

WINTER PALACE



A NOVEL BY

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YATSENKO LAY motionless on the matted carpet of decaying spruce needles, staring out into the clearing. Even here, two hundred kilometers north of Leningrad, the sun was strong enough to raise a heat-dazzle from the tangled weeds and grasses of the clearing's floor. On its far side, the spruce forest beckoned, cool and dim. Perhaps two thousand meters further on, beyond the rampart of the evergreens, lay the cleared security zone and the Finnish border.

Or the border should be there. But the clearing wasn't shown on Yatsenko's map, and if he were in the right location, it ought to be. The map was a top secret one, prepared by Yatsenko's own department to show the safe corridors by which agents could slip into Finland without interference from the Soviet frontier patrols.

He folded the map and slipped it back into his leather jacket, cursing under his breath. A mosquito whined at his ear and he waved it away, not daring to risk the noise of a slap. The insects had been devouring him all last night and even into the hottest part of the day; his face and ankles and the backs of his hands were puffy and swollen from their bites. When he sweated, as he did now, the itching drove him nearly mad. The things bred in the boggy places up here; in spring and early summer they swarmed through the spruce forest in clouds.

Yatsenko sat up and pulled his jacket straight. He was a swarthy man, with a Mongol slant to his eyes, protuberant ears, heavy in

the gut, balding. But he could still move swiftly; there was muscle under the fat.

He made sure that the heavy black Nagan revolver was firmly tucked into the holster under his jacket, and that the safety catch was on. The gun would blow his upper leg to shreds if it fired accidentally. Then he felt in his inner pocket for the microfilm capsule. He might as well shoot himself with the Nagan and have it over with if he didn't bring that across. The Americans would likely hand him back, and he'd probably go feet first, slowly and alive, into a crematory furnace, like that poor bastard Popov. Screaming his head off all the way, even though he'd been a tough bugger up until then. Even Yatsenko, who was used to screams and had orchestrated a long symphony of them during his career in the NKVD and the MVD, had been shaken by that particular execution. He'd never thought he'd be trying to pull the same trick Popov had, defecting. But if he didn't, he'd end up with a bullet in the back of the neck, at best. Khrushchev or Malenkov or one of the other new rulers in the Kremlin would see to that.

Who would have thought Yatsenko's boss, the indestructible Lavrenti Beria, would be trapped so easily? Beria, chief of the secret police, internal security, the Gulags, the whole MVD. After Stalin died back in March, everybody thought Beria was going to be the new head of the Politburo and ruler of the USSR. It must have been overconfidence on his part, going off to the Praesidium meeting like that, without any bodyguard to speak of. Hell, Yatsenko'd been talking to him not an hour before he left for the meeting and warned him. But Beria hadn't paid any attention. Yatsenko had always got along better with Beria than had the other heads of departments. He would get drunk with Beria and find girls for him, the kind the chief liked, the young green ones. Not so young or green after the encounter, though. A lot of them had jumped off Moscow bridges, and Yatsenko had hushed up that sort of thing more than a few times. That was all over now. Beria'd gone to the Kremlin, overconfident, and somebody had put a bullet through his head.

Yatsenko's friendship with the MVD chief, if that's what it had been, would be his death if Khrushchev and the rest of the new Kremlin gang caught up with him. He grimaced and got to his knees, standing up slowly. It was a good thing he'd taken out some insur-

ance, although if Beria had found him at it, he'd have been dead before Beria. It had been a dreadful risk to take, but Yatsenko had seen the writing on the wall since last year, when Stalin kicked Beria upstairs into a Deputy Minister's post and put Beria's old enemy Kruglov into the vacated position. Stalin did that kind of thing to people he was sick of, promoted a man and then pulled the rug out after he was isolated from his supporters. And when Beria went, Yatsenko knew he would too. Kruglov had always hated both of them.

So he'd made contact with the Americans. He'd been at least as wary of their ineptitude as he had been of the diligence of his own people. This new CIA of theirs didn't seem to know a lot about operational security. Nevertheless, he'd made his plans to get out, bringing his own redemption on the microfilm, he hoped. He'd been planning his break for August, but Beria, the half-wit, had gone and got himself shot, and Yatsenko had had to run early. He'd been running for four days.

He bent over and swept the brown spruce needles off his trousers. That American contact, he thought, straightening. He'd fucking well better be over there. I don't want to go wading in a Finnish swamp for a week, me and the mosquitoes. I wonder if Kruglov's figured out yet where I've gone?

He set out into the clearing. He was halfway across when he heard the plane.

Beads of sweat gathered under Alexander Markelov's helmet liner, coalesced into trickles, and then percolated through his eyebrows into the corners of his eyes. The drops stung. Ahead of him, Fedorchuk trudged along in the ancient infantryman's slog, dark green patches under his arms where the perspiration had soaked through his uniform. Markelov's own tunic felt saturated and, in spite of the heat, clammy.

The two men were following one of the patrol paths that threaded the restricted zone two kilometers east of the Finnish border. The area had been partly logged over before the war, and there were occasional clearings where the spruce forest hadn't grown back. The border zone itself was completely denuded of trees and undergrowth and heavily patrolled by security troops of the most guaranteed

loyalty. Markelov and Fedorchuk didn't belong to that elite group; they were now almost as close to the frontier as they were ever allowed to go. Not that Markelov would have dared to make a break for the other side, anyway; Fedorchuk would shoot him immediately, as he would Fedorchuk if their positions were reversed. The two-man patrols were especially selected so that the members disliked each other. Markelov knew Fedorchuk didn't like him because he was a Jew. There were now only two other Jews in the security battalion; the rest had been weeded out over the last few months. Markelov thought he'd probably be reassigned to a construction brigade before the summer was out. He didn't relish the prospect but he only had a year of military service left. Then he could go back to Moscow and start in at the university, assuming his father's cronies could exert enough influence to get a Jew in. The authorities had been steadily reducing the quotas for the past couple of years. Markelov wanted to study Russian literature. Maybe some day he'd be able to teach it.

He summoned his wandering thoughts back to the path and the business at hand. He'd better be alert; they'd been briefed to watch out for a fugitive who was heading for the border. If found inside the two-kilometer zone, the man was to be warned once and then shot if it looked as though he were about to get away. In addition, the patrols had been ordered not to search the man (or his body); anyone found to have done so would be severely punished. There were even planes looking for the poor devil. Markelov had heard them three times since noon, and one pilot had come down low to inspect him and Fedorchuk, wagging his wings and climbing away after they had waved and he had identified their uniforms.

Fedorchuk stopped suddenly in the center of the path. Markelov almost ran into him.

"Listen!"

Markelov listened. From above the spruce canopy, ahead of them, he could hear the sound of an aircraft engine. Its buzz rose and fell angrily, like that of a wasp imprisoned in a jar.

"There's somebody up ahead," Fedorchuk said. "Come on, *Zhid.*"

As always, the word made Markelov's stomach turn over with a mixture of fear and anger. He'd never be a Russian, he'd always

be a *Zhid*, a Jew. All the other nationalities in the Soviet Union were described in their internal passports as Lithuanians, Uzbeks, or whatever. But not Jews. If you were Jewish, it didn't matter where you had been born or brought up. Your passport said you were a *Zhid*.

Fedorchuk broke into a run, unslinging his rifle, snapping a round into the chamber. He wanted to be the one to catch the fugitive, there'd likely be some kind of a reward or other, maybe even a couple of days' leave. He'd make sure Markelov didn't share any of the credit. Not that they'd give a Jew any, no matter what happened out here.

The gloom under the spruce canopy was lightening, the trees thinning out as the men approached an open space in the forest. They broke out into the clearing, which ran in a gentle slope down to a level area dotted with pools of standing water, lush with bright green marsh grasses and white flowers like small stars. There would be sucking mud under the vegetation and at the bottom of the still, dark pools. On the far side of the bog the spruce forest resumed again, a solid rampart of dark trunks and feathery branches.

Markelov couldn't see the plane; it was too low, but it was there, off to the right, buzzing furiously. Suddenly, a plume of orange vapor boiled into view above the treeline. The pilot had dropped a smoke marker.

"He's over there," Fedorchuk said excitedly, gesturing with the muzzle of his gun. "Don't screw up, we'll be in the shit if he gets away."

Go fuck yourself, Markelov thought. You're no better at this than I am.

They started running toward the treeline, choosing their direction to skin the eastern edge of the bog. Markelov's boots thudded in the long warm grass. His canteen, which was still full, bounced heavily at his side, throwing him off balance. Fedorchuk, who had longer legs, pulled steadily ahead.

Idiot, Markelov thought. Suppose he's sitting behind a tree trunk, waiting for us? You're a perfect target.

With a deafening roar the search plane hurtled overhead, just over the crowns of the spruces. Involuntarily, Markelov glanced up. The plane was climbing, the red stars on its wingtips standing out against the olive camouflage paint.

We've got him now, Markelov thought. The other patrols will be heading this way by now. He'll never make the border. Who is he? A spy?

Fedorchuk was well ahead now. Markelov slowed down. Despite his rigorous training, he was slightly out of breath.

It happened so quickly that, despite all the warning he'd had, Markelov was startled. A figure pounded out of the trees, running flat out, a hundred meters to Fedorchuk's left. Fedorchuk changed direction with a jerk, shouting unintelligibly. Markelov swung to cut the running man off. He was stocky, much older than Markelov. As he pelted through the weeds, he fumbled under his jacket for something.

"Halt!" screamed Fedorchuk. He stopped, raising his rifle to his shoulder. "I'll shoot!"

The fugitive spun in his tracks, dropping to one knee, his hand no longer under his coat, arm up and straightening, a huge black revolver in his fist.

Fedorchuk fired. At that distance, with a rifle, he could hardly miss. But he did.

The revolver boomed twice. Both bullets hit Fedorchuk, the first one in the middle of the chest, the second in the exact center of his upper lip. His face exploded in a splash of tooth fragments, blood, tissue, and scraps of bone. He fell over backwards, the rifle muzzle aiming momentarily and pointlessly at the sky as he collapsed.

The revolver muzzle swung toward Markelov. He couldn't risk a shot from the hip, not against a marksman as good as this. He threw himself flat into the weeds as the revolver fired again. The heavy bullet passed his right ear with a whiplash crack.

He had nearly winded himself. He kept his head down, bringing the rifle butt to his shoulder, up on his elbows now, risky but necessary, peering through the weeds, waiting for the next shot, the blow against his forehead, the big bullet slamming through his helmet —

The man was running again, maybe he thought his last round had hit. He ran right into the bog, arms flailing as the mud gulped at his boots, staggering, recovering quickly.

Markelov got the sights on target, between the shoulder blades,

and squeezed the trigger. The rifle bucked. The fugitive threw his arms out wide and collapsed forward into the muck. Markelov couldn't tell where the revolver had gone.

Shaking with reaction, he got to his feet. He'd never shot a man before. His training took over and he moved toward the edge of the bog.

The man wasn't dead. He was half-submerged in a slurry of mud and water, twisted to one side, pawing feebly inside his jacket. Blood pumped out of the wound in his back, drenching the white marsh flowers. Flies and mosquitoes whined.

Markelov stopped at the edge of the bog, three meters from the struggling figure. He couldn't see the revolver but kept his rifle aimed at the man anyway. He didn't know what to do next. Fish the man out, try to patch him up with a field dressing? Wait until an officer came? The plane was gone, but it'd be back soon, with help.

The fugitive was in shock, muttering unintelligibly, seemingly unaware of Markelov. His right hand was still inside the mud-caked jacket, but sliding out, sudden and astonishingly quick, something bright —

Markelov fired. The man jerked under the impact of the bullet in his side. Blood jetted out of his mouth. His left arm continued its throwing arc for an instant, and then folded bonelessly into the mud. The bright object tumbled clear of the dead fingers, bobbing in a small pool of dark water almost at Markelov's feet. The fugitive had tried to throw it away, Markelov thought.

Markelov's knees were trembling; he felt lightheaded and sick, detached from his body. Almost involuntarily, he bent over and plucked the object out of the water. It was a small metal can with a screw top. His hands seemed to take on a will of their own. He cradled the rifle in the crook of his arm and began twisting at the cap. It had been sealed with wax and turned stiffly at first, then spun loose. He removed it and peered inside. Something dark. He shook the contents into his palm. A film. A camera film. Markelov unrolled part of it. It was already developed. He could make out pages of infinitesimal, unreadable text.

Off in the distance the plane buzzed, returning.

Markelov stared at the film between his fingers, appalled at what

he had just done. Nothing the fugitive carried was to be touched, those had been the orders. They'd know he'd opened the can, the broken wax seal would tell them, even if he recapped it and replaced it in the dead man's pocket. The penalties for disobeying orders out on the frontier were savage. He'd get twenty years in the punishment battalions, if they didn't shoot him.

He had to get rid of the thing.

Curiosity awoke, though. What was recorded on those tiny pages that was so important? It might be useful to find out, someday, somehow. He didn't know why it might be useful, but this was his instinct.

He decided. He ran to the edge of the spruce forest, scabbled away under a tree root, excavating a small cavity. The plane was nearer. Into the hole with the container, dirt back over it, a dusting of spruce needles. When he stood up there was no sign that anything was buried there. No one knew, no one would find it.

Except Markelov, if he dared.

Dusk was falling, late as it did in these latitudes at this time of year. Desmond Lacey waited by the abandoned railway spur line, swatting at the mosquitoes. He'd just about given up hope; he'd heard the planes over there on the Russian side of the border during the afternoon, and then about 3:00 P.M. the engine noises had stopped, as though the border patrols had found whomever or whatever they were looking for.

And Yatsenko should have been across by now, if he were going to make it at all. Lacey had decided some time ago that he probably wasn't going to. What a waste. All the preparations, the risks in Moscow and here in Finland.

And for what? Lacey wondered. Something called Winter Palace. Something big, the Russian had said. A propaganda victory to end all propaganda victories, one to show the Communists up for what they really were. But that was all he'd tell, until he got out. Now he wasn't going to get out.

Winter Palace, Lacey thought, slapping at another mosquito. I wonder what it is? Was? Might have been? I don't suppose we'll ever know, now.

Or, he corrected himself, perhaps we won't know until it's too late.