

Chapter Twenty Six

Night had already fallen in Russia; the meeting at the Nearby Dacha, as Stalin's *dacha* near the Kremlin was called, was attended by Stalin, Foreign Minister Molotov, Defense Commissar Voroshilov, *Politbureau and Central Committee* member Khrushchev, and other high-ranking Party officials.

Khrushchev had returned that day from a hunting trip and had provided the wild game they were eating.

"Comrade Khrushchev, this bear you shot, is it Russian?" Stalin poked the meat with his fork.

"That, Comrade Stalin, is a Finnish bear. Not as large as the Russian." Khrushchev knew Stalin; he knew Stalin's whims had killed many men—men much more powerful than he.

"Wandered over our border, did it?" Stalin probed for a crack in Khrushchev's armor.

"Russian bears are too smart to get shot by someone as unskilled as me." Khrushchev understood that Stalin saw him as a political rival.

"And this grouse? Blown across by the wind?" Stalin poked the over-cooked bird on the large serving plate in front of him.

"I think so, Comrade Stalin. Russian grouse are too elusive."

"Let's eat." Stalin reached for the pieces he had selected.

The others at the table helped themselves to the food, but not Foreign Minister Molotov; he wasn't interested in food—he was concerned with communiqués regarding the deteriorating relationship between the Soviet Union and Finland; the carefully worded briefings he had to compose

for his political officers at diplomatic posts around the world. He was keenly aware that Stalin had a peculiar, naïve fondness for the Finns; he had to be gentle with him but decided to get the bothersome matter over with.

“Comrade Stalin, there is the matter of our non-aggression pact with Finland and world opinion—” Molotov didn’t get any further.

“World opinion!” Stalin exploded. He stood up from the table, picked up the plate with the grouse and threw it through the closed window—the grouse flew once more and landed in the garden; the sound of shattering glass brought the NKVD guards running.

The primitive animal in Stalin had been unleashed—he feared world opinion more than anything. He knew its power and how it affected other world leaders in regards to the ability to compromise, to reach politically expedient agreements, and to look the other way. He clenched his jaw, breathed deeply through widened nostrils, and glared at Molotov, who silently berated himself for accepting the appointment as Foreign Minister of the USSR.

“World opinion is your responsibility, Comrade Molotov,” Stalin said, strictly for the record; he knew the matter was ultimately his. “Times have changed, and we must change with them.” He regretted losing his temper, revealing his peasant roots to those whose respect and support he sought, yet not needed.

“What will the world think of a bear that can be restrained by a flea?” Stalin added, resentful of Molotov’s guarded demeanor.

Khrushchev thought he should mention that a flea could make life miserable for the largest of bears, but the look on Stalin’s face didn’t permit any poetic maneuvers.

“How long will your army need?” Stalin glared at Voroshilov.

A former bureaucrat who relished his position as Defense Commissar for which he was neither qualified nor suited, Voroshilov knew what Stalin wanted to hear.

“Ten days, Comrade Stalin. Twelve at the most.”

Poskrebyshev and Khrushchev were better informed; they studied the ceiling, leaving Voroshilov to fend for himself and his poor judgment. Stalin sensed dissention and slammed his hand on the table.

“Good,” he said, circumventing a discussion. “I can see we agree.”

He lit one of the Herzegovia Flor cigarettes he had made especially for him, and began to pace, his hands at the small of his back.

“The Finns will not fight.” In Soviet politics a chartered road had to be followed to its end. “They are proletarians. Kuusinen, who maintains excellent contacts in Finland, assures me that if we fire one bullet the Finns will lay down their arms.”

Assurance from the expatriate Finn Kuusinen didn’t sway the skeptics in the room. They didn’t have any respect for the leftist Finn, although he was a member of the *Central Committee* and after Finland’s fall would be appointed its president by Stalin. Kuusinen had not set foot in Finland for years and they knew that he, as well as Stalin—or any of them for that matter—more often than not were told only what others thought they wanted to hear.

Gazing at the window, Stalin felt the silence in the room. He whirled around, studied their faces, and saw in all—except for Voroshilov—poorly concealed skepticism. “Did we not twenty years ago extend them the independence they sought?” Stalin asked, expecting an answer.

No one spoke for the longest time; Molotov finally broke the silence. “We did. Lenin thought that keeping an eye on the Finns would be too consuming.” Molotov didn’t want Stalin to take the strange people to the northwest lightly.

“That was Lenin. Times have changed.” Insulating himself from any future reproach, Stalin pointed his

Herzegovia at Khrushchev—whom he knew to be ambitious—and added for the record: “The Finns have had their independence for twenty years. They should be grateful and not fight.”

He took another puff on his papirosa, ground it out, and turned to Voroshilov. “You know what to do. Do it.”

Thus Stalin concluded the matter of Finnish independence and the non-aggression treaty with Finland he had forced Ivan Maisky to sign seven years earlier.

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