

Chapter One

CLICK.

Lieutenant-General Grigori Pavlovich Sechenov froze in mid-step. He recognized the sound instantly although he hadn't heard it for over forty years. As a young junior lieutenant, he had stepped on a land mine during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. It's a sound one never forgets. Then, as now, he instinctively froze knowing that if he moved his foot even slightly, the mine would explode. Although the temperature was well below freezing, sweat began to form on Grigori's brow.

As before, the land mine was buried under newly fallen snow. Forcing himself to breathe in short, shallow breaths so that he wouldn't inadvertently move, he slowly, carefully looked down: his foot was clearly visible in the bright moonlight. However, instead of the high leather boot Soviet officers wore back then, all he saw were his blue pin-striped trousers and a black rubber galosh.

The last time his life had been spared by a quick-thinking sergeant who volunteered to hold down his boot while Grigori carefully pulled his foot out. Another of his men then put a heavy stone on top of his now-empty boot so that his sergeant could escape in turn. As far as Grigori knew, his boot was still standing in the middle of the field, its toe covered by a large rock.

How am I ever going to get my foot out of the galosh? he worried.

“General, v chyom delo? General, what is the matter?” Major Pavel Mironovich Kolovsky, his bodyguard, inquired anxiously.

Grigori twisted around and glared angrily at his companion. “Speak in English,” he growled in a hoarse whisper. “Remember where we are!”

An instant later he realized what he had said. Embarrassed, he looked around nervously. They were less than ten meters away from the front door of their destination, a large three-story house in a secluded, quiet suburban neighborhood. Christmas decorations twinkled in the windows.

A quaver of foolishness swept over Grigori—the Swiss living near Zurich were not known for planting mine fields in their front yards.

Daintily, he lifted his foot.

CLACK!

Grigori's heart skipped a beat even though he was braced for the sudden sound; Pavel didn't even seem to notice it. Grigori hesitated before probing the snow with his gloved hand. An instant later he held a seashell-shaped object. It was barely five centimeters wide, made of tin-plate, and had a characterized frog painted on the top. Underneath was a springy metal tab. He pressed it.

Click-clack.

Grigori glanced at Pavel Kolovsky and smiled. His expression quickly changed to a grimace when he saw his companion's stare.

"We had best be getting into the house," Grigori Sechenov grumbled as he slipped the toy frog into his overcoat pocket. "They're waiting for us."

He turned; and with his head tucked down into the upturned collar of his overcoat, he trudged the last few steps to the porch. Pavel watched his superior for a moment and then followed a respectful two steps behind.

The thick oak door opened suddenly as Grigori Sechenov reached for the doorbell.

"Ah, *Herr* Sechenov, you have arrived!"

The round, plump face of a middle-aged man with graying brown hair and gold-rimmed eyeglasses peered around the edge of the barely open door. His owlish eyes

were an intense blue. The man, Manfred Schossberg, opened the door wider and beckoned them to enter.

“Please, please,” he bid them, “it is cold and the cost of heating fuel is so high. Please hurry in so I can keep the cold out.”

Pavel quickly followed Grigori’s lead, stamping the snow off his feet before hurrying into the oak-paneled vestibule. Grigori was already unbuckling the catches on his galoshes as the door clicked shut behind them.

“Is he here yet?” Grigori inquired while he fumbled with one of the catches.

“Certainly,” a voice answered from the right. The accent was indisputably American. Grigori looked up. A man in his mid-sixties stood in the doorway to the living room. Plump from too many business luncheons, the American wore a Harris Tweed sports jacket and held a drink in his right hand. As Grigori watched, the American placed a briar pipe into his mouth. Smoke curled upward as the man exhaled.

“Have a good trip?” Grigori muttered, returning his attention to the balky catch on his left galosh.

“No worse than average,” Lazarus Keesley, the American, replied. “You?”

“We had a hell of a time getting out of Sheremetyevo airport. It was snowing.” Grigori yanked viciously at the catch of his boot. “Whoever invented these damned things ought to be sent to Siberia,” he grouched. With a grunt, he at last forced the obstinate galosh off. “There—that’s better!”

“Oh, Manfred,” he added, digging into his overcoat pocket. “This doesn’t belong to little Helga, does it?” He held out the toy frog and squeezed it, causing it to emit its click-clack sound.

“Why, yes,” Manfred exclaimed jubilantly when he saw the toy. “Wherever did you find it?”

“Out in the snow,” Grigori answered with a chuckle. “I stepped on it as we were cutting across your yard. It gave me quite a start.”

“Oh, thank you so very much, *Herr* Sechenov. I don’t know how to thank you enough. You have certainly made my little Helga happy again. I will give it to her as soon as she returns tomorrow,” Manfred chattered while he hung the overcoats in the closet. “Now, if you gentlemen would follow me, we should go to our room in the cellar. I believe that you have business to discuss.”

He led the way to the cellar stairs. At the base of the stairs stood a heavy steel door set in a solid cement wall. It resembled a watertight hatch from a submarine. Only about a meter and a half high, it had steel dogs set all the way around its frame, allowing it to be sealed from within.

Manfred led the procession down the stairs and pulled the steel door open before entering the room beyond. It was a comfortably furnished room with birch paneling and light brown upholstered furniture. It was actually a Swiss household bomb shelter outfitted as living space. Three men were already in the room. They scrambled out of their seats as the others entered. Two looked like Americans while the third had a distinctly eastern European appearance.

“Ah, I see that all of our watchdogs are here,” Lazarus Keesley noted while stepping through the portal. “Is the room clean, Jack?”

“Yes, sir,” Jack Egan, one of the men assigned to guard Lazarus, replied. “I did the sweep myself. Not a bug to be found. Manfred runs a really tight safehouse.”

Grigori Sechenov glanced at the eastern European-appearing man, “Do you agree, Major Yakovlev?”

“*Da*, General,” he replied.

“Good,” Manfred said. “Now that the accommodations

have been approved, please make yourself at home, gentlemen. Can I offer you some refreshments?”

“If you would, Manfred. I’ll have mineral water,” Grigori said. “Do you mind if I use your facilities?”

“Certainly not; you know where it is,” Manfred answered. He then faced the security men and added, “If we can have the hatch secured, we may start.”

Pavel Kolovsky, Grigori Sechenov’s senior bodyguard, and Jack Egan, Lazarus Keesley’s Chief of Security, both attended to closing the entrance hatch and locking the steel dogs that ringed it, securing it from within.

They were in the ‘*Zufluchtsort*,’ ‘the Refuge,’ as Manfred Schossberg, their host, preferred to call the house. In fact, it was a very special place: it was a joint American and Russian safehouse set up shortly after the Cold War fell apart in the early 1990’s. Once the political polarization between Communism and Capitalism had vanished, a multitude of nationalistic and ethnic strivings reemerged from a fifty-year hiatus. These plunged the world into a bewildering mass of petty wars, revolutions and disputes—especially inside the former Soviet Union.

The rules of espionage had changed as well. The one-time arch-antagonists, the CIA and KGB—now the *Sluzhba Vneshnoi Razvedki* (SVR) or the Foreign Intelligence Service—suddenly found themselves on the same side in many of these conflicts. The need for secure communications became evident to both sides. Feelers went out, contacts were made, and soon two men shook hands in a hotel room in Geneva. The first CIA-SVR meetinghouse was established near Geneva in late 1992, only to be compromised by the Mossad within a year.

The second safehouse, the *Zufluchtsort*, was founded in early 1994, with Manfred Schossberg, a Swiss banker, as the custodian and occasional ombudsman. Schossberg, a middle-aged widower, was required to re-marry and start a second family as part of the arrangement so that he

would have more than just himself to worry about should he be tempted into perfidy by the Mossad or anyone else.

The arrangement worked well for years. For most of the year, the Schossbergs lived in peace in the large house overlooking Lake Zurich. Usually it was only two or three times a year that the phone rang, causing Katrina Schossberg to suddenly find a reason to visit her family in Berne with little Helga. Later that afternoon a delivery van would arrive. After sunset, others would arrive in ones and twos until the stage was set for the main participants: Grigori Sechenov, First Deputy Director of the SVR; and Lazarus Keesley, the Director of the Intelligence Community Staff at the CIA.

As usual, the meeting started casually. Lazarus refilled his pipe and lit it before pausing to chat with his two security men. Grigori headed to the bathroom. Manfred busied himself with mixing the drinks.

A few minutes later, Grigori Sechenov, fresh drink in hand, wandered over to where Keesley was standing with Manfred and smiled politely. "Well, Mr. Lazarus Monroe Keesley, what was it that has you so bothered that you had to drag me all the way from Moscow."

"Iraq," Lazarus answered brusquely. He glanced down at his drink as though planning to take a sip of it, when he suddenly looked up and glared acquisitively into Grigori's eyes. "What the hell are you doing there?"

"Iraq? Me?" Grigori looked surprised. "I've never been there."

"I'm talking about the three divisions of Russian soldiers stationed there, not to mention the six squadrons of MiG-39s interceptors and large number of Kamov attack helicopters."

"And you want to know what they are doing there?"

"Isn't that what I just asked?"

Grigori continued to appear perplexed. He shook his

head. "They're making money, what else did you expect?"

"What?" The American's eyebrows arched in disbelief.

"I said that they're earning money," Grigori repeated earnestly.

It was Lazarus' turn to seem dumbfounded.

Grigori Sechenov chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. "Look, my friend. You in the West have nobody to blame but yourselves. First, you run the old Soviet Union into the ground. Then you force all us Communists to become Capitalists. This we did—but what is it that we have to sell? I mean, what in the world is it that we have that anybody would want to buy from us? The answer is military equipment and know-how. Now you're complaining about how successful we're at."

"But what does that have to do with stationing thirty to forty thousand troops in Iraq?" Lazarus queried dubiously, eyeing the Russian with suspicion.

"They're working there," Grigori replied with a shrug. "That's their job—they're mercenaries. They're paid to be mercenaries."

Lazarus sucked his pipe for a moment. "Mercenaries—whole divisions at a time? How do you expect me to believe that poppycock?"

Grigori Sechenov shrugged his shoulders again. "It's true. Given the mess the Russian economy is in and the heavy cuts we have had to make in our military expenditures, the Soviet—I mean the Russian general staff had a problem. Either they deactivated entire divisions of redundant military forces and dumped the men on an already overloaded job market, or they found some way to put them to work outside of Russia. They found just the answer—Renta-Army. They discovered that there are many third-world nations that need experienced troops, both for keeping the peace as well as training their own indigenous forces. So we rent out what they need—from a

company of advisers to entire divisions. The troops come fully trained, equipped with their own weapons and supplies, and leave whenever you want them to go. All you have to do is put down a three-month deposit and give them a sixty-day notice. We do, however, prefer a yearly contract, particularly when more than a company of personnel is involved.”

Lazarus glared at the Russian. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Certainly! You don’t seriously believe that we’re still into that idealistic crap about making the world safe for Communism, do you? Look, Lazarus, we have three basic problems.”

Grigori held up his right hand balled into a fist and then popped up his index finger. “First, we have too many men for too few jobs. Second, we need foreign capital. Third, about all we know how to do is make military things—hell, we still don’t know how to make a decent car or refrigerator yet. When you put the three together, you see an obvious answer. And that is that we should hire our young men out as mercenaries. This way, they make a few dollars—more than they could make at home. Then, in turn, they send back home to their families, who, in turn, spend it in Russia. I think you’ve heard of the idea, it’s called cash flow.”

“Bullshit!” A frown formed on Lazarus’ brow. “Whole divisions as mercenaries is a bit hard to swallow.”

“But it’s true,” Grigori insisted. “What would it take to convince you? Look!” He pulled a notebook out of his breast pocket and flipped it open. “Look here, I have all the information right here—the units, the names of the commanding officers, their location, their mission—whatever you want to know. Ask me and I’ll tell you.”

Grigori Sechenov stood silently while Lazarus eyed the notebook for several seconds. Finally, Lazarus reached out and gently took the notebook from Grigori Sech-

enov's hand.

"It's in code," he complained the moment he tried to read it.

"It's Russian shorthand," Grigori explained. "I learned it years ago. Here, I'll read it for you," he added as he took the notebook back and flipped to the first page.

"Russian ground troops serving as mercenaries in Iraq," he began reading. He glanced up and found that Jack Egan had a notebook out and was taking notes. Grigori paused to gaze at him quizzically.

"I learned shorthand years ago, myself, sir," Jack explained. "I need it to take notes at briefings—probably the same reason you learned."

"Yes, it was."

"Just read your notes aloud slowly, and I'll copy them down."

"Okay," the Russian agreed. "Russian ground troops serving as mercenaries in Iraq," he re-read. "The 135th Guards Armor Division, stationed in central Iraq with headquarters in Bayji. Equipped with T-90 Main Battle Tanks. Purpose: train Iraqi armor units in use of T-90 and related tactics. The 342th Guards battalion, Special Purpose Troops, Mountain Warfare. Stationed in mountains in northeast Iraq, headquartered near Kirkuk. Purpose: train Iraqi Republican Guards in mountain warfare techniques...."

Grigori continued reading from his notebook in a droning monotone for nearly twenty minutes, yet everybody's attention was riveted on him. On and on he went, covering each and every Russian unit stationed in Iraq, giving its size, name, and mission. When he finished, he glanced at Lazarus and asked, "Any questions?"

Lazarus nodded in agreement. "Okay, you've made your point. Maybe they are all mercenaries. However, I do think it is appropriate that we send somebody to check on

your claims.”

“Neither I nor the Russian government will have any problem with that,” Grigori answered quietly. “However, you’ll still have to get Field Marshal Khalid Ribat to go along with that request. I suspect he might object. After all, he was involved in the losing side in the Gulf War and so might harbor some hard feelings.” He glanced around the room. “Are there any other questions?”

“Yes, I would like a list of all unit commanding officers,” Lazarus said as he knocked his pipe into an ashtray. He then began to relight it. “Outside of that, I think that’s about it.”

As Grigori watched, Lazarus turned and began to walk to the door.

“We’re not quite done yet,” Grigori announced. “I also have some complaints to raise of my own. Isn’t there something you should be telling us?”

Caught off guard, Lazarus nearly choked on his pipe. “What?”

“I asked if you didn’t have something to tell us about as well,” Grigori repeated innocently.

“Are you fishing for something?” Lazarus again eyed the Russian suspiciously.

“No, not at all. I was simply trying to make it easier for you to tell us about your magic computer.”

Confused, Lazarus glared at Grigori. “What are you talking about?”

“Line item 1285698,” Grigori closed his eyes to help him remember the number, “according to your own government’s accounting office. It’s also known as Project Velvet Rainbow by the United States Air Force. Finally, the boys at the Skunk Works call it Project Mary Lou. It’s all so very confusing, but then again, I guess it’s supposed to be that way.”

Lazarus again cleaned the ashes out of his pipe by knocking it against the bottom of an ashtray. The rapping sound caught everybody's attention.

"I don't think Project Velvet Rainbow is an appropriate subject of conversation," he insisted. The tone of his voice was suddenly stern. Grigori Sechenov continued to stare at Lazarus Keesley.

"I quite disagree. When you asked about Iraq, I answered your questions. I gather that you were satisfied," Grigori responded. He waited for Lazarus to answer. Lazarus glared back in silence.

"Well, Manfred," Grigori said, turning toward their host, "I think that we might be needing your services as our ombudsman after all. We believe that Project Velvet Rainbow is a potential strategic killshot."

Manfred shrugged. He glanced at Lazarus Keesley, who was becoming increasingly agitated over the way the discussion was developing.

"It's not a killshot, and you know it," Lazarus growled. "It's just another goddamn airplane. A fighter. It's not really even a stealth fighter."

"Yes, my friend," Grigori Sechenov acknowledged calmly. "I know all of that. It's supposed to be the next-generation air supremacy fighter, designed to turn on a dime and give ten cents change. It's not the airplane that worries us; it's the computer."

"The computer?" A confused look reappeared on Lazarus Keesley's face. The thick furrows over his eyebrow deepened and spread almost to his ears.

"The one that flies the airplane. It's called the CLEO computer," Grigori Sechenov retorted, raising his voice as though Lazarus were hard of hearing. "It's too damned smart. It scares the hell out of us, even if only half of what we hear about it is true."

"Scares the hell out of you? How? It's just a tactical

aircraft. True, it might beat the pants off your squadrons of obsolete aircraft, should the balloon ever go up, but that's what we're here to prevent. However, Velvet Rainbow is no killshot, Grigori."

Grigori Sechenov's face flushed, but he checked his anger. He slowly crossed his arms and glared at Lazarus Keesley.

"Once again, Lazarus. It's not the airplane," he repeated harshly, not quite shouting his reply, "it's the CLEO computer. We think that it's too damn dangerous."

"In the name of the seven potbellied Inca gods, HOW?" Lazarus demanded angrily.

"It has obvious strategic applications," Grigori repeated, this time lowering his voice in an effort to reduce the acrimony that was rapidly developing into outright hostility. "It can pick and choose targets. It can fly the airplane all by itself. If it's intelligent enough to do that, it can be used to manage your new Star Wars II effort to the point where it can totally neutralize any retaliatory missile launch we might make in response to your aggression."

Lazarus Keesley eyed Grigori and then muttered, "Bullshit. First of all, we're not going to start a war with you, and second, the so-called 'Star Wars II' initiative is merely a defense against some crazy third-world dictator lobbing a nuclear-tipped missile or two against us in the name of Allah. It's even a smaller scale defense than permitted us by the SALT agreements."

Grigori Sechenov's eyes bulged in response, but he again checked his fury. He stood still for a moment, breathing deeply. Finally, he turned toward Manfred Schosberg, who was standing silently, gently shaking his head.

"Well, Manfred," Grigori summarized, "there's the impasse. We want it resolved. We think the Americans are developing a strategic weapon under the disguise of

an airplane. We think it's a strategic weapon, a killshot."

Manfred continued to shake his head sadly. It was going to be one of those nights.

"Okay," Manfred uttered with a sigh. He glanced back and forth between Grigori and Lazarus.

"General Sechenov," he addressed Lazarus formally, "has made a demand that the American Velvet Rainbow project be reviewed as a potential strategic weapon."

Lazarus replied with a sour expression.

"General Sechenov," Manfred turned toward Grigori, "why do you feel that the American computer can be used for strategic purposes? What you have described to me so far is merely an advanced aircraft radar-targeting system and a sophisticated autopilot—certainly no killshot."

"This one thinks," Grigori persisted. His expression changed to a pout when he realized that he was making a fool of himself. Manfred stared at him in disbelief.

"Oh, my god!" Lazarus roared with laughter, thoroughly enjoying Grigori Sechenov's discomfort. "Somebody has certainly sold you a real winner, Grigori. I never heard of such a crock of crap in all of my life. What hallucinating drunk sold you this intelligence? Did he also tell you about the little pink elephants we're training to fly the airplane?"

Suddenly on the defensive, Grigori Sechenov drew back.

"Manfred," Lazarus said, turning to the ombudsman, "I think that they are just trying to get some tactical technology under the false claim that it is strategic."

Manfred paused to straighten his tie. "I have come to the conclusion that someone has told you a preposterous lie, *Herr* Sechenov. I do not believe computers can think. I cannot accept your argument that it is a strategic weapon system."

Lazarus laughed aloud. “That means, Grigori, that if you want to know the secret of Project Velvet Rainbow, you shall have to do so on your own efforts. There’ll be no free ride on this one.”

“Then I shall,” Grigori answered acridly. “I’ll have it in six months.”

“Give it your best shot, because that’s what it will take!” Lazarus sneered.

Grigori quietly turned and walked to the entrance. Pavel rushed to undo the steel dogs locking the hatch while Grigori watched in silence. A moment later, he was gone.