

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Archangel

Robert Harris

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About the Book

When historian Fluke Kelso learns of the existence of a secret notebook belonging to Josef Stalin he determined to track it down, whatever the consequences. From the violent political intrigue and decadence of modern Moscow he heads north – to the vast forests surrounding the White Sea port Archangel, and a terrifying encounter with Russia's unburied past.

About the Author

Robert Harris is the author of *Fatherland*, *Enigma*, *Archangel*, *Pompeii*, *Imperium* and *The Ghost*, all of which were international bestsellers. His work has been translated into thirty-seven languages. He was born in Nottingham in 1957 and is a graduate of Cambridge University. He worked as a reporter for the BBC's *Panorama* and *Newsnight* programmes, before becoming political editor of the *Observer* and subsequently a columnist on the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In 2003 he was named Columnist of the Year in the British Press Awards. He lives near Hungerford in Berkshire with his wife and their four children.

FICTION

Fatherland

Enigma

Pompeii

Imperium

The Ghost

Lustrum

NON-FICTION

A Higher Form of Killing (with Jeremy Paxman)

Gotcha!

The Making of Neil Kinnock

Selling Hitler

Good and Faithful Servant

Archangel

ROBERT
HARRIS



arrow books

IN MEMORY OF

Dennis Harris
1923–1996

and for

Matilda

Rapava's story

'Death solves all problems – no man, no problem.'

J. V. Stalin, 1937

LATE ONE NIGHT a long time ago – before you were even born, boy – a bodyguard stood on the verandah at the back of a big house in Moscow, smoking a cigarette. It was a cold night, without stars or moon, and he smoked for the warmth of it as much as anything else, his big, farm lad's hands cupped around the burning cardboard tube of a Georgian *papiroso*.

This bodyguard's name was Papu Rapava. He was twenty-five years old, a Mingrelian, from the north-eastern shoreland of the Black Sea. And as for the house – well, *fortress* would have been a better word. It was a tsarist mansion, half a block long, in the diplomatic sector, not far from the river. Somewhere in the frosty darkness at the bottom of the walled garden was a cherry orchard, and beyond it a wide street – Sadovaya-Kudrinskaya – and beyond that the grounds of the Moscow Zoo.

There was no traffic. Very faintly in the distance, when it was quiet, like now, and the wind was in the right direction, you could hear the howling of caged wolves.

By this time the girl had stopped screaming, which was a mercy, for it had got on Rapava's nerves. She couldn't have been more than fifteen, not much older than his own kid sister, and when he had picked her up and delivered her, she had looked at him – looked at him – well, to be honest, boy, he preferred not to talk of it, even now, nearly fifty years later.

Anyway, the girl had finally shut up and he was enjoying his cigarette when the telephone rang. This must have been about two a.m. He would never forget it. Two o'clock in the morning on the second of March, 1953. In the cold stillness of the night the bell sounded as loud as a fire alarm.

Now, normally – you have to understand this – there were four guards on duty during an evening shift: two in the house and two in the street. But when there was a girl, the Boss liked his security kept to a minimum, at least indoors, so on this particular night Rapava was alone. He threw down his cigarette, sprinted through the guard room, past the kitchen and into the hall. The phone was old-fashioned, pre-war, fastened to the wall – Holy Mother, it was making a racket! – and he grabbed the receiver mid-ring.

A man said: 'Lavrenty?'

'He's not here, comrade.'

'Get him. It's Malenkov.' The normally ponderous voice was hoarse with panic.

'Comrade –'

'Get him. Tell him something's happened. Something's happened at Blizhny.'

'KNOW what I mean by Blizhny, boy?' asked the old man.

There were two of them in the tiny bedroom, on the twenty-third floor of the Ukraina Hotel, slumped in a pair of cheap foam armchairs, so close their knees were almost touching. A bedside lamp threw their dim shadows on to the curtained window – one profile bony, picked bare by time, the other still fleshy, middle-aged.

'Yes,' said the middle-aged man, whose name was Fluke Kelso. 'Yes, I know what Blizhny means.' (*Of course I bloody know, he felt like saying, I did teach Soviet history at Oxford for ten bloody years –*)

Blizhny is the Russian word for 'near'. 'Near', in the Kremlin of the forties and fifties, was shorthand for the 'Near Dacha'. And the Near Dacha was at Kuntsevo, just outside Moscow – double perimeter fence, three hundred NKVD special troops and eight camouflaged 30-millimetre anti-aircraft guns, all hidden in the birch forest to protect the dacha's solitary, elderly resident.

Kelso waited for the old man to carry on, but Rapava was suddenly preoccupied, trying to light a cigarette from a book of matches. He couldn't manage it. His fingers couldn't grasp the flimsy stick. He had no fingernails.

'So what did you do?' Kelso leaned across and lit Rapava's cigarette for him, hoping to mask the question with the gesture, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. On the little table between them, hidden among the empty bottles and the dirty glasses and the ashtray and the crumpled packs of Marlboro, was a miniature cassette recorder which Kelso had put there when he thought Rapava wasn't looking. The old man sucked hard on the cigarette and then contemplated the tip with gratitude. He tossed the matches on to the floor.

'You know about Blizhny?' he said at last, settling back in his chair. 'Then you know what I did.'

Thirty seconds after answering the telephone, young Papu Rapava was knocking on Beria's door.

POLITBURO member Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, draped in a loose red silk kimono through which his belly sloped like a great white sack of sand, called Rapava a cunt in Mingrelian, and gave him a shove in the chest that sent him stumbling backwards into the corridor. Then he pushed past him and padded off towards the stairs, his sweaty white feet leaving prints of moisture on the parquet flooring.

Through the open door, Rapava could see into the bedroom – the big wooden bed, a heavy brass lampstand in the form of a dragon, the crimson sheets, the white limbs of the girl, sprawled like a sacrifice. Her eyes were wide open, dark and vacant. She made no effort to cover herself. On the bedside table was a jug of water and an array of medicine bottles. A scattering of large white pills had fallen across the pale yellow Aubusson carpet.

He couldn't remember anything else, or exactly how long he had stood there before Beria came panting back up the stairs, all fired up by his conversation with Malenkov, throwing the girl's clothes at her, shouting at her to *get out, get out*, ordering Rapava to bring round the car.

Rapava asked who else he wanted. (He had in mind Nadaraya, the head of the bodyguard, who normally went everywhere with the Boss. And maybe Sarsikov, who at that moment was deep in vodka stupor, snoring in the guard house at the side of the building.) At this, Beria, who had his back to Rapava and was beginning to shrug off his dressing gown, stopped for a moment, and glanced over his fleshy shoulder – thinking, thinking – you could see his little eyes flickering behind their rimless pince-nez.

'No,' he said at last. 'Just you.'

The car was American – a Packard, twelve cylinders, dark green bodywork, running-board a half metre wide – a beauty. Rapava backed it out of the garage and reversed it down Vspolnyi Street until he was directly outside the front entrance. He left the engine running to try to get the heater going, jumped out and took up the standard NKVD position beside the rear passenger door: left hand on his coat and jacket pulled slightly open, shoulder holster exposed, right hand on the butt of his Makarov pistol, checking the street up and down. Beso Dumbadze, another of the Mingrelian boys, came running round the corner to see what was going on, just as the Boss stepped out of the house and on to the pavement.

'WHAT was he wearing?'

'What the hell do I know what he was wearing, boy?' said the old man, irritably. 'What the hell does it matter what he was wearing?'

ACTUALLY, now he stopped to think of it, the Boss was wearing grey – grey coat, grey suit, grey

pullover, no tie – and what with this, and his pince-nez, and his sloping shoulders, and his big, dome head, he looked like nothing so much as an owl – an old, malevolent grey owl. Rapava opened the door and Beria got in the back, and Dumbadze – who was about ten yards away – made a little *what the fuck do I do?* gesture with his hands, to which Rapava gave a shrug – what the fuck did *he* know? He ran round the car to the driver's seat, slid behind the wheel, jammed the gear stick in to first, and they were off.

He had driven the fifteen miles out to Kuntsevo a dozen times before, always at night and always as part of the General Secretary's convoy – and *that* was some performance, boy, I can tell you. Fifteen cars with curtained rear windows, half the Politburo – Beria, Malenkov, Molotov, Bulganin, Khrushchev – plus bodyguards: out of the Kremlin, through the Borovitskiy Gate, down the ramp accelerating to 75 miles an hour, the militia holding back the traffic at every intersection, two thousand plainclothes NKVD men lining the government route. And you never knew which car the GenSec was in until, at the last minute, just as they turned off the highway into the woods, one of the big ZiLs would pull out and accelerate to the front of the cortège, and the rest of them would all slow down to let the Rightful Heir of Lenin go in first.

But there was nothing like that tonight. The wide road was empty and once they were across the river Rapava was able to let the big Yankee car have its head, the speedo flickering up to nearly 90 while Beria sat in the back as still as a rock. After twelve minutes, the city was behind them. After fifteen, at the end of the highway from Poklonnaya Gora, they slowed for the hidden turning. The tall white strips of the silver birches strobed in the headlights.

How quiet the forest was, how dark, how limitless – like a gently rustling sea. Rapava felt that it might stretch all the way to the Ukraine. A half-mile of track took them to the first perimeter fence where a red-and-white pole lay waist-high across the road. Two NKVD specials in capes and caps carrying sub-machine guns strolled out of the sentry box, saw Beria's stone face, saluted smartly and raised the barrier. The road curved for another hundred yards, past the hunched shadows of big shrubs and then the Packard's powerful lights picked out the second fence, a fifteen foot high wall with gun slits. Iron gates were swung open from the inside by unseen hands.

And then the dacha.

Rapava had been expecting something unusual – he wasn't sure what – cars, men, uniforms, the bustle of a crisis. But the two-storey house was in darkness, save for one yellow lantern above the entrance. In this light, a figure waited – the unmistakable plump and dark-haired form of the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Georgiy Maksimilianovich Malenkov. And here was an odd thing, boy: he had taken off his shiny new shoes and had them wedged under one fat arm.

Beria was out of the car almost before it had stopped and in a flash he had Malenkov by the elbow and was listening to him, nodding, talking quietly, looking this way and that. Rapava heard him say 'Moved him? Have you moved him?' And then Beria snapped his fingers in Rapava's direction, and Rapava realised he was being summoned to follow them inside.

Always before on his visits to the dacha he had either waited in the car for the Boss to emerge, or had gone to the guardhouse for a drink and a smoke with the other drivers. You have to understand that *inside* was forbidden territory. Nobody except the GenSec's staff and invited guests ever went *inside*. Now, moving into the hall, Rapava suddenly felt almost suffocated by panic – physically choked, as if someone had their hands around his windpipe.

Malenkov was walking ahead in his stockinged feet and even the Boss was on tiptoe, so Rapava played follow-my-leader and tried not to make a sound. Nobody else was about. The house seemed empty. The three of them crept down a passage, past an upright piano, and into a dining room with

chairs for eight. The light was on. The curtains were drawn. There were some papers on the table, and a rack of Dunhill pipes. A wind-up gramophone was in one corner. Above the fireplace was a blown-out black and white photograph in a cheap wooden frame: the GenSec as a younger man, sitting in a garden somewhere on a sunny day with Comrade Lenin. At the far end of the room was a door. Malenkov turned to them and put a pudgy finger to his lips, then opened it very slowly.

THE old man closed his eyes and held out his empty glass for a refill. He sighed.

‘You know, boy, people criticise Stalin, but you’ve got to say this for him: he lived like a worker. Not like Beria – *he* thought he was a prince. But Comrade Stalin’s room was a plain man’s room. You’ve got to say that for Stalin. He was always one of us.’

CAUGHT in the draught of the opening door, a red candle flickered in the corner beneath a small icon of Lenin. The only other source of light was a shaded reading lamp on a desk. In the centre of the room was a large sofa that had been made up as a bed. A coarse brown army blanket trailed off it onto a tiger-skin rug. On the rug, on his back, breathing heavily and apparently asleep, was a short, fat, elderly, ruddy-faced man in a dirty white vest and long woollen underpants. He had soiled himself. The room was hot and stank of human waste.

Malenkov put his pudgy hand to his mouth and stayed close to the door. Beria went quickly over to the rug, unbuttoned his overcoat and fell to his knees. He put his hands on Stalin’s forehead and pulled back both eyelids with his thumbs, revealing sightless, bloodshot yolks.

‘Josef Vissarionovich,’ he said softly, ‘it’s Lavrenty. Dear comrade, if you can hear me, move your eyes. Comrade?’ Then to Malenkov, but all the while looking at Stalin: ‘And you say he could have been like this for *twenty hours*?’

Behind his palm, Malenkov made a gagging sound. There were tears on his smooth cheeks.

‘Dear comrade, move your eyes ... Your eyes, dear comrade ... Comrade? Ah, fuck it.’ Beria pulled his hands away and stood up, wiping his fingers on his coat. ‘It’s a stroke right enough. He was meat. Where are Starostin and the boys? And Butusova?’

Malenkov was blubbing by now and Beria had to stand between him and the body – literally had to block his view to get his attention. He grasped Malenkov by the shoulders and began talking very quietly and very fast to him, as one would to a child – told him to forget Stalin, that Stalin was history. Stalin was meat, that the important thing was what they did next, that they had to stand together. Now where were the boys? Were they still in the guard room?

Malenkov nodded and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

‘All right,’ said Beria. ‘This is what you do.’

Malenkov was to put on his shoes and go tell the guards that Comrade Stalin was sleeping, that he was drunk and why the fuck had he and Comrade Beria been dragged out of their beds for nothing? He was to tell them not to touch the telephone, and not to call any doctors. (‘You listening, Georgiy?’ Especially no doctors, because the GenSec thought all doctors were Jewish poisoners – remember that. Now, what was the time? Three? All right. At eight – no, better, seven-thirty – Malenkov was to start calling the leadership. He was to say that he and Beria wanted a full Politburo meeting here, in Blizhny, at nine. He was to say they were worried about Josef Vissarionovich’s health and that a collective decision on treatment was necessary.

Beria rubbed his hands. ‘That should start them shitting themselves. Now let’s get him up on the couch. You,’ he said to Rapava. ‘Get hold of his legs.’

THE old man had been sinking deeper into his chair as he talked, his feet sprawled, his eyes shut, his voice a monotone. Suddenly he let out a long breath and hauled himself upright again. He looked around the hotel bedroom in a panic. 'Need to have a piss, boy. Gotta piss.'

'In there.'

He rose with a drunk's careful dignity. Through the flimsy wall, Kelso heard the sound of his urine drilling into the back of the toilet bowl. Fair enough, he thought. There was a lot to unload. He had been lubricating Rapava's memory for the best part of four hours by now: Baltika beer first, in the Ukraina's lobby bar, then Zubrovka in a café across the street, and finally single-malt Scotch in the cramped intimacy of his room. It was like playing a fish: playing a fish through a river of booze. He noticed the book of matches lying on the floor where Rapava had thrown it and he reached down and picked it up. On the back flap was the name of a bar or a nightclub – ROBOTNIK – and an address near the Dinamo Stadium. The lavatory flushed and Kelso quickly slipped the matches into his pocket, then Rapava reappeared, leaning against the door jamb, buttoning his flies.

'What's the time, boy?'

'Nearly one.'

'Gotta go. They'll think I'm your fucking boyfriend.' Rapava made an obscene gesture with his right hand.

Kelso pretended to laugh. Sure, he'd call down for a taxi in a minute. Sure. But let's just finish the bottle first – he reached over for the Scotch and surreptitiously checked that the tape was still running – finish the bottle, comrade, *and finish the story*.

The old man scowled and looked at the floor. The story was finished already. There was nothing more to say. They got Stalin up on to the couch – so, what of it? Malenkov went off to talk to the guards. Rapava drove Beria home. Everyone knows the rest. A day or two later, Stalin was dead. And not long after that, Beria was dead. Malenkov – well, Malenkov hung around for years after his disgrace (Rapava saw him once, in the seventies, shuffling through the Arbat) but now even Malenkov was dead. Nadaraya, Sarsikov, Dumbadze, Starostin, Butusova – dead, dead. The Party was dead. The whole fucking country was dead, come to that.

'But there's more to your story, surely,' said Kelso. 'Please sit down Papu Gerasimovich, and let us finish the bottle.'

He spoke politely and hesitantly, for he sensed that the anaesthetic of alcohol and vanity might be wearing off, and that Rapava, on coming round, might suddenly realise he was talking far too much. He felt another spasm of irritation. Christ, they were always so bloody *difficult*, these old NKVD men – difficult and maybe even still *dangerous*. Kelso was a historian, in his middle forties, thirty years younger than Papu Rapava. But he was out of condition – to be truthful, he had never really been in condition – and he wouldn't have fancied his chances if the old man turned rough. Rapava, after all, was a survivor of the Arctic Circle camps. He wouldn't have forgotten how to hurt someone – hurt someone very quickly, guessed Kelso, and probably very badly.

He filled Rapava's glass, topped up his own, and forced himself to keep on talking.

'I mean, here you are, twenty-five years old, in the General Secretary's bedroom. You couldn't get any closer to the centre than that – that was the inner sanctum, that was *sacred*. So what was Beria up to, taking you in there?'

'You deaf, boy? I said. He needed me to move the body.'

'But why you? Why not one of Stalin's regular guards? It was they who'd found him, after all, and alerted Malenkov in the first place. Or why didn't Beria take one of his more senior boys out to Blizhny? Why did he specifically take *you*?'

Rapava was swaying, staring now at the glass of Scotch, and afterwards Kelso decided that the whole night really turned upon this one thing: that Rapava needed another drink, and he needed it at that precise instant, and he needed these two things in combination more than he needed to leave. He came back and sat down heavily, drained the glass in one, then held it out to be filled again.

‘Papu Rapava,’ continued Kelso, pouring another three fingers of scotch. ‘Nephew of Avksentiy Rapava, Beria’s oldest crony in the Georgian NKVD. Younger than the others on the staff. A new boy in the city. Maybe a little more naïve than the rest? Am I right? Precisely the sort of eager young fellow the Boss might have looked at and thought: *yes, I could use him, I could use Rapava’s boy, he would keep a secret.*’

The silence lengthened and deepened until it was almost tangible, as if someone had come into the room and joined them. Rapava’s head began to rock from side to side, then he leaned forward and clasped the back of his scrawny neck with his hands, staring at the worn carpet. His grey hair was cropped close to his skull. An old, puckered scar ran from his crown almost to his temple. It looked as if it had been stitched up by a blind man using string. And those fingers: blackened yellow tips and no nail on one of them.

‘Turn off your machine, boy,’ he said, quietly. He nodded towards the table. ‘Turn it off. Now take out the tape – that’s it – and leave it where I can see it.’

COMRADE Stalin was only a short man – five foot four – but he was heavy. Holy Mother, he was heavy. It was as if he wasn’t made of fat and bone, but of some denser stuff. They dragged him across the wooden floor, his head lolling and banging on the polished blocks, and then they had to lever him up on his legs first. Rapava noticed – couldn’t help noticing, as they were almost in his face – that the second and third toes of the GenSec’s left foot were webbed – the Devil’s mark – and when the others weren’t looking, he crossed himself.

‘Now, young comrade,’ said Beria, when Malenkov had gone, ‘do you like standing on the ground or would you prefer to be under it?’

At first, Rapava couldn’t believe he had heard properly. That was when he knew his life would never be the same again, and that he’d be lucky to survive this night. He whispered, ‘I like standing on it, Boss.’

‘Good lad.’ Beria made a pincer of his thumb and forefinger. ‘We need to find a key. About so big. Looks like the sort of key you might use to wind a clock. He keeps it on a brass ring with a piece of string attached. Check his clothes.’

The familiar grey tunic was hanging off the back of a chair. Grey pants were neatly folded over. Beside them was a pair of high black cavalry boots, their heels built up an inch or so. Rapava’s limbs moved jerkily. What kind of dream was this? The Father and Teacher of the Soviet People, the Inspirer and Organiser of the Victory of Communism, the Leader of All Progressive Humanity, with half his iron brain destroyed, lying filthy on the sofa, while the two of them went through his room like a pair of thieves? Nevertheless, he did as he was ordered and started on the tunic while Beria attacked the desk with an old Chekist’s skill – pulling out drawers, upending them, scavenging through their contents, sweeping back the detritus and replacing them on their runners.

There was nothing in the tunic and nothing in the trousers, either, apart from a soiled handkerchief brittle with dried phlegm. By now, Rapava’s eyes had grown used to the gloom, and he was better able to see his surroundings. On one wall was a large Chinese print of a tiger. On another – and this was the strangest thing of all – Stalin had stuck up photographs of children. Toddlers, mostly. Not proper prints, but pictures roughly torn out of magazines and newspapers. There must have been a couple

dozen of them.

‘Anything?’

‘No, Boss.’

‘Try the couch.’

They had put Stalin on his back, with his hands folded on his paunch, and you’d have thought the old fellow was merely asleep. His breathing was heavy. He was almost snoring. Close up, he didn’t look much like his pictures. His face was mottled red and fleshy, pitted with shallow cratered scars. His moustache and eyebrows were whitish grey. You could see his scalp through his thin hair. Rapava leaned over him – ah! the smell: it was as if he were already rotting – and slid his hand down into the gap between the cushions and the sofa’s back. He worked his fingers all the way down, leaning left towards the GenSec’s feet then moving right again, up towards the head until, at last, the tip of his forefinger touched something hard and he had to stretch to retrieve it, his arm pressing gently against Stalin’s chest.

And then – an awful thing: the most horrible, terrible thing. As he withdrew the key and called in a whisper to the Boss, the GenSec gave a grunt and his eyes jerked open – an animal’s yellow eyes, full of rage and fear. Even Beria faltered when he saw them. No other part of the body moved, but a kind of straining growl came from the throat. Hesitantly, Beria came closer and peered down at him, then passed his hand in front of Stalin’s eyes. That seemed to give him an idea. He took the key from Rapava and let it dangle at the end of its cord a few inches above Stalin’s face. The yellow eyes locked on to it at once, and followed it, never left it, through all the points of the compass. Beria, smiling now, let it circle slowly for at least half a minute, then abruptly snatched it away and caught it in his palm. He closed his fingers around it and offered his clenched fist to Stalin.

Such a sound, boy! More animal than human! It pursued Rapava out of that room and along the passage and down all the years, from that night to this.

THE bottle of Scotch was drained and Kelso was on his knees now before the mini-bar like a priest before his altar. He wondered how his hosts at the historical symposium would feel when they got the bar bill, but that was less important right now than the task of keeping the old man fuelled and talking. He pulled out handfuls of miniatures – vodka, more Scotch, gin, brandy, something German made of cherries – and cradled them across the room to the table. As he sat down and released them a couple of bottles rolled on to the floor but Rapava paid them no heed. He wasn’t an old man in the Ukraine any more; he was back in fifty-three – a frightened twenty-five-year-old at the wheel of a dark green Packard, the highway to Moscow shining white in the headlights before him, Lavrenty Beria rocklily in the rear.

THE big car flew along the Kutuzovskiy Prospekt and through the silent sweep of the western suburb. At three-thirty it crossed the Moskva at the Borodinskiy Bridge and headed at speed towards the Kremlin, entering through the south-western gate on the opposite side to Red Square.

Once they had been waved inside, Beria leaned forward and gave Rapava directions – left past the Armoury, then sharp right through a narrow entrance into an inner courtyard. There were no windows, just half a dozen small doors. The icy cobbles in the darkness glowed crimson like wet blood. Looking up, Rapava saw they were beneath a giant red neon star.

Beria was quickly through one of the doors and Rapava had to scramble to follow him. A little flagstoned passage took them to a cage-lift that was older than the Revolution. A rattle of iron and the drone of an engine accompanied their slow ascent through two silent, unlit floors. They jolted to a stop

and Beria wrenched back the gate. Then he was off again, down the corridor, walking fast, swinging the key on the end of its length of string.

Don't ask me where we went, boy, because I can't tell you. There was a long, carpeted corridor lined with fancy busts on marble pedestals, then an iron spiral staircase which had to be climbed down, and then a huge ballroom, as vast as an ocean liner, with giant mirrors ten yards high, and fancy gilt chairs set around the walls. Finally, not long after the ballroom, came a wide corridor with lime green, shiny plaster, a floor that smelt of wood-polish and a big, heavy door that Beria unlocked with the key he kept in a bunch on a chain.

Rapava followed him in. The door, on an old imperial pneumatic hinge, closed slowly behind them.

It wasn't much of an office. Eight yards by six. It might have done for some factory director at the far end of Vologda or Magnitogorsk – a desk with a couple of telephones, a bit of carpet on the floor, a table and a few chairs, a heavily-curtained window. On the wall was one of those big, pink, roll-up maps of the USSR – this was back in the days when there was a USSR – and next to the map was another, smaller door, to which Beria immediately headed. Again, he had a key. The door opened into a kind of walk-in cupboard in which there was a blackened samovar, a bottle of Armenian brandy and some stuff for making herbal teas. There was also a wall-safe, with a sturdy brass front on which was the manufacturer's label – not in Russian Cyrillic but in some western language. The safe wasn't very big – a foot across, if that. Square. Well fashioned. Straight handle, also brass.

Beria noticed Rapava staring at it and told him roughly to clear off back outside.

NEARLY an hour passed.

Standing in the corridor, Rapava tried to keep himself alert, practising drawing his pistol, imagining every little creak of the great building was a footstep, every moan of wind a voice. He tried to picture the GenSec striding down this wide, polished corridor in his cavalry boots, and then he tried to reconcile that image with the ruined figure lying imprisoned in his own rancid flesh out at Blizhnyy.

And you know something, boy? I cried. I might have cried a bit for myself as well – I can't deny it. I was scared – I was shitless – but really I cried for Comrade Stalin. I cried more over Stalin than I did when my own father died. And that goes for most of the boys I knew.

A distant bell chimed four.

At around half-past, Beria at last emerged. He was carrying a small leather satchel stuffed with something – papers, certainly, but there might have been other objects: Rapava couldn't tell. The contents, presumably, had come from the safe, and the satchel might have come from there, too. Or it might have come from the office. Or it might – Rapava couldn't swear to this, but it was possible – it might have been in Beria's hand right from the moment he got out of the car. At any rate, he had what he wanted, and he was smiling.

Smiling?

Like I say, boy. Yes – smiling. Not a smile of pleasure, mark you. More a kind of – Rueful?

– That's it, a rueful kind of smile. A would-you-fucking-believe-it? kind of a smile. Like he'd just been beaten at cards.

They went back the way they had come, only this time in the bust-lined passage they ran into a guard. He practically dropped to his knees when he saw the Boss. But Beria just dead-eyed the man and kept on walking – the coolest piece of thievery you ever saw. In the car he said, 'Vspolnyi Street.'

By now it was nearly five, still dark, but the trams had started running and there were people on

the streets – babushkas, mostly, who had cleaned the government offices under the Tsar and under Lenin, and who, after tomorrow, would be cleaning them under somebody else. Outside the Lenin Library a vast poster of Stalin, in red, white and black, gazed down upon a line of workers queuing outside the metro station. Beria had the satchel open on his lap. His head was bent. The interior light was on. He was reading something, tapping his fingers with anxiety.

‘Is there a shovel in the back?’ he asked, suddenly.

Rapava said there was. For snowdrifts.

‘And a toolbox?’

‘Yes, Boss.’ A big one: car jack, wheel wrench, wheel nuts, spare starting handle, spark plugs ...

Beria grunted and returned his attention to his reading.

*

BACK at the house, the surface of the ground was diamond-hard, set with glittering points of ice, much too hard for the shovel, and Rapava had to hunt around the outbuildings at the bottom of the garden for a pick-axe. He took off his coat and wielded the axe like he used to when he worked his father’s patch of Georgian dirt, bringing it down in a great smooth arc over his head, letting the weight and the velocity of the tool do the job, the edge of the blade burying itself in the frozen earth almost to the shaft. He wrestled it back and forth and pulled it free, adjusted his stance, then brought it down again.

He worked in the little cherry orchard by the light of a hurricane lamp suspended from a nearby branch, and he worked at a frantic pace, conscious that in the darkness behind him, invisible on the far side of the light, Beria was sitting on a stone bench watching him. Soon he was sweating so heavily that despite the March cold he had to stop and take off his jacket and roll up his sleeves. A large patch of his shirt was stuck to his back and he had an involuntary memory of other men doing this while he nursed his rifle and watched – other men on a much hotter day, hacking away at the ground in a forest, then lying obediently on their faces in the freshly dug earth. He remembered the smell of moist soil and the hot drowsy silence of the wood and he wondered how cold it would be if Beria made him lie down now.

A voice came out of the darkness. ‘Don’t make it so wide. It’s not a grave. You’re making work for yourself.’

After a while, he began alternating between the axe and the shovel, hacking off chunks of earth and jumping into the hole to clear the debris. At first the ground came up to his knees, and then it lapped his waist, and finally it was at his chest – at which point Beria’s moon face appeared above him and told him to stop, that he had done well, it was enough. The Boss was actually smiling and held out his hand to pull Rapava from the hole, and Rapava at that moment, as he grasped that soft palm, was filled with such love – such a surge of gratitude and devotion: he would never feel anything like it again.

It was as comrades, in Rapava’s memory, that they each took hold of one end of the long metal toolbox and lowered it into the ground. They kicked the earth in after it, stamped it tight, and then Rapava hammered the mound flat with the back of the shovel and scattered dead leaves over the site. By the time they turned to walk across the lawn to the house, the faintest gleams of grey were beginning to infiltrate the eastern sky.

BETWEEN them, Kelso and Rapava had drained the miniatures and had moved on to a kind of homemade pepper vodka, which the old man had produced from a battered tin flask. God alone knew what he had made it from. It could have been shampoo. He sniffed it, sneezed, then winked and poured

brimming, oily glass for Kelso. It was the colour of a pigeon's breast and Kelso felt his stomach lurch. ~~'And Stalin died,' he said, trying to avoid taking a sip. His words slurred into one another. His jaw was numb.~~

'And Stalin died.' Rapava shook his head in sorrow. He suddenly leaned forward and clinked glasses. 'To Comrade Stalin!'

'To Comrade Stalin!'

They drank.

AND Stalin died. And everyone went mad with grief. Everyone, that is, except Comrade Beria, who delivered his eulogy to the thousands of hysterical mourners in Red Square like he was reading a railway announcement, and had a good laugh about it afterwards with the boys.

Word of this got around.

Now Beria was a clever man, much cleverer even than you are, boy – he'd have eaten you for breakfast. But clever people all make one mistake. They all think everyone else is stupid. And everyone isn't stupid. They just take a bit more time, that's all.

The Boss thought he was going to be in power for twenty years. He lasted three months.

It was late one morning in June and Rapava was on duty with the usual team – Nadaraya, Sarsikov, Dumbadze – when word came through that there was a special meeting of the Presidium in Malenkov's office in the Kremlin. And because it was at Malenkov's place, the Boss thought nothing of it. Who was fat Malenkov? Fat Malenkov was nothing. He was just a dumb brown bear. The Boss had Malenkov on the end of a rope.

So when he got in to the car to go to the meeting, he wasn't even wearing a tie, just an open-necked shirt and a worn-out old suit. Why should he wear a tie? It was a hot day and Stalin was dead and Moscow was full of girls and he was going to be in power for twenty years.

The cherry orchard at the bottom of the garden had not long finished flowering.

They arrived at Malenkov's building and the Boss went upstairs to see him, while the rest of the team sat around in the ante-room by the entrance. And one by one the big guys arrived, all the comrades Beria used to laugh about behind their backs – old 'Stone Arse' Molotov and that fat peasant Khrushchev and the ninny Voroshilov, and finally Marshal Zhukov, the puffed-up peacock, with his medals and boards of tin and ribbon. They all went upstairs and Nadaraya rubbed his hands and said to Rapava, 'Now then, Papu Gerasimovich, why don't you go to the canteen and get us some coffee?'

The day passed and from time to time Nadaraya would wander upstairs to see what was happening and always he came back with the same message: meeting still in progress. And again: so what? It wasn't unusual for the Presidium to sit for hours. But by eight o'clock, the chief of the bodyguard was starting to look worried and, at ten, with the summer darkness gathering, he told them all to follow him upstairs.

They crashed straight past Malenkov's protesting secretaries and into the big room. It was empty. Sarsikov tried the phones and they were dead. One of the chairs had been tipped back and on the floor around it were some folded scraps of paper, on each of which, in red ink, in Beria's writing, was the single word 'Alarm!'

THEY could have made a fight of it, perhaps, but what would have been the point? The whole thing was an ambush, a Red Army operation. Zhukov had even brought up tanks – stationed twenty T34s at the back of the Boss's house (Rapava heard this later). There were armoured cars inside the Kremlin. It was hopeless. They wouldn't have lasted five minutes.

The boys were split up there and then. Rapava was taken to a military prison in the northern suburbs where they proceeded to beat ten kinds of shit out of him, accused him of procuring little girls, showed him witness statements and photographs of the victims and finally a list of thirty names that Sarsikov (great big swaggering Sarsikov – some tough guy *he* turned out to be) had written down for them on the second day.

Rapava said nothing. The whole thing made him sick.

And then, one night, about ten days after the coup – for a coup was how Rapava would always think of it – he was patched up and given a wash and a clean prison uniform and taken up in handcuffs to the director's office to meet some big shot from the Ministry of State Security. He was a tough looking, miserable bastard, aged between forty and fifty – said he was a Deputy Minister – and he wanted to talk about Comrade Stalin's private papers.

Rapava was handcuffed to the chair. The guards were sent out of the room. The Deputy Minister sat behind the director's desk. There was a picture of Stalin on the wall behind him.

It seems, said the Deputy Minister – after looking at Rapava for a while – that Comrade Stalin, in recent years, to assist him in his mighty tasks, had got into the habit of making notes. Sometimes these notes were confided to ordinary sheets of writing paper and sometimes to an exercise book with a black oilskin cover. The existence of these notes was known only to certain members of the Presidium, and to Comrade Poskrebyshev, Comrade Stalin's long-standing secretary, whom the traitor Beria recently had falsely imprisoned on fraudulent charges. All witnesses agree that Comrade Stalin kept these papers in a personal safe in his private office, to which he alone had the key.

The Deputy Minister leaned forwards. His dark eyes searched Rapava's face.

Following Comrade Stalin's tragic death, attempts were made to locate this key. It could not be found. It was therefore agreed by the Presidium to have this safe broken into, in the presence of the whole lot, to see if Comrade Stalin had left behind material that might be of historical value, or which might assist the Central Committee in its stupendous responsibility of appointing Comrade Stalin's successor.

The safe was duly broken open, under the supervision of the Presidium, and found to be empty apart from a few minor items, such as Comrade Stalin's party card.

'And now,' said the Deputy Minister, getting slowly to his feet, 'we come to the crux of the matter.'

He walked around and sat on the edge of the desk directly in front of Rapava. Oh, he was a big bastard, boy, a fleshy tank.

We know, he said, from Comrade Malenkov that in the early hours of the second of March, you went to the Kuntsevo dacha in the company of the traitor, Beria, and that you were both left alone with Comrade Stalin for several minutes. Was anything removed from the room?

No, comrade.

Nothing at all?

No, comrade.

And where did you go when you left Kuntsevo?

I drove Comrade Beria back to his house, comrade.

Directly back to his house?

Yes, comrade.

You are lying.

No, comrade.

You are lying. We have a witness who saw you both inside the Kremlin shortly before dawn.

sentry who met you in a corridor.

~~Yes, comrade. I remember now. Comrade Beria said he needed to collect something from his office –~~

Something from Comrade Stalin's office!

No, comrade.

You are lying! You are a traitor! You and the English spy Beria broke into Stalin's office and stole his papers! Where are those papers?

No, comrade –

Traitor! Thief! Spy!

Each word accompanied by a punch in the face.

And so on.

I'LL tell you something, boy. Nobody knows the full truth of what happened to the Boss, even now even after Gorbachev and Yeltsin have sold off our whole fucking birthright to the capitalists and let the CIA go picnicking in our files. The papers on the Boss are still closed. They smuggled him out of the Kremlin on the floor of a car, rolled up in a carpet, and some say Zhukov shot him that very night. Others say they shot him the following week. Most say they kept him alive for five months – *five months!* – sweated him in a bunker underneath the Moscow Military District – and shot him after a secret trial.

Either way, they shot him. He was dead by Christmas Day.

And this is what they did to me.

Rapava held up his mutilated fingers and wiggled them. Then he clumsily unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it from the waistband of his pants, and twisted his scrawny torso to show his back. His vertebrae were criss-crossed with shiny roughened panes of scar-tissue – translucent windows on the flesh beneath. His stomach and chest were whorls of blue-black tattoos.

Kelso didn't speak. Rapava sat back leaving his shirt unbuttoned. His scars and his tattoos were the medals of his lifetime. He was proud to wear them.

NOT a word, boy. You listening? They did not get. One. Single. Word.

Throughout it all, he didn't know if the Boss was still alive, or if the Boss was talking. But it didn't matter: Papu Gerasimovich Rapava, at least, would hold his silence.

Why? Was it loyalty? A bit, perhaps – the memory of that reprieving hand. But he wasn't such a young fool that he didn't also realise that silence was his only hope. How long do you think they would have let him live if he'd led them to that place? It was his own death warrant he'd buried under the tree. So, softly, softly: not a word.

He lay shivering on the floor of his unheated cell as the winter came and dreamed of cherry trees with the leaves dying and falling now, the branches dark against the sky, the howling of the wolves.

And then, around Christmas, like bored children, they suddenly seemed to lose interest in the whole business. The beating went on for a while – by now it was a matter of honour on both sides, you must understand – but the questions stopped, and finally, after one prolonged and imaginative session the beating stopped as well. The Deputy Minister never came again and Rapava guessed that Beria must be dead. He also guessed that someone had decided that Stalin's papers, if they did exist, were better left unread.

Rapava expected to get his seven grams of lead at any moment. It never occurred to him that he wouldn't, not after Beria had been liquidated. So of his journey, in a snowstorm, to the Red Army

building on Kommissariat Street, and of the makeshift courtroom, with its high, barred windows and its troika of judges, he remembered nothing. He blanked his mind with snow. He watched it through the window, advancing in waves up the Moskva and along the embankment, smothering the afternoon lights on the opposite side of the river – high white columns of snow on a death march from the east. Voices droned around him. Later, when it was dark and he was being taken outside, he assumed to be shot, he asked if he could stop for a minute on the steps and bury his hands in the drifts. A guard asked why, and Rapava said: ‘To feel snow between my fingers one last time, comrade.’

They laughed a lot at that. But when they found out he was serious they laughed a whole lot more. ‘If there’s one thing you’ll never go hungry for, Georgian,’ they told him, as they pushed him into the back of the van, ‘it’s snow.’ That was how he learned he had been sentenced to fifteen years’ hard labour in the Kolyma territory.

KHRUSHCHEV amnestied a whole bunch of Gulag prisoners in fifty-six, but nobody amnestied Papu Rapava. Papu Rapava was forgotten. Papu Rapava alternately rotted and froze in the forests of Siberia for the next decade and a half – rotted in the short summer, when each man worked in his own private fever-cloud of mosquitoes, and froze in the long winter when the ice made rock of the swamps.

They say that people who survive the camps all look alike because, once a man’s skeleton has been exposed, it doesn’t matter how well-padded his flesh subsequently becomes, or how carefully he dresses – the bones will always poke through. Kelso had interviewed enough Gulag survivors in his time to recognise the camp skeleton in Rapava’s face even now, as he talked, in the sockets of his eyes and in the crack of his jaw. He could see it in the hinges of his wrists and ankles, and the flat blade of his sternum.

He wasn’t amnestied, Rapava was saying, because he killed a man, a Chechen, who tried to sodomise him – gutted him with a shank he’d made from a piece of saw.

And what happened to your head? said Kelso.

Rapava fingered the scar. He couldn’t remember. Sometimes, when it was especially cold, the scar ached and gave him dreams.

What kind of dreams?

Rapava showed the dark glint of his mouth. He wouldn’t say.

Fifteen years ...

They returned him to Moscow in the summer of sixty-nine, on the day the Yankees put a man on the moon. Rapava left the ex-prisoners’ hostel and wandered round the hot and crowded streets and couldn’t make sense of anything. Where was Stalin? That was what amazed him. Where were the statues and the pictures? Where was the respect? The boys all looked like girls and the girls all looked like whores. Clearly, the country was already halfway in the shit. But still – you have to say – at least in those days there were jobs for everyone, even for old *zeki* like him. They sent him to the engine sheds at the Leningrad Station, to work as a labourer. He was only forty-one and as strong as a bear. Everything he had in the world was in a cardboard suitcase.

Did he ever marry?

Rapava shrugged. Sure, he married. That was the way you got an apartment. He married and got himself fixed up with a place.

And what happened? Where was she?

She died. It was a decent block in those days, boy, before the drugs and the crime.

Where was his place?

Fucking criminals ...

And children?

A son. He died as well. In Afghanistan. And a daughter.

His daughter was dead?

No. She was a whore.

And Stalin's papers?

Drunk as he was, there was no way Kelso could make *that* question casual and the old man shot him a crafty look; a peasant's look.

Rapava said softly, 'Go on, boy. Yes? And Stalin's papers? What about Stalin's papers?'

Kelso hesitated.

'Only that if they still existed – if there was a chance – a possibility –'

'You'd want to see them?'

'Of course.'

Rapava laughed.

'And why should I help you, boy? Fifteen years in Kolyma, and for what? To help you spin more lies? For love?'

'No. Not for love. For history.'

'For history? Do me a favour, boy!'

'All right – for money, then.'

'What?'

'For money. A share in the profits. A lot of money.'

The peasant Rapava stroked the side of his nose.

'How much money?'

'A lot. If this is true. If we could find them. Believe me: a lot of money.'

THE momentary silence was broken by the sound of voices in the corridor, voices talking in English and Kelso guessed who this would be: his fellow historians – Adelman, Duberstein and the rest coming back late from dinner, wondering where he'd got to. It suddenly seemed overwhelmingly important to him that no one else – least of all his colleagues – should know anything at all about Papu Rapava.

Someone tapped softly on the door and he held up a warning hand to the old man. Very quietly he reached over and turned off the bedside lamp.

They sat together and listened to the whispers, magnified by the darkness but still muffled and indistinct. There was another knock, and then a splutter of laughter, hushed by the others. Maybe they had seen the light go out. Perhaps they thought he was with a woman – such was his reputation.

After a few more seconds, the voices faded and the corridor was silent again. Kelso turned on the light. He smiled and patted his heart. The old man's face was a mask, but then he smiled and began to sing – he had a quavering, unexpectedly melodious voice –

Kolyma, Kolyma,

What a wonderful place!

Twelve months of winter

Summer all the rest ...

AFTER his release, he was this and no more: Papu Rapava, railway worker, who had done a spell in the camps, and if anyone wanted to take it further – well? yes? come on, then, comrade! – he was always

ready with his fists or an iron spike.

Two men watched him from the start. Antipin, who was a foreman in the Lenin No. 1 shed, and a cripple in the downstairs flat called Senka. And they were as pretty a pair of canaries as you could ever hope to meet. You could practically hear them singing to the KGB before you were out of the room. The others came and went – the men on foot, the men in parked cars, the men asking ‘routine questions, comrade’ – but Antipin and Senka were the faithful watchers, though they never got a thing from neither of them. Rapava had buried his past in a hole far deeper than the one he’d dug for Beria.

Senka died five years ago. He never knew what became of Antipin. The Lenin No. 1 shed was no longer the property of a private collective, importing French wine.

Stalin’s papers, boy? Who gives a shit? He wasn’t afraid of anything any more.

A lot of money, you say? Well, well –

He leaned over and spat into the ashtray, then seemed to fall asleep. After a while, he muttered. My lad died. Did I tell you that?

Yes.

He died in a night ambush on the road to Mazar-i-Sharif. One of the last to be sent. Killed by stone-age devils with blackened faces and Yankee missiles. Could anyone imagine Stalin letting his country be humiliated by such savages? Think of it! He’d have crushed them into dust and scattered the powder in Siberia! After the lad was gone, Rapava took to walking. Great long hikes that could last a day and a night. He criss-crossed the city, from Perovo to the lakes, from Bittsevskiy Park to the Television Tower. And on one of these walks – it must have been six or seven years ago, around the time of the coup – he found himself walking into one of his own dreams. Couldn’t figure it out at first. Then he realised he was on Vspolnyi Street. He got out of there fast. His lad was a radio man in a tank unit. Liked fiddling with radios. No fighter.

And the house? said Kelso. Was the house still standing?

He was nineteen.

And the house? What had happened to the house?

Rapava’s head drooped.

The *house*, comrade –

There was a red sickle moon, and a single red star. And the place was guarded by devils with blackened faces –

KELSO could get no more sense out of him after that. The old man’s eyelids fluttered and closed. His mouth slackened. Yellow saliva leaked across his cheek.

Kelso watched him for a minute or two, feeling the pressure build in his stomach, then rose suddenly from his chair and moved as quickly as he could to the lavatory, where he was violently and copiously sick. He rested his hot forehead against the cold enamel bowl and licked his lips. His tongue felt huge to him, and bitter, like a swollen piece of black fruit. There was something stuck in his throat. He tried to clear it by coughing but that didn’t work so he tried swallowing and was promptly sick again. When he pulled his head back, the bathroom fixtures seemed to have detached themselves from their moorings and to be revolving around him in a slow tribal dance. A line of silver mucus extended in a shimmering arc from his nose to the toilet seat.

Endure, he told himself. This, too, will pass.

He clutched again at the cool white bowl, a drowning man, as the horizon tilted and the room darkened, slid –

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