

STEPHAN CLARK

THE SECRET MEETING OF THE SECRET POLICE

WE FOUND OURSELVES ON A DIRT ROAD that stretched off into the darkness. Long lines of cars were parked on both sides, their paint and side mirrors reflecting our headlights as we approached.

“Who is here?” I said.

“Everyone.”

I looked over my shoulder to Vasili in the backseat. “Everyone in the secret police?”

He nodded. “We have called a secret meeting.”

Sergei looked into the rear-view mirror as he drove. “A secret meeting of the secret police?” he said.

Vasili pointed, saying not to worry, the *dacha* is safer than any other. “It belongs to the Colonel General,” he said. “We will be able to talk freely there.”

Sergei had eased up on the gas. “I do not know. A secret meeting?” The cars blurred by on both sides of us, like the walls of a tunnel. “There could be spies,” he said, “spies and double-agents. With so many people, who is to know who belongs and who does not?”

“We have employed the buddy system,” Vasili said. “Everyone was told

to bring two buddies. Before the meeting begins, we will join hands. Anyone left out will be shot."

I turned in my seat. "And we are your buddies?" He smiled by frowning. "This is good," I told Sergei. "It works. The buddy system. It began with Stalin and Lenin."

"And Trotsky," added Vasili, "though he did not understand." He checked his watch. "Now, Sergei, if you do not stop in the middle of the road, we will be right on time."

SERGEI, VASILI AND I STOPPED inside the mudroom, unable to push through any farther. Agents were everywhere—in the kitchen, the dining room, even spilling out of the bedrooms and onto the back deck.

"The Colonel General is starting," a man at the far door called back to us. He listened for a moment, then, receiving the Colonel General's words through another intermediary a little further on, and turned with a chuckle when he had the first of the news." The Colonel General says while the imperialists have used computers for years to increasing power and effectiveness, Mother Russia at first treated them like fancy typewriters or expensive adding machines."

I nodded, reaching for Sergei's shoulder. "It is just like you told me. The capitalists are always having you buy something, thinking it is something else. When really it is the same thing sold twice, a calculator and a typewriter."

This was not exactly what he had said, but it was what I liked to believe. That afternoon, before Vasili brought us to the meeting, Sergei and I had argued in the car outside of Housing Authority Complex #332. He believed it would one day be privatized and renamed Sunshine Manor, as if it were an imperialist hotel on the beaches of Ibiza. "It will be purchased by a private developer," he'd said. "Or no, a consortium of private developers who together will form a Delaware Corporation." I saw this only as what it was—absurd—but whenever I argued he would wave a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* in my face. He had found the paper in January, while searching the hotel room of a visiting American businessman. Now, some seven months later, it was bloated from use, its pages stained by the rings of the teacups and vodka glasses he drank from while studying its propaganda. I knew not what to do. We had been soldiers together. He was my best friend.

Vasili slapped Sergei on the back, snorting in agreement at what I had

said. "Yes. The Americans will do anything for a dollar, even drill a hole through the earth and sell it as, how they say? A doughnut."

There was great laughter at this, all around. It was like it had been in the sixties and seventies and even the eighties, when we still thought we were winning. But then the man at the door was calling back to us again, asking for Vasili.

"The Colonel General," he said, "he wants you."

Vasili acted as if he had expected nothing less. He smoothed down the front of his jacket and moved through the parting crowd. Sergei and I shared a quick look of surprise, and then we followed him before the bodies of our comrades could fall in behind him like a wall.

The Colonel General stood in front of the fireplace, and welcomed our friend with a hug and a kiss on both cheeks. "This, comrades," the Colonel General announced, "is the man who has saved our way of life."

Vasili looked appropriately abashed. He raised his hands over the crowd's clapping and hoots of approval. "Please," he said, "please. Had you been given my most recent assignment and learned what I learned, it would be you up here talking, not me."

He was so humble; I realized then that he was a great man, perhaps a future Secretary General of the Party. It was what I had once secretly dreamed of, when I was a child under Stalin. But this had changed when I got married; then my dreams were only for a larger apartment, or failing that, for my wife's father and brother to fall asleep with their backs to us more often, allowing Liliya and me to make love.

"Gorbachev can't be trusted!"

"He works for the CIA!"

"Please, please!" Vasili was bouncing his hands in the air. "You are right, all of you," he said. "We have our reasons to be suspicious." I turned nodding sharply to those agents around me, as if I had heard all of what my comrade had said and believed it and nothing more. "But only recently have we learned of a technology Gorbachev covets and hopes to implement," Vasili went on. "It is a technology that will take your job, and yours — all of yours," he said, sweeping his hand across the room. "It is a technology that will be the end of the secret police as we know it."