

Chapter 1

From the shattered window of the German warden's former office, General Ivan Vasilyevich Dimitrov observed the crowded yard; men packed like sardines, freezing in the icy late-February cold, a sorry, stinking lot of traitors awaiting transport to oblivion. He chuckled at the euphemism, rubbing the stubble on his chin, squinting from the smoke of the cigarette hanging from his lips.

Following in the wake of the advancing combat troops, Dimitrov always chose the largest prison in town for his temporary *Narodny Kommisariat Vnutrennikh Del* command post, invariably an annex to a now-abandoned Gestapo headquarters with its underground cells and thick-walled torture chambers, the interior tailor-made for his purposes.

Dimitrov's NKVD rifle regiments had trailed the path of General Zhukov's astonishing offensive now heading swiftly towards Berlin. Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria, NKVD Chief, had directly ordered them to show no mercy, to concentrate on anything with the barest stench of collaboration or disloyalty. As soon as Zhukov's combat troops rolled out, Dimitrov's job began. He had ordered his commanders to not put a fine line on discriminating between the Germans and Russians, men, women or children.

"Find them. Waste no time on guilt or innocence. If there is the slightest suspicion of collaboration, consider them all

guilty, especially Germans and deserters. Take what you want. Do what has to be done. We are entitled to the spoils," he told his officers. "Exact revenge. Remember what the Nazi bastards have done to us. Remember Stalingrad. And don't spare the women. Fill them to overflowing with hot Russian sperm. They need a lesson in humiliation." Beria had told Dimitrov how much he enjoyed his verbal reports.

"They will regret what they did to our country for generations to come," Beria had asserted, adding how pleased Marshal Stalin had been with his reports of Dimitrov's successes. For his work, Dimitrov had received a Hero of the Soviet Union citation from Stalin himself.

A compact man with a long angular face creased deeply on either cheek, dark eyes that turned downward at their edges, thin mobile lips that could curl into a deceptively warm half-smile, and a prominent pointed chin that he used effectively to signal a demand, Dimitrov patted the side pocket of his heavy overcoat where he had put the file. The confidential papers had come by courier directly from Beria's office in Moscow.

Nodding with satisfaction, he knew he had been on to something. The information in the file had confirmed the man's story. Dimitrov marveled at the reach of the NKVD intelligence operatives.

Beria had scrawled a comment on the top of the document: *Mole?*

Dimitrov knew what he meant.

A sharp knock broke his concentration. He looked toward the door.

"Come."

"The transport is ready, comrade. The excavation of deserters completed," the man said, standing stiffly, wearing the uniform and NKVD insignia of his rank of Major.

Dimitrov nodded, pointing his chin in the direction of the prison yard, a mixed bag of deserters and civilians. Some had even dressed as women to escape detection.

Dimitrov laughed. Heaven will have to receive them with sore assholes.

"Nearly one thousand traitors in the group," the officer said, understanding the gesture.

"Names and numbers?"

"Duly recorded, comrade."

Dimitrov nodded. The relatives of the deserters would receive their colorful "death in action" notices signed by Stalin himself, suitable for framing. It would be displayed for generations like a diploma—another brainstorm by Beria.

The man was a genius, Dimitrov acknowledged.

He had learned from the Katyn event, which liquidated twenty-one thousand bastard Poles. No more shots to the back of the head, the typical NKVD execution method. No more old German bullets—too transparent if discovered, although that was highly unlikely. Since then, they had used only recently captured German mounted machine guns and modern ammunition.

Dimitrov had run the operation to then eliminate the liquidators of Katyn. A thorough job, he remembered, earning Beria's deep respect, and proving his loyalty to the head of

the NKVD. They were both Georgian, both from the Sukhumi district, which counted a great deal in matters of trust as far as Beria was concerned.

The Georgians were always given the tough jobs; the deportations and executions. Where the Germans had occupied, traitors were endemic and had to be rooted out. Executions were commonplace and vast populations had to be deported. Dimitrov had done his duty with skill and efficiency and had come to Beria's attention early in his NKVD service. Promotions and decorations had come his way. He was the youngest General in the NKVD.

"Always remember," he was told after he had accomplished his first assignments. "You are Beria's man now. You are responsible only to me. We must be forever on the lookout for traitors in our midst. Intrigues are everywhere, even those who we think are our friends. That is why I must demand total obedience, and absolute loyalty without question. Do you understand, Ivan Vasilyevich? Our goal is to rid our nation of all of its enemies, real and potential, without mercy, without hesitation, without remorse."

Beria's words had been an inspiration. If he believed in God, they would be a Holy Writ.

"And the others?" Dimitrov asked the waiting captain.

"In the holding cell below as ordered."

"How many?"

"Forty-two."

Dimitrov had cut them from the pack—randomly selected SS officers—for special treatment. It would be a test of the man's purpose.

"We move in the morning," Dimitrov said, looking at his watch. "They are advancing like lightning. The front is already fifty kilometers ahead. I think Zhukov will be in Berlin in ten days, two weeks at the most." He looked at his watch. "Say 0600 hours."

"We will be ready, comrade."

They had been busy for three days, rounding up deserters and German prisoners. They had "processed" a decimated division of the SS, and interrogators were working them over in the honeycombs below.

"Be merciless. Think of Stalingrad. Think of the millions slaughtered. Show them what we Russians think of the master race. Save some for show. Pick carefully."

Except for the information garnered for Beria's eyes alone, whatever military intelligence had been gathered was sent to Zhukov's people. Not that it mattered. It was a complete rout, the German army in full retreat, running like frightened rabbits.

"We must look ahead now, Dimitrov," Beria had told him in their last conversation as the troops rolled through Poland in the first days of the new offensive that had begun in January.

For Dimitrov, the occasion had been festive, bonding him and his Chief further. Beria had chosen a villa for his overnight stay, formerly occupied by a captured turncoat Pole who had been recently executed. The Pole's wife and her twin thirteen-year-old daughters still lived in the villa and acted as servants to the Russian brass passing through.

Dimitrov had reported his progress with the deserters

and German prisoners. Beria was deeply impressed with the body count. It had always struck Dimitrov how scholarly Beria looked, with his pince-nez spectacles and small balding head. With his low voice and precise, slow sentences, he seemed more like a university professor than the powerful head of the NKVD.

"The real work will start after the war," Beria had told him, periodically polishing his pince-nez as he spoke over brandy and cigars. "Stalin will soon appoint me to the politburo, putting us further on the inside."

Dimitrov loved the reference to "us."

"A lot is going to happen. We will liberate the workers and destroy the bourgeoisie of every nation on earth: Europe first, then Asia, and the best prize of all, the United States. The day is coming. Westerners are weak and without backbone. They are too soft and sentimental. We must not hesitate to weed out the weak in our midst. Their absurd sense of virtue will destroy them. We are the future. To achieve it, all potential enemies must be destroyed. One must keep one's focus on the greater good."

Beria had flicked the ashes on the floor and dipped the sucking end of his cigar in the brandy.

"Ivan Vasilyevich, my dear comrade, we Georgians are the leaders of the future. Stalin, Beria, Dimitrov. Loyal men like you will rise with me."

He lowered his voice almost to a whisper as he bent close to Dimitrov's ear.

"Stalin will not live forever...."

He put his hand on Dimitrov's knee. For a brief moment,

the gesture seemed like a sexual pass.

And if it were? Dimitrov asked himself, knowing the answer.

Beria lifted his snifter and swallowed the remnants. Dimitrov did the same, and Beria poured again, remaining silent for a long stretch.

"You know, Ivan Vasilyevich, we have the greatest intelligence service on the globe, the best spy network in the history of the world. I know. I built it. Others might claim otherwise but Stalin knows it was I who made it happen. We will win, make no mistake about it. The West will boil in its own corruption."

Beria shook his head in contempt.

Two weeks earlier, he had returned from Yalta, where Stalin had met Roosevelt and Churchill to discuss the future course of the war and its aftermath.

"Stalin played them like a violin, but Churchill is the more dangerous of the two, distrustful and suspicious. Roosevelt is a naïve fool. Besides, he seemed weak and not attentive. The days of the Western countries are numbered, Ivan Vasilyevich. There is a world for us to take."

Beria's nostrils flared as he sniffed the brandy. He nodded as if he were answering a question in his mind. He took a deep pull on the cigar and blew the smoke into the air.

"We are moving fast for other reasons," he whispered. "The Americans are making a super bomb, something to do with splitting the atom. Roosevelt has promised Stalin that, if the bomb works, he will share the process with the Russians. Churchill has not been informed. He would be

the fly in the ointment. The Germans are working on it as well, and we need whatever secret technology we can capture, not to mention the uranium deposits in Saxony and Czechoslovakia and the lab in Dahlem, hence the speed of this offensive."

He lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper.

"Stalin has given me the mission of building such a bomb."

"Congratulations, comrade. I salute you."

Dimitrov lifted his glass in tribute. Beria nodded and sipped. For a long moment, he was lost in thought.

"They leak like a sieve," he said, no longer whispering. "Stupid democracies! They have no real insight into espionage; they are amateurs. We are light-years ahead of them."

Beria chuckled, showing small teeth in a tight smile.

"In Yalta, we had every room in their residences bugged, heard every conversation that took place privately between Roosevelt and Churchill. My own son, Sergo, did the translations. I can tell you that Churchill despises us; he is our nemesis. Roosevelt, naïve idiot, believes that we will be allies forever. We will play the game as long as we can, but make no mistake, Ivan Vasilyevich, the big war is ahead, and we have already organized our army. We are placing people in readiness everywhere—agitators, organizers, propagandists, assassins." Beria chuckled. "We are *everywhere*; you cannot imagine how deep we are embedded."

He paused and shook his head.

"But for now, we must be clandestine. We must smile and pet our Western friends. Keep the knife hidden inside the

velvet glove, especially in America. Now we are beloved: the brave Russians who sacrificed to get rid of the Nazi scourge! We must keep that love affair going as long as we can after the war. But our people are in place, burrowing below the surface, like moles. We need moles, Ivan Vasilyevich, hidden weapons ready for use, while our people eat away at their diseased entrails."

Beria took a sip of his brandy and looked deeply into Dimitrov's eyes.

"Your command of English will be an asset, Ivan Vasilyevich."

"And French, Spanish, and Italian, comrade," Dimitrov said with pride, reminding Beria of his other natural skills. He was not averse to blowing his own horn, when and where appropriate.

"We will need all of your many skills in the future, Ivan Vasilyevich. We will be giving orders in all of your languages. And you will come with me however high we climb."

Dimitrov felt his heartbeat accelerate, a thrill rising up from his crotch.

"I will serve you with my life, comrade."

Beria reached out with his glass and clinked it against Dimitrov's. After a long pause, Beria drank, then roused himself, stood up, threw his still-lighted cigar on the carpet and ground it down with his foot.

"Now, Ivan Vasilyevich," he said smiling. "Let us treat ourselves to the women of the establishment."

What followed, Dimitrov decided, was an experience that would linger in his memory for years. It was the ul-

timate bonding experience between the two men. They fucked the mother and her two daughters in each other's sight. The women had been quickly compliant. Beria had simply pointed his pistol at the head of one of the twins.

"Will it be this gun?" Beria snickered. "Or this?" he said, opening his fly.

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