

AMERIGO MERENDA

THE
SOVIET
NETWORK

A NOVEL



The Soviet Network

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Chapter 1

Captain Rypchensky was evolving into a dissident who harbored contempt for the Communist Party. In 1963, he began to formulate a strategy for altering the status quo within the Soviet Union. The best pathway for incapacitating a corrupt and incompetent system was from within. His thoughts persisted, even as he read the story of David and Goliath to his son, Kristoff. The youngster loved the story as much as his father enjoyed embellishing his version of the tale. Stories about giants could be indelible moments experienced by a four year old boy. He wondered whether his son would someday recognize the meaning of “giant killers” in another context. He also wondered whether, by expanding this story, he was displacing his resentment toward a detested political system. Kristoff was always overwhelmed by the power of Goliath and how David managed to overcome his disadvantage in size. The captain showed his son a picture that portrayed Goliath after being struck a mortal blow. Kristoff responded.

“How can this happen, father? The giant is so big and strong.” The captain, a rising military officer, realized the formative years of his son’s education would be in part determined by his example. He was conflicted about placing too much drama into his son’s frame of reference at this age, but also knew that his moral compass was being framed by his words and example.

He squeezed his son gently and quietly explained.

“Sometimes even giants can be weak. We must be strong, not weak.” Then looking at his son’s curious stare he said: “If you ever have to choose between being afraid of giants and being afraid of weakness, be afraid of weakness.” His wife Monique was listening in and was not amused with the direction of his embellishment. But his son’s interest continued to pique.

Kristoff was amazed at his father’s response, as young boys would imagine the enormity of Goliath. “Why, father?” Like many young children, Kristoff asked why many times.

His father was pleased with his curiosity. “Well, sometimes you have to fight people who are bigger and stronger.”

Without hesitation, Kristoff responded, “How can you win? The big person is too strong.”

The captain smiled. “It depends. David defeated Goliath because David was smart and brave.”

Captain Rypchensky’s wife Monique waited for the right moment to lead her four year old son off to bed.

“Are you smart, Father?” Kristoff asked.

For a fleeting moment, the captain had a pang of fear he did not understand. “Smarter than whom?”

Kristoff looked at his father. “Smarter than Goliath.”

Monique must have sensed the story had reached a point where she should intercede when her husband responded, “Only if I have to be”.

His story telling approached a point where he could place his family under surveillance if he allowed political views to expand his son’s thinking. Four year olds have no filters and could reveal parental sentiments outside the home. Living in a police state had to include this possibility. As much as the captain wanted to satisfy his son’s curious mind, he realized he was treading in dangerous currents. Then his son asked another question.

“Are there any giants like Goliath today?”

Once again, he wondered, how far should he allow his son’s imagination to probe. “Well, not exactly. As you get older, you will learn about giants.”

However, this was not enough to satisfy young Kristoff.

“Why can’t I learn now?”

His mother’s instincts took over, motivated by her personal experiences of life in a police state. She reached down and lifted her son with her answer.

“Because it is time to go to bed; give your father a kiss goodnight.”

Kristoff resisted. “Why can’t I learn now?”

Monique embraced her son before she repeated with more authority, “Because it is time to go to bed. Now give your father a kiss good-night.”

The youngster persisted.

“Father, please tell me more about giants.” The captain embraced his wife and son with his massive arms.

“Maybe another night. Goodnight, my son.”

Childhood memories often surfaced for Kristoff, revealing a segment of his father’s psychological profile, portrayed through childhood stories. It was during moments of solitude when Kristoff vividly remembered episodes where his father would portend ominous thoughts within a story. As a child, he didn’t realize his father was speaking to him subconsciously, almost as a way of planting a reality that would reveal itself in his adult years. Now as an adult journalist for Pravda, Kristoff explored his father’s hidden messages. He also discovered his father purposely isolated him from political drama to protect him. Kremlin walls shielded dangerous and hidden messages. Kristoff understood there were few if any adults living in the Soviet Union who could share personal thoughts, political or otherwise, with their children. Totalitarian fear bred secrecy and anxiety.

As he matured, Kristoff began to realize how much of his adult life was spent thinking about his father, now with the rank of commander, one of the most powerful men in the Soviet army. Their relationship changed after his father’s promotion. Intrigue that surrounded Commander Rypchensky was too dangerous for his son to explore. Kristoff had a problem with that because now, at age twenty-seven, his career in journalism, at his father’s insistence, required avoidance of domestic politics. His frustration was building, but he understood his father’s wisdom and would never endanger their careers and

relationship, with political jargon that could be easily misinterpreted. Journalism in the Soviet Union was without question an arm of the state, with little demand for a journalist's true literary skills, except for the purpose of propaganda. Religion and politics were toxic subjects, topics wisely avoided in public circles. However, Kristoff sensed his frustration was also discretely shared by his parents. There were signs of dissonance within Kremlin political families. Frustration was steadily building.

Monique, Kristoff's mother, was born in Russia. Her French mother was married to a Russian artist, who developed a style of avant-garde painting that became very popular in Western Europe. Mysteriously, he disappeared during one of several purges during the Stalin era. Monique had repressed memories of her father that were very painful for her as a child. Now, as an adult, she, like thousands of other citizens, suffered in silence. She desperately wanted to share her discontent with others but feared dire ramifications. Her father's mysterious disappearance still haunted her. Repression was a very common defense mechanism in Russia. It was necessary for survival. Kristoff sensed this when he continued to probe his grandfather's life. His mother would cut him off or change the subject. Once he saw tears in his mother's eyes when his questions were persistent. At that moment, he realized her painful psychological threshold had reached its limit; he learned never to question her again.

Kristoff's family name was Rypchensky. His father's traditions were culturally Ukrainian although his father's mother was Russian. As a child, Kristoff didn't know why cultural attachments mattered until later in life when he became aware of tension between the two republics. Stalin's policy of forced migration of Russian populations into other republics, some thousands of miles away, was enforced to maintain cultural superiority. A priority was forcing Russian language on inhabitants. Ukrainians maintained their dialect. They also preferred Western European cultural habits. Their associations with cultural hubs in Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, and Rome, exposed Ukrainians to material amenities. Kristoff's father made sure his son was informed of Ukraine's unique traditions. His father's ethnicity was reinforced by Russian arrogance directed toward other social traditions. Cultural distinctions became more apparent as he matured into adulthood.

The Soviet Union's vast land mass has eleven time zones, containing fifteen republics, with over forty languages. Eastern republics have large Muslim populations that can present major obstacles to Russian hegemony. The Russian war in Afghanistan was instigated by religious zealot's plans to create a theocracy. If religious and cultural divisions continued to clash with Communist autocrats, Russia's eastern empire was threatened. Religious-cultural wars breed contempt and longevity. Avoiding this possibility is a primary objective of communist leaders who had little choice but to allow for cultural-religious traditions. However when communist authorities realized the rebirth of jihadism spreading from Afghanistan to Soviet republics containing large numbers of Muslims, they invaded Afghanistan. Their efforts failed in part because mujahideen fighters were determined enemies. Rugged geography was another factor. Alexander the Great and the British experienced similar results. What may have been the most critical factor in Russia's defeat was the introduction of stinger missiles provided by the United States. Without air power, Russia could not control territory.

Controlling eastern republics with large Muslim populations required mixing Russian

settlements with native populations. This policy began with czars and continued with twentieth century dictators. The success or failure of these policies will eventually be determined. The communist goal is to encourage a moderate political ideology that maintains cultural equilibrium. Assimilation of cultures has introduced a different demographic. However, on occasion, military force has been used when native populations protest against violations of their political and cultural traditions. Basically, Russian domination has been maintained with force. One important factor insisted upon by Russia is linguistic uniformity. A Russian common language taught in schools, creates common bonds that can transcend culture. Ethical and moral justification of policies used for Russification will weave their way into lives of Soviet citizens with mixed results. The Soviet Union's western republics had different concerns, Ukraine in particular.

The Rypchensky's status elevated their privileges. Because of her husband's rank, and the large communist Party in France, Monique was allowed to attend school at the Sorbonne where she was professionally trained in impressionism. Her intellectual capacity was wasted in Moscow. She always looked forward to touring Western Europe with her husband where art dealers from all over the world would convene. Her mother's family resided in Paris, allowing opportunities for French cultural attachments. Paris was the antithesis of Moscow. She could sense contrasts while browsing shops, often stopping to peruse or make purchases in charming boutiques, followed by dining in French cafes. Paris was liberating. On occasion, Kristoff would accompany his mother. He became fluent in French and enjoyed conversing with his mother's family. During these moments in Paris, Kristoff began to comprehend his mother's joy while touring the city of lights. Her face beamed with contentment. Upon their return to Russia, he could sense changes in mood, not only with his mother, but also with Russians walking Moscow's streets. The differences were psychologically miles apart. His mother was a different person when they returned.

When Kristoff's father was promoted to the highest rank in the Soviet Army, life changed more dramatically. There were more privileges offered to the elite and Commander Rypchensky, a Ukrainian by birth, enjoyed a lifestyle reserved for a select few. Kristoff's opportunities expanded as well. New experiences were open to him, including travel and material comforts. His mother's deep French roots and artistic training highlighted her cultural deprivation in Russia. To compensate for this disparity, she frequently took advantage of privileged liberties that allowed her to share interests and freedoms with her relatives in France. Often, Kristoff thought of this paradox. The very establishment that was the defender of communism, was being corrupted by exotic comforts whose origin was often foreign. The Soviet Union, defender of monolithic communism, was being "corrupted" by material comforts and intellectual pursuits whose origins were not only foreign but also democratic and capitalist. In elite circles, this irony did not persist unnoticed.

Kristoff was aware and proud of his parent's intellectual and political interests. His father was a trained physicist whose military career was advanced toward the closing months of WW II, when his division captured several prominent German scientists, who were instrumental in establishing and promoting the Soviet Union's success with long range rockets, expanding the Soviet's military threat post war. Subsequently, rocket technology became a cornerstone for space exploration, leading to Russia's successful

space program, culminating in Sputnik's success. These accomplishments advanced the world's view of communism.

Commander Rypchensky was reputed as the consummate professional. And he was. Tall and ruggedly handsome, he commanded respect from his subordinates and peers. It was only a matter of time before his leadership would replace an aging military hierarchy. The Soviet military had substantial political leverage, and, depending on leadership loyalties, could make unforeseen changes in the body politic. Military personnel's political preferences were unknown. Officers were promoted on the basis of professional skills. Many of the brightest were trained in math and science. Their understanding of communism's shortcomings was inescapable. Commander Rypchensky decided upon a military career rather than one in science because highly ranked military officers possessed more potential for political alternatives.

Commander Rypchensky's political views remained a mystery. His agenda may have been shared with loyal comrades. Being outspoken, however, was dangerous for him and other officers associated with intellectual provocateurs, especially when dissonant undercurrents circulated. Kristoff was kept uninformed intentionally. Protecting his son from political conflict was foremost. Kristoff believed his perception of reality was unmistakable. The status quo was unacceptable. He also knew better than to ask questions. Circumstances required silence. Within the Kremlin, a code of silence was mandatory for survival.

Kristoff's bond with his parents was strong. Having two loving parents was one of his most cherished possessions, followed by Nadia, a woman he met during an emergency snow delay at Boryspil International airport, east of Kiev. They made plans to meet again at Rasputin's, one of several popular discos in Moscow, where elite young professionals gathered to dance and commiserate. Nadia would alter Kristoff's future. Not only was she beautiful and smart, but she was also a member of the Bolshoi Ballet. Their relationship matured to the point where marriage was a definite possibility. He purchased a diamond ring to offer Nadia before introducing her to his parents. When she invited Kristoff to her apartment for dinner, the opportunity presented itself. Kristoff was unaware of Nadia's plan to defect during a future performance in New York City.

Chapter 2

Kristoff watched senior members of the Central Committee walk to their seats in a chamber at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses, a large complex built during the Khrushchev era. They were for the most part very old men and looked their age. The Central Committee was meeting to vote on two issues that party liberals and conservatives had deliberated for many weeks. Arranged in a semi-circle, the older members led by Andrei Yermolov were seated at the right side of the chamber. Peter Yurov, an articulate spokesman for the loyal opposition within the Communist Party, was spokesman for the liberal wing. The speaker of the Central Committee began by reading the first proposal before voting occurred. He pounded his gavel, calling for their attention.

“We will vote on the following proposal.” The speaker hammered his gavel again until silence prevailed.

“Shall the Communist Party liberalize its position concerning private ownership and free enterprise, including legal authority to decrease government control over decisions of commerce?”

Basically, this was an attempt to move the Soviet Union toward a market economy. The Chinese communist economy had made movements in this direction and it was believed that similar reforms might occur in the Soviet Union as well. Kristoff looked at his colleague Boris and smiled. They may have something interesting to write in their column after all.

Boris was not amused and his disinterest was apparent. He was a good example of what years of frustration can lead to for totalitarian journalists. At one time earlier in his career, journalism was an exciting profession until he was punished for writing the truth as he believed it to be. One year in Siberia highlighted fear only totalitarianism can generate. He was a “party writer” now and understood the implications of every word he wrote. He admired Kristoff who reminded him of years past when he too believed journalism had meaning and purpose for Mother Russia and beyond. Now, survival was most important, nothing more.

Boris still had some fire left in him but it was easily extinguished. This is why he enjoyed working with Kristoff who was determined to initiate some changes for writers. There also was the advantage in knowing someone whose father was a powerful broker in the Kremlin hierarchy. It was no accident that Kristoff was paired with Boris as journalistic team writers for Pravda. Boris was more than a friend and mentor for young Kristoff; he was a father figure whose role was to protect his protégé from indiscretions of youth. This was a personal and private request from the commander himself. Boris felt a strong loyalty to both father and son. He also believed both of these men would have prominent roles to play in future political changes as they unfolded. The commander left an indelible impression with Boris that conditions would improve. As an officer serving under Captain Rypchensky, Boris was reminded of inadequacies of communism, on more than one occasion. Boris also had his own reasons for not feeling optimistic about the future. Commander Rypchensky had personally revealed his disappointment with Communist bureaucrats who had little interest in reforming a system that provided them

with advantages over an overwhelming majority of citizens. Their interest was self-interest, clear and simple. Reforming a system that made their lives comfortable was unlikely. The commander implied on more than one occasion, that abusive practices and entitlements would be addressed.

When the speaker used his gavel to quiet members of the Central Committee, Boris took notice. The second proposal read as follows:

“Shall the Soviet government rewrite laws pertaining to writers, journalists, filmmakers and performing artists? The new law will allow for more individual discretion and freedom in decision-making for these individuals and organizations within Soviet republics.”

Kristoff smiled and felt a surge of joy. Boris inhaled on his cigarette and did not appear anxious, having experienced similar moments in the past.

“Enjoy the moment, Boris. We will have a story to write.”

Boris winced. “A tragedy I can do without.” Boris lowered his head in his hands. He had been there before and anticipated similar results.

The speaker asked for a vote on the first proposal concerning private ownership. “Those members in favor of proposal number one, please raise your hands.” The votes were counted, with a total of 325 votes in favor. The speaker proceeded. “Those members against proposal number one, please raise your hands.” The chamber housed 549 members in the Soviet of the Union and 526 in the Soviet of the Nationalities. The ballots were electronically tabulated.

“Proposal number one was defeated 750 no, 325 yes.”

The liberal wing reacted with disgust. Shouts of anger disrupted the chamber until the Party Speaker regained order by pounding his gavel followed with his announcement of the second proposal on journalistic liberties, most important to Boris and Kristoff.

“We will now vote on proposal number two. Those members in favor of the second proposal, please raise your hands.” The vote count was the same, 325 votes in favor.

“Those members against the second proposal, please raise your hands.” The result was the same, 750 no, 325 yes.

The conservative majority applauded the results. The old men even managed to stand and applaud. Kristoff and Boris were frustrated and walked out of the chamber. Their walk to a parking lot behind the Kremlin was long enough to allow both men to vent their anger. “What will it take in order for these old men to see how much they are crippling our country? Are they blind? I cannot write what is not accurate and true anymore. I have reached my limits. Suppressed journalism is slowly killing me.”

Boris lit another cigarette and responded in his raspy voice.

“You will write what you have to write. There is no other way.”

Kristoff looked incredulous. “How can you continue to believe that anymore? Haven’t you had enough? Our economy is bankrupt. We must buy wheat from Americans every year. There are lines at food markets. Meat is scarce. The people crave western clothing

and music. Our brave Russian soldiers are being slaughtered in Afghanistan for almost a decade. What will it take, Boris? What will it take?" Cigarette smoke whirled around Boris who felt genuine anger and frustration but understood the repercussions of irrational behavior.

"You are talking dangerously. You are talking revolution. Keep quiet with such words. You will get us both killed." Boris felt he had to temper his young colleague's enthusiasm, realizing he would have reacted the same way when he was twenty-eight. Now he was tired, his youthful energy replaced by complacency and dejection. The system had destroyed his vigor. Boris understood Kristoff's feelings, but was concerned about his personal safety if he expressed his sentiments too vigorously. Even meaningful conversation was not prudent. Words had ways of finding public consumption and were easily twisted along the way. Totalitarian machinations run counter to reason. One cannot be too careful. Boris therefore tried to calm his young colleague. He turned on the car radio to lighten the mood with some music.

"I am trying to put you in a good mood with some music and what do I hear. Nothing but funeral music." He turned the dial. But all government channels were playing funeral hymns. Then Radio Moscow announced:

"We interrupt our musical program to announce the death of our beloved party chairman, Provenko." Boris turned off the radio and looked at Kristoff. Neither one had a word to say, but their minds were racing with mixed emotions. Political succession always presented Russians with mysterious undercurrents. Now with the death of Provenko, Boris feared a chain reaction that could lead to reactionary measures. Hardline communists who were out of touch with reality in the fifteen republics could make life even more miserable. However, the chairman's unexpected death created a window of opportunity for a network of communists waiting to revise the political framework. There were also several men competing for leadership who wanted to replace the deceased Provenko.

The struggle that followed was made more mysterious without a free and open press. Who can anyone really trust without accurate information?

When Boris and Kristoff entered the Kremlin the following day, throngs of citizens walked past Provenko's casket, most without expression of any kind. Among the long line of dignitaries were political suitors, waiting to fill the vacuum created by his untimely death. Two days after the funeral, Central Committee members ordered an emergency meeting. A struggle emerged between older and younger members. Yurov was the spokesman for the younger and more liberal wing of the party. Hundreds of party members were present. His voice was clear and to the point. All eyes and ears were focused on his every word and gesture. Yurov announced firmly, "The party must emerge from this sad moment equipped and prepared for the future of our nation. Youth is the order of the day. We must elect a man whose physical health is as vigorous as his intellect. That man is Kamir Mikoyanov."

There was a stir among the older members who were not prepared for this direct attack on their secured leadership and privileges. They whispered to one another and looked to their spokesman, Vladimir Lomov, who stood and slowly moved his aged frame toward the dais. Absolute silence rippled across the chamber. He made a brilliant call for the

status quo.

“Comrades. Our wisdom will be judged by the decision we make in this hour. Continuity is the order of the day, not youth. This party has made great progress under the leadership of men whose beliefs have conformed with the principles of Marx and Lenin. We must not change that course unless we also relinquish our communist principles and heritage. The man who should lead this nation is present in this chamber. He is Stantin Rolanov.” There was loud applause and approval from the committee.

Rolanov stood and acknowledged the warm recognition from his supporters. He raised both hands above his head and clasped them together as a sign of unity. Mikoyanov, nominee of the liberal wing, realized he could not win so he gestured to his committee supporters to rise and acknowledge the forthcoming election of Rolanov. Yurov whispered to his colleagues, “We must give the appearance of unity. Our turn will come in due course.” The vote was unanimous for Rolanov. There was loud applause from the older party members. Journalists took copious notes as photographers snapped pictures. Stability and conservatism once again reigned over unknown liberal action and leadership. However, during his first year in office, there were several reports of Rolanov’s ailing health. The media reported several accounts of his sudden disappearance. It was believed by some that his death was imminent. Headlines revealed his mysterious absence from the body politic. His whereabouts was a mystery. A series of disturbing political observations followed:

May 5, 1986, LONDON TIMES, “Rolanov is seen in public, reports of his illness divulged.”

September 12, 1986, NEW YORK TIMES, “Rolanov makes appearance. The Soviet leader is seen in public but needs assistance walking to a podium. His voice is weak and he shows signs of shortness of breath.”

January 30, 1987, WASHINGTON POST, “Stantin Rolanov disappears from public. Reports circulate that he has died.”

February 10, 1987, BBC reports: “To quell reports of his death, Stantin Rolanov makes a public appearance, but looks gravely ill. His speech is slurred. He lost his breath on several occasions and had to discontinue. Officials standing near him helped him maintain his balance. Rolanov had to be assisted from the dais.”

A week later, BBC reported Stantin Rolanov died in office. Once again the Soviet Union had an internal struggle for succession. With his death, the liberal wing of the Communist Party had an opportunity they had patiently and prudently waited for. Mikoyanov, along with his liberal colleagues, stood along the funeral procession with a somber expression. Hundreds of party members were also in attendance. An American journalist present wrote the following:

“This is the third funeral for a leader of the Soviet Union in recent years. Once again throngs of citizens walk past the casket looking even more incredulous. Their leader, third in just over three years, has died in office. The scene is very somber.”

This was a turning point for a network that would now emerge under the cover of political uncertainty. In Mikoyanov’s residence, under absolute privacy, several prominent

network leaders gathered. Among them was Commander Rypchensky and KGB Captain Orlov. Their discussion centered on the recent turn of events placing Mikoyanov center stage. The commander was pleased as he addressed his elite members, all men he knew and trusted. All were members of the Communist Party who wanted change.

“Gentlemen. We have been together for many years. Our success will depend upon faith and trust in each other. If we can replace the old regime with men of vision, integrity, and spirit, we will change the course of the Soviet Union forever.” He understood threatening ramifications of his challenge to the status quo. His judgement was respected. He also understood the limits of his power. Reforms would be achieved by chipping away at oppressive doctrines of totalitarianism. Eventually, unrealistic ideals, based upon unattainable communist dogma, would be exposed for their failure to provide goods and services. Economic well-being was fundamental, followed by civil liberties and social justice. Communism was losing public support for these reasons. Replacing a failed status quo became the Network’s goal. Up to this point, progressive policies were stalled or rejected. Patience was limited. Network leaders sensed their time had arrived.

Presenting his strategy, Commander Rypchensky informed network operatives of the importance of keeping the KGB preoccupied with diversions. The idea was clever. Implementation was a major concern. He began to explain his plan as follows:

“If the KGB is consumed with chasing spurious international threats, aka false leads, Network leaders and operatives will have more opportunity for expanding their domestic political agenda. If KGB agents are preoccupied with fake news assignments that divert their attention, Network policy alternatives will have more opportunity for success. We will have time to expose rigid communist economic and political failures, and by doing so, reveal their inability to address public demands. Basically this will involve fabricating and exploiting existing Cold War military and political threats as subterfuge. I repeat, if our enemies are preoccupied chasing false leads, our agenda will have more time for success. By diverting our enemies we are giving our policies valuable time for public consumption. Diversion of KGB operatives will act as cover. If they are consumed chasing false intelligence assignments, we will gain valuable time for our political agenda.” He added: “However, it is only a matter of time before suspicions will arise. Our immediate goal is to explain our domestic reform agenda in order to increase our leverage in the next election. Political power in our hands can and will lead to reform.” He turned and looked at Mikoyanov, whose face was flush, his gray white hair perfectly combed. Then he continued. “This strategy involves a peaceful transition of ideology from a failed communist system to a free market and democratic system. I want to emphasize peaceful transition.” He paused and his tone became even more serious.

“But in the event we see imminent failure with our nonviolent approach, we can then move on to a more aggressive strategy which may necessitate military intervention. I am prepared for that eventuality as are my officers.” Pausing again, he looked at Mikoyanov. “In either case, our legitimacy must include the election of our esteemed leader.” Mikoyanov stood, paused, and finally spoke.

“I am honored by your trust, but suspicions of our political views run deep. We must determine whether our political opponents, who insist on maintaining hard line communist principles, will agree to some necessary changes. Their thinking and planning has

smothered progress. Their strong arm tactics are spreading fear of retaliation. Communism is failing our nation. Our opponents refuse to accept this reality.” He looked at the commander who responded.

“Word has it that Yermolov is suspicious of your leadership and motives. He has rallied his supporters in an effort to maintain control of the party. He is desperate, even suggesting the opposition may have poisoned Rolanov. Of course, this is not true.”

Mikoyanov was angry. He despised Yermolov. “Those bastards will never change. They are not true Leninists. They see change as evil. Lenin saw change as survival. Our country is choking on its own spit and they will not change the status quo. I will never understand those selfish bastards. They make our work more difficult and dangerous.” He paused, then asked, “How many members can we elect to the Central Committee in February?”

His assistant compared information with the commander, then responded.

“We estimate we can finally achieve a majority. This means a minimum of 538. It depends. Events can change minds. Yermolov has plans to increase his coalition. Maybe you should address the party and try to persuade some of the undecided members. Our succession crisis may change minds in our favor.”

Mikoyanov disagreed. “No, that would be premature on my part. It will only serve to solidify the opposition. Moderate party members may become suspicious of any maneuvers on my part. I believe they may consider supporting us. We are better off maintaining a low profile.” Then he motioned toward Commander Rypchensky.

“Have your son Kristoff write more articles critical of these bureaucrats. They are strangling us with their deceptions. They have been using lies and conspiracies as their diversion for decades. Now we can give them a taste of their own contempt for truth.”

Commander Rypchensky inserted a new factor.

“You know the war in Afghanistan is very unpopular, especially here in the Russian Republic. Russians do not want to see their sons slaughtered in a winless struggle. This war has continued without end in sight for eight years. It’s the equivalent of America’s Vietnam nightmare. Our soldiers are dying as we are losing.”

All present realized the commander was correct in his assessment. They understood how Soviet military strategy was outmaneuvered by introductions of American Stinger missiles that were shooting down Russian jets.

Mikoyanov listened to Commander Rypchensky and asked:

“What do you recommend?”

The commander stood and explained his well-thought-out plan.

“We can make the opposition look very bad by their refusal to withdraw our troops. A planned withdrawal from this war will be well received by our military. If we take this position, our military will support our efforts for policy changes. I believe they will support our network plans for the future. Field commanders have had enough. You must speak to the officer corps and let them know your true feelings. This will have tremendous

political ramifications in our favor.”

Mikoyanov was impressed. “That is an excellent idea. I will speak with them. Please Commander, make the necessary arrangements.”

In the days that followed, events happened faster than expected. The Central Committee was meeting to select a new party chairman. Peter Yurov, spokesman and leader of the liberal faction, delivered a persuasive commentary and endorsement of his preferred choice. The elegant surroundings within the Kremlin’s intimate chamber were impressive. Russian art and history embellished walls within the committee chamber, one of many lavish displays from an earlier era. Relics of czarist Russia were displayed. These masterpieces could appear to contradict orthodox communist ideals, however they were magnificent examples of Russian art and culture enjoyed during frequent public tours. Russians showcased their cultural heritage as superior to cultures of fourteen other republics. Their arrogance often caused resentment. By elevating their culture, they unwittingly stirred resentment among masses of non Russians. Elevating themselves for political gain frequently caused disturbances. The policy of expanding Russian culture by occupation began with Czars and continued with Stalin. Russians were forcibly assimilated throughout the European and Asian territory known as the Soviet Union, spreading their language and culture throughout the republics in order to mitigate influence of non Russians.

When Yurov spoke to assembled members, he was purposeful as well as emotional. Momentum had begun to shift. Cultural heritage beautifully displayed in the hall provided an impressive setting. When members were settled, Yurov began.

“Gentlemen. Once again we have gathered under tragic circumstances. Our recent history has been filled with unforeseen events. We must not repeat failures of past decades. My plea to you concerns the destiny of our great nation. I offer you the man who will meet our future with fresh ideas for success. That man is Andrei Mikoyanov.” At first, there was no applause. Gradually, however, the liberal wing’s enthusiasm dominated the room and cheerful support followed. Moderates peered at the conservative delegation, then gradually and steadily stood to support a new leader. A majority consensus had been achieved. When the vote was tabulated, the underground network had achieved political legitimacy. However, their pathway was perilous because traditional forces, deeply entrenched from years of patronage and corruption, would not easily relinquish power. Mikoyanov understood this more than any one because he had fought for years to reform totalitarian hypocrisy. He addressed the legislature, knowing that change would have to be framed carefully using conservative icons and ideology. He understood political undercurrents were in play. Therefore he was very selective with his choice of words that would not offend conservative opponents.

He stood tall and straight, projecting an image of strength and youth.

“Comrades, I am honored by your trust. Our nation must now heal its wounds. We have suffered together and we will triumph together. We can surpass expectations set for our nation by our predecessors. Our party must remain a symbol of Lenin and Marx. They are watching our movements and decisions as I speak.” He pointed to large posters of Lenin and Marx on the walls of the chamber.

“If you observe them you will notice they are not taking their eyes off us.” This was followed by loud laughter and applause. His words were well received. However, Mikoyanov realized that words alone would not appease the entrenched conservatives in the party. He was buying time for his underground network of reformers to finish the enormous task ahead. Both speed and patience were required. He did not want to bruise strong egos during a sensitive political succession. Posturing for influence and power during the succession was ill advised. The opposition must not be humiliated, at least not yet. They were still strong power brokers and could use their powerful connections to terminate reforms.

Mikoyanov feared totalitarian politics for that reason. It could be impulsive and erratic. He was careful not to inflame. His speech was well received and the transition to new leadership was formally announced for public consumption. Mikoyanov apparently had persuaded the body politic that survival required reconciliation and rational, long-overdue compromises and transformations of communist dogma.

Among elite Network members, precautions were taken to avoid indiscrete written or spoken words from being intercepted by enemy agents. At this stage, Kristoff was unaware of any underground movement. The network’s most powerful leader was his father who chose to protect his son by isolating him from being involved as a participant. Now, with the election of Mikoyanov, the Commander was more confident for his son’s safety. Therefore, at some point in the future, he would inform Kristoff of his leadership role and network operations in motion.

As time progressed, a policy of glasnost allowed Kristoff to assume more ownership of his critiques. He crafted editorials that would frame opposing political dialogues between old and new forces emerging from an unexpected political succession. He wanted to present to the public, choices that would stir debate, never before allowed in print. It was a risk worth taking, now with the election of Mikoyanov. Glasnost was emerging which allowed for more printed veracity. He was writing his editorial in the gallery above the chamber while below old bureaucrats used their remaining leverage to advance personal interests. This clearly meant the preservation of their privileges and power at the expense of public needs. For them it was still business as usual. In an attempt to expose their corrupt practices, Kristoff would include in his editorial a question for public dialogue.

“What public policies will advance our nation’s political and economic freedom?” His editorial would contain arguments from each side taken directly from interviews with legislative members. He did not offer his opinion, but it was quite evident what the overwhelming majority of readers would conclude, leading to public demands. He wondered whether Pravda, the party newspaper, would even print his editorial uncensored or would screeners edit its content. He felt optimistic under evolving circumstances. However, Kristoff was not aware of network operatives in the legislature, reconstructing public policies. His father would eventually inform him but not until the movement was more advanced and secure. Major life changes for his parents and all those involved in Network operations were possible. The Network was still operating as an underground movement. Members had to patiently wait and calculate opportune moments that would allow them to surface. It would be premature to identify themselves as advocates for

change. Timing was key for successfully overwhelming their opponents. Totalitarian culture has deep roots.

Chapter 3

Kristoff was looking forward to spending time with Nadia, a woman he was certain would one day be his wife. After a year's time, he realized how important she was to his happiness. She was truly a beautiful woman inside and out. Her blue eyes, blond hair, high cheek bones, tall frame and curvaceous appearance were stunning. What really impressed Kristoff the most was her demeanor. She was level headed, intelligent and determined. Her apartment always cheered his spirits because Nadia had somehow managed to decorate it with beautiful and artistic trappings from her travels with the Bolshoi. She had friends in many special places, friends who loved her and showered her with unique gifts from all over the world of ballet.

While driving to her apartment, Kristoff noticed a car trailing him for blocks. It wasn't the first time he was followed. He always managed to lose pursuers in traffic because his car was faster than most and his driving skills were daring to say the least. Kristof was always fascinated with sport cars and speed. When visiting his relatives in France, he met Italian drivers who introduced him to racing. It was a passion unfulfilled. He even loved the challenge of outmaneuvering KGB agents, usually without difficulty. However, several blocks of sharp turns and dangerous weaving in and out of traffic did not work this time. The agent kept pace. Finally realizing the futility of his attempt, he pulled over, approached the man who parked directly behind him. He was smiling and appeared friendly. Kristoff was not amused.

“Who the hell are you? KGB!”

When the man responded, he smiled and said, “No, but you practically got us killed.” He appeared to be in his early sixties and spoke in a friendly tone.

“So sorry to detain you, but I did not know which apartment was your girlfriend's. However, I recognized your Volvo and license number.”

Kristoff's anger peaked.

“Why are you following me? And what does my girlfriend have to do with anything: Are you KGB?”

The man felt bad about what had happened.

“No, I know they are watching you, so be careful. I'm a friend of your father. He wants to see you this weekend at the Black Sea resort. Bring your girlfriend. Your parents want to meet her.”

Kristoff was shaking his head in disbelief. “How do you know all about my personal life?”

His pursuer's response was straightforward. “It's my job. Your father's insistence!”

Kristoff was incredulous. “But why? What's going on?”

What Kristoff heard next really disturbed him.

”Your girlfriend is planning to defect during her next performance in New York. You must discourage her and let her know the danger in which she is placing her family.”

It was difficult for Kristoff to fathom how his personal life and relationship was unraveling without his knowledge. He felt wounded by someone he loved, and yet he could understand and appreciate her motives. The stranger then provided him with more information.

“Reservations will be made for you and your girlfriend at the airport. My name is Trushin. I work for your father. He is very concerned about your safety as well as your happiness. Trust in his judgment. Now I must go.” Kristoff took some comfort in Trushin’s presence. For reasons he could not explain, he felt some kind of bond with this complete stranger.

When Trushin drove off, Kristoff waited a few minutes to collect his thoughts. His options were limited so he decided to continue his plans with Nadia and determine whether their relationship could be maintained with news of her defection plans. He drove to a florist and purchased a bouquet of roses, and combined with a bottle of French wine from his mother’s collection, felt he was making every effort to create a romantic setting for his evening plans. While approaching her apartment, he noticed a pink ballet figurine attached to her door, just below the number. The figurine was a very special gift from her mother, purchased when Nadia was a young girl studying ballet. Her parents always encouraged her to train and discipline herself. They told her, it would change her life. They were right. She loved to perform and travel all over the world. After three knocks, a moment lapsed before the door opened. Her stunning beauty overwhelmed him, and he practically dropped everything. Her smile was followed by a warm kiss on his lips.

“Thank you for the beautiful flowers, and where did you ever find French wine?”

Kristoff prudently avoided Trushin’s message. His response displayed hesitation. “My mother’s friends have just returned from France. It should be chilled. Any ice?”

She walked toward the refrigerator.

“Absolutely! My refrigerator was made in West Germany, not here. I always have ice.”

Kristoff felt no artificiality on Nadia’s part, but he did feel very amorous. He could not withhold his attraction to her beauty and sexuality that overwhelmed his thoughts despite learning of her secret plans for defection. He approached her with outstretched arms. “That is not all you have.”

After placing the bottle of wine into an ice bucket, he pulled Nadia into a passionate embrace. They practically disrobed while standing. Kristoff gently carried her off to the bedroom where their sexual encounter was both erotic and exhausting. They fell asleep for about an hour. Nadia then gingerly extracted herself from Kristoff’s gentle grasp, slipped on her robe, and prepared the finishing touches for dinner. After she lit candles, she walked toward Kristoff, still resting, naked in bed, and gently rubbed his temples while kissing him with her warm lips. His eyes opened when he felt her blond hair tickle his chest. Her perfume enhanced the moment. Before he could react, Nadia effortlessly stood as though in a ballet and gently exposed a chair from the dining table, from which she brought a box wrapped with a purple ribbon and handed it to Kristoff. Inside, Kristoff found a beautiful evening robe purchased on her last trip abroad.

“I hope you like it. It’s extra-large.”

It was dark burgundy and Kristoff looked very handsome with it wrapped around his tall and shapely physique.

Kristoff was pleased with her selection.

“I do very much,” he said. He stroked the smooth, silky material.

“It’s really nice. Thank you.”

He tied his new robe in front. Kristoff felt everything was going well until her next comment.

“I purchased it at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. Would you pour the wine?” Kristoff’s mind raced with confusion. He thought it wise to avoid any mention of New York before dinner and hoped that after an exclusive bottle of wine, discussion would be easier. Why ruin the beautiful moment and dinner Nadia had prepared? Nadia apparently wanted to set the stage for Kristoff when she commented:

“We should enjoy moments like this more often. That is why I love touring with the ballet. We dine in charming restaurants all over Western Europe and the United States. It is so wonderful.” She paused, then added, “Will we ever live to experience that joy in our country, Kristoff?”

He noticed her eyes watering and embraced her warmly, holding her firm, shapely body as close as he could. “I love you, Nadia. Maybe our new leader, Mikoyanov, will move the Soviet Union in that direction.”

Nadia stared at Kristoff. She could not accept his response and made him more aware of her frustration with life in Russia. The political climate debilitated her spirit.

“But I don’t want to wait until I am an old woman. I want us to enjoy life now while we are young. We need more freedom, you as a writer and I as a performer. Why don’t we leave? There is no future for us here. We need more than love, Kristoff.”

He pondered her comment. Was this the perfect moment to reveal his knowledge of her planned defection? He preferred she reveal her secret. That would be a sign of her trust in him. Maybe Nadia would tell him outright.

He kissed her and through her lips he could feel her uneasiness.

“It is not that easy, Nadia. I am being watched.” Her face tightened with fear. He quickly realized his remark was imprudent. She wanted to speak but held back. Kristoff had never seen Nadia appear so frightened. He embraced her until he felt her mood calm. The look in her eyes was one he had never seen before and would never forget. She was searching for a solution to her unhappiness, knowing the repercussions of her desires could jeopardize their relationship and mutual safety. Kristoff also understood her reasons for silence while living in a dwelling that could be wired for information. Enough had been said already. He placed his index finger over his lips to indicate that silence should prevail at the moment. He kissed her gently, poured more wine, sat her at the table, and asked her to pass the salad. A smile returned to her beautiful face. They enjoyed the moment.

After dinner, Kristoff felt the need to continue their conversation. They walked to their

favorite rendezvous, Odessa, a nightclub several blocks from her apartment where conversation could be muted in social frivolity. There was a chill in the Moscow air as they walked in a light snowfall that covered them while dimming street lights. The café was crowded with cheerful clamor. Many patrons were standing or dancing to American rock and roll while they drank beer and vodka, losing their inhibitions as the night progressed. A friendly waitress motioned for them to follow her to their favorite table away from the bar. She knew Kristoff and Nadia and served them two cognacs. They stared at one another. Kristoff raised his glass to celebrate their love. "To our future together." His eyes focused on Nadia. Her smile was diminished by her emotions. She wanted to be cheerful but found it difficult. Kristoff could feel her anguish and hoped a few drinks would relax her mood. Apparently Nadia was thinking similar thoughts because she finished her cognac and asked for another. Her cheeks began to show some color. That was a good sign. She moved closer to Kristoff. Their eyes were inches apart. Kristoff whispered.

"Talk to me. Tell me what's inside."

Nadia's response was soft and appeared pensive. "I will." Kristoff anticipated her answer was forthcoming, but he gently nudged her. "When?" Her response was almost a whisper. "Soon."

Kristoff was pushing and he knew it. "Why not now?" Nadia's eyes began to tear. Kristoff held her hands and moved closer until his leg touched hers. He then revealed the engagement ring for this very moment. His proposal followed.

"I love you, Nadia. Will you marry me?" Nadia looked at the ring. She moved closer to Kristoff until her lips met his. She thanked him then whispered, "Yes I will, but you should know I am defecting Kristoff. Please join me."

Kristoff felt both joy and trepidation at her response. Without much effort, she had shared her secret with him. He felt a strong, warm connection based upon mutual love and trust. Now he felt obligated to respond. It wasn't easy for him because of what Trushin had told him. "When, Nadia? What about your family?"

Apparently her plan had been set in motion.

"My mother understands. I have her blessing. Our Bolshoi tour in New York is nineteen months from now. This will give us time to work out all the details. Are you with me, Kristoff?" She looked for some kind of encouragement but found little if any until Kristoff added:

"One way or another, I will join you."

Tears streaked down her face.

"Make plans soon. Please!" The desperation in her voice was genuine.

Then Kristoff informed her, "This weekend we are visiting my parents. They want to meet you. We will plan our strategy then, I promise."

His words were comforting. Nadia embraced Kristoff with a new sense of life and emotion she had never felt before. Her mind felt free at last. She had revealed her secret and now had something to look forward to. This alone altered her disposition and mood

away from fear and uncertainty. Her lips pressed hard against Kristoff.

“I love you so much. You have made me the happiest woman in the world.” Kristoff’s heart pounded with mixed emotions.

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