspective, the same bridge and the same horizon. Suddenly, reality coincided with the photograph—and at that moment, something inexplicable occurred. The emotions he experienced became many times more powerful. It was as though someone had shown him a treasure map in advance and he was now standing upon the very place where the treasure lay buried.

An Epiphany on the Embankment

Alexei stood on the English Embankment and gazed at the water. For the first time in six months, his mind became quiet. No figures. No negotiations. No pressure. Only the city. Only the Neva. Only himself.

'I am so tired,' he whispered. 'Tired of running and failing to notice anything.'

He looked at the water and thought about how the city had stood there for three centuries. It had been built in defiance of everything—the marshes, the floods and the bitter cold. Every building was the embodiment in stone of the scale of somebody's thinking.

'They thought in terms of centuries,' Alexei reflected. 'Yet I am trapped within a single quarter.'

At that moment, something clicked within him.

The Morning That Changed Everything

Alexei returned to the hotel late. For the first time in a long while, he slept soundly. In the morning, he awoke... a different person. His mind was filled with a firework display of ideas—precise, clear and practical. He seized his notebook and began writing rapidly, without pausing, afraid that even one thought might escape him: ‘How to break through that glass ceiling. How to enter new markets. How to scale a product that seemed to have exhausted its potential. How to view the company from a bird’s-eye perspective rather than from the trenches of daily routine.’

Ten pages in an hour and a half.

‘Where has all of this come from?’ he wondered in amazement.

The answer was simple. The city had given him something that training courses, business coaches and strategic sessions had been unable to provide: a change of perspective. Alexei saw his business in the same way that ‘The Petersburg’s Emporium’ had shown him St Petersburg—from its finest angle.

One Year Later

The negotiations during that business trip went brilliantly. Yet they were a minor detail compared with what happened next. Alexei began implementing the ideas he had recorded that morning—not all at once, but one at a time and with great precision, like brushstrokes upon a painting.

The company took flight! Its turnover increased several times over, new areas of business opened, its workforce expanded and what had once seemed to be a ceiling proved to be nothing more than another step upwards. His partners could not believe it. His competitors could not understand it. Alexei, however, knew the secret. The secret was a change of perspective—the ability to look at something familiar from a new angle. A single evening on the English Embankment had taught him that lesson.

The Return to St Petersburg

A year later, Alexei returned—but he did not return alone. He brought the entire leadership team of his company: senior executives, departmental directors and other key people.

‘Where are we going?’ they asked. ‘What sort of corporate event is this?’

‘It is not a corporate event,’ Alexei replied with a smile. ‘It is an investment in your thinking.’

He arranged a special tour for them through ‘The Petersburg’s Emporium’—one which had not existed a year earlier, but which had been born and had grown alongside the business. It was called ‘Business Scaling through Photography’. It was unique of its kind and the only experience in the world in which the beauty of St Petersburg encountered business thinking; in which the finest perspectives of the city taught participants to discover the finest perspectives upon their own work; and in which every location became a metaphor for growth.

Alexei's team visited the iconic places of St Petersburg, but not as ordinary tourists. On the English Embankment, they learnt to perceive scale and to think not in quarters, but in centuries. At St Isaac's Cathedral, they came to understand that great things take a long time to build, yet endure forever. At the drawbridges, they realised that sometimes something must come apart to allow something great to pass through before coming together once again as a single whole. Along the vista of Nevsky Prospekt, they learnt to see a goal beyond the horizon and proceed towards it in a straight line. Every perspective, every frame and every location served a single idea: to change one's way of seeing is to change the result.

At the end of the tour, Alexei gathered his team on the same embankment where everything had begun one year earlier.

'My friends,' he said, 'a year ago, I stood here alone. I was exhausted, burnt out and unable to see a way forward. This city showed me one simple truth: it is not what you do that matters. What matters is how you look at it.'

He swept his hand towards the Neva, the bridges and the granite embankments.

'The Petersburger's Emporium taught me to discover the finest perspectives—first of the city and then of my business. Now I want you to see them too.'

The team remained silent. Yet in their eyes, Alexei saw what he himself had experienced one year earlier—an epiphany.

Epilogue

Today, the 'Business Scaling through Photography' tour from 'The Petersburger's Emporium' is far more than a walk through the city. It is an instrument of growth which continues to evolve alongside those who experience it. Businesspeople, entrepreneurs and executives come to St Petersburg not for its palaces. They come in search of a new way of seeing—in search of the particular perspective that changes everything.

It all began with one man who, on a certain evening, chose not to remain in his hotel room; who opened 'The Petersburger's Emporium'; who, an hour later, was standing on the English Embankment; and who understood the essential truth: the scale of a business begins with the scale of one's thinking, while the scale of one's thinking begins with the ability to see beauty from the right angle—the angle that became the beginning of a new cycle of growth for Alexei's team.

Chapter Twelve

The Story of a Lonely Man Named Dmitry and a Single Photograph from ‘The Petersburger’s Emporium’

...sometimes #fate lies hidden in a photograph opened by chance...

Dmitry was one of those people who are lonely not by choice. Days turned into weeks, weeks into years, yet his heart continued to wait for someone it had not yet met. In the evenings, when the city beyond his window fell asleep and the silence of the flat became almost tangible, he would reach for his phone. He had a special ritual—visiting the gallery of ‘The Petersburger’s Emporium’ on social media. There, within its collection of photographs and videos of the drawbridges, dwelt a particular kind of magic. Dima scrolled from one image to the next: the Palace Bridge raising its wings towards the night sky; the golden path across the Neva, trembling in the light of the lamps; mist enveloping the granite embankments; and couples in love captured beneath the rising spans.

Every photograph whispered the same words: ‘Miracles happen here. Come.’ Then, one evening, as he paused upon a video of the Palace Bridge closing, Dmitry suddenly realised that he could no longer simply watch: ‘I shall go. For the weekend. To St Petersburg. And I shall make the most important wish of my life.’

A Wish beneath a Rising Drawbridge

On Saturday evening, he stood upon the embankment. All around him were the hum of the crowd, the flashes of cameras and the breath of the Neva. Then the spans of the Palace Bridge slowly rose towards the sky, as though the city itself had opened its arms to welcome his dream.

Dmitry closed his eyes and made his wish: ‘To meet my soulmate. And never to part from her. To share a family journey lasting a lifetime. To live through everything fate has prepared—but to live through it together, hand in hand, with the person I love.’

He waited until the bridge had closed once more—as though he had waited for an answer from the heavens. His heart alight with dreams, he wandered back towards his hotel room on Bolshaya Morskaya Street.

That Very Door

The city had made his head spin. His dreams carried him far away. Lost within his reverie, Dmitry confused Bolshaya Morskaya Street with Malaya Morskaya Street. He failed to notice that he had

entered the wrong hotel. He went up to what he believed was his floor, took out his key card and attempted to open the door to his room.

The door would not yield. He tried again and again. The card flashed red, yet Dima still could not understand what was happening. Then, suddenly... the door opened from within. There she stood upon the threshold—a stranger with warm, astonished eyes.

‘Dima,’ he introduced himself in bewilderment, as though that explained everything.

‘Marie,’ she said with a gentle smile.

The Night That Changed Everything

They never did go to sleep that night. There was tea. There was a conversation—the kind that happens once in a lifetime, when two strangers suddenly realise that they have known one another for eternity. They spoke about everything: their dreams, St Petersburg, the drawbridges and the way in which the wrong door can sometimes prove to be the only right one.

Outside, dawn was breaking. The Neva carried its waters onwards. The city, having granted his wish, smiled quietly. From that night forward, they never parted again.

An Entire Life Ahead

Just as Dmitry had wished beneath the rising Palace Bridge, countless vicissitudes awaited them—joys and trials, triumphs and hardships. Yet they experienced all of them together, exactly as he had dreamed during those lonely evenings spent looking at photographs from ‘The Petersburg’s Emporium’.

Sometimes all that happiness requires is the courage to decide: to open a photograph, buy a ticket and believe that a city filled with extraordinary energies will lead you to the very door behind which your destiny is waiting.



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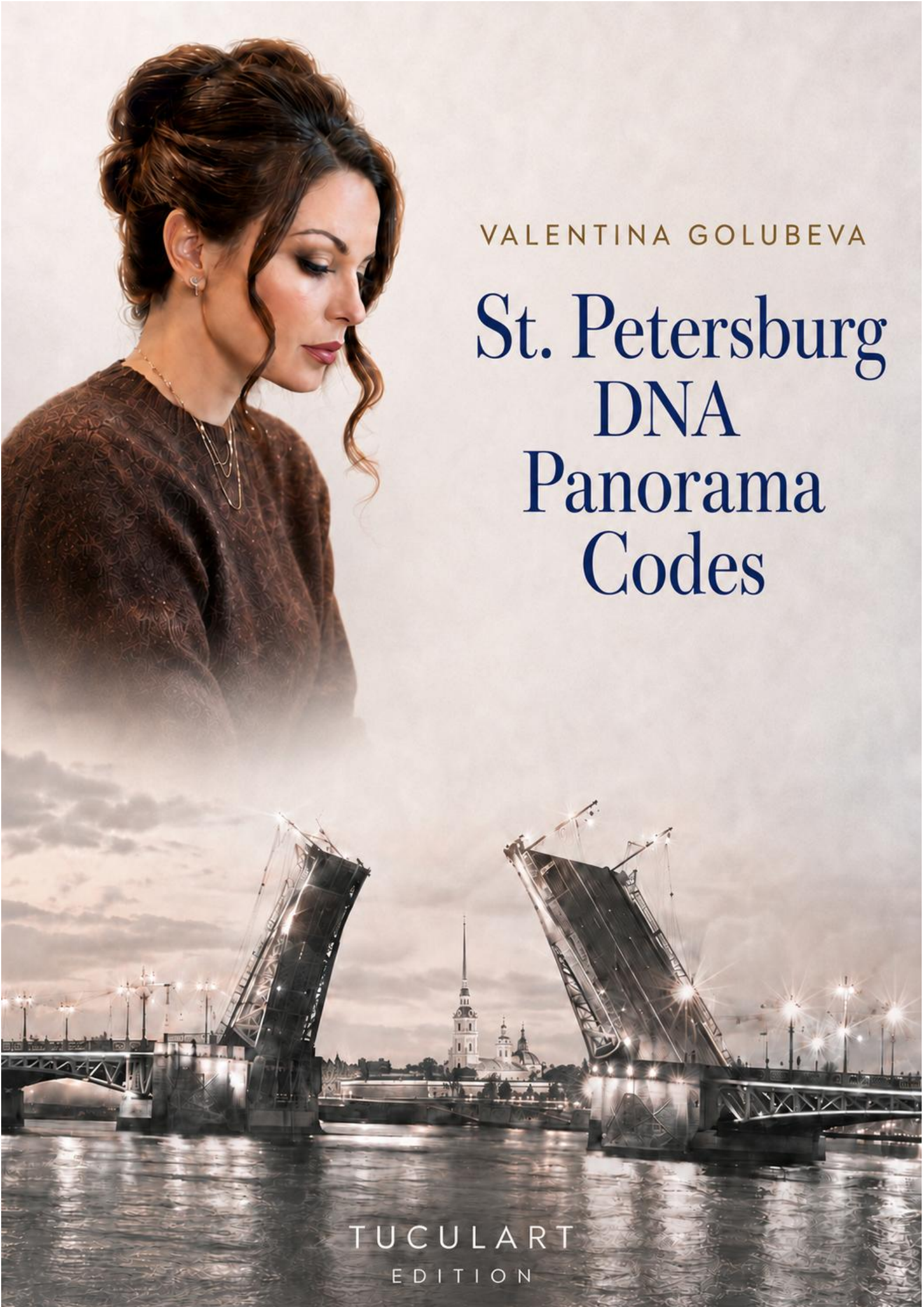
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