

# THE GAMES

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J E F F   S C H N E I D E R



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# CHAPTER 1

DR. YANCY YOSEMITE squinted, then moved away from the microscope. He'd seen something, but what?

"You still working, sir?"

The weary doctor turned, stared blankly at the security guard, then down to the watch on his pencil-thin wrist. "Sorry, Herman, I didn't realize the time."

"It's all right, doc. Just doing my rounds. I'll stop back."

The guard smiled, then spun and left the laboratory, keys jingling in his wake. Yancy stood motionless for a long moment watching the guard move through a set of doors, then remembered what it was he was looking for. He lumbered into the bathroom, emptied his bladder, then found the liquid cleaner under the sink. He ripped a paper towel from the holder and meandered back to the microscope. Another few minutes, he told himself, and he'd close shop. But not yet. Not after encountering something that made the hairs all over his body stand at attention. He sprayed the cleaner. He needed one more look through a clean lens.

He swiped the top of the microscope in circles, bent, squinted through the black scope. For several minutes he stared, almost as if he'd become frozen.

"Jesus," he mumbled. He raised from the microscope, rubbed

his tired eyes, resumed his position. Disbelief was on his tongue. “Jesus . . . Mary . . . and JOSEPH!”

Sunshine sliced the stained-glassed windows and hit the silver chalice perfectly, causing the few in attendance to squint momentarily when the beam reflected back into their eyes. The grandfatherly priest cleaned the inside of the bowl, then sat in the lone chair on the altar, his shoulders slouching toward his knees. After a few minutes of reflection, the priest stood and ended Mass. Nicholas said a silent prayer, made the sign of the cross, and then left church with the rest of the congregation. How things had changed in Russia. God . . . *the* God, minutes from Red Square. He kept looking for the soldiers, but they weren’t anywhere to be found. The habit was hard to break.

His breath curled on this frigid morning. Hollow clouds sailed above, pushed by a slicing wind that sucked all the moisture out of his nose. Soon the lobes on his ears were deep red. In his gloved hand he clutched a list of items he needed. He studied it and tried to figure out where to go first. But before he could begin, a military SUV pulled up, breaking his train of thought.

“Nicholas.” The hard voice was one he recognized, lifting his eyes immediately.

“Boris?” Nicholas had surprise in his face and voice. Especially on his face. “What on earth brings you here?”

Boris nodded to the list in Nicholas’s hand. Thick gray eyebrows pinched at the top of his ruddy nose. “Same as you, comrade. A honey-do list.”

Both laughed hard as if over shots of clear and lethal vodka. After small talk, Nicholas soon sensed something else. Fifteen years of working under Boris in the KGB told him there was more to this chance meeting. “Boris, I sense something in your voice.”

The big man shrugged. “The country has gone to hell, Nicholas.”

“Boris, we’ve been through all of this. There is nothing we can do. Let . . . it . . . go. Yes, our power is gone, but open your eyes and look around. There are no soldiers. Can’t you see the freedom?” He pointed to the streets.

“Freedom, Nicholas? You call this . . . freedom? *You* look around. Do you not see the hunger? The ruin of our government?”

The crumbling of our cities and hotels?” He shook his fist, then spit onto the sidewalk, barely able to get the words out.

Boris’s voice slipped into the bitter cold. Nicholas knew his former boss was right, especially the part about their government and the rest of society. It *had* all gone to hell, including the vaunted sports program, once the envy of the rest of the world. But he had liberty for the first time in his life, and though he didn’t have power, the freedom still tasted good.

“Someday we will dominate like in the past,” Nicholas said, clenching his jaw, remembering, “but it takes time. Trust in God.”

Boris leapt from the car as if stung by an eel on the butt. His full-length black overcoat spilled across the snow. “You’re like the rest of the country, Nicholas,” he said. “All this religion and god garbage has made you soft in the head.”

Nicholas took a step back and rolled his shoulders. “I’m frustrated, too, Boris, but it does no good. The Iron Curtain was rusty long before it crumbled. The Motherland is no more. We will have to wait . . . and rebuild. We’ve been through this.”

Boris withdrew a newspaper from his coat pocket. “Maybe not, my friend. Read.”

Nicholas took the newspaper. “No!” he said after a few sentences.

“Yes, we’ve played the game before, and we can do it again. Come. You’ve been requested. Shop later.”

The SUV streaked across the frozen land at seventy-five miles an hour. The blanket of snow was virgin as far as the eye could see, except for a lone coyote pawing at something in the distance. Boris nibbled a toothpick, then turned into the mountains and up a steep road bordered with thick pines. For two miles they followed a two-lane road, then finally reached the summit.

“Woooooh,” Nicholas said, gazing at an enormous Nordic park.

A group of speed skaters trained on a spectacular rink with a time clock in each corner, and in the distance, a bobsled team worked out on the luge course tucked into the mountain.

“How much does this cost us each year?” Nicholas said, his eyes fixed on a jumper coming down the 90-meter large hill.

“Not how much it cost, Nicholas. It’s how much of a return it

brings. In the past our spending was never questioned because of the notoriety and pride these athletes brought to the Motherland. Now, though, we are being questioned about things that before wouldn't have raised an eye."

Boris pointed to the speed-skating ice. "Finest rink in the world. When the skaters get a little cold, there are small heaters running around the track for them to warm themselves."

Nicholas walked to the track and spotted the glowing heaters. He stretched his hands over them, feeling the heat through his gloves. "What's that?"

"We have plans for a new course for the snowboarders."

Hills like camel humps rose from the slopes.

"Ahh, that is impressive, Boris. Snowboarding I think is a great new sport."

"It is for everyone but the Russians, Nicholas." Boris shook his head. "We've had to practically beg, borrow, and steal money to get this going."

Nicholas's eyes fell on a beautiful log cabin. "What . . . is . . . that?"

"A place for our best athletes."

The log cabin was three stories. A long front porch stretched from one end to the other. Several stone chimneys rose from the roof, and deep black smoke poured out, lining the sky.

"I should have been an athlete," Nicholas said, slack-jawed. "Never knew it had this kind of reward."

"It doesn't anymore, Nicholas, but that's why I've brought you here. Come, follow me inside."

"Leonid is going to be here?" Nicholas asked, looking past a soldier standing sentry, getting nervous knowing he was meeting one of the most ruthless men to ever walk the snow-covered streets of Moscow.

Boris nodded and put a hand on his friend's shoulder, sensing the anxiety. "Relax, Nicholas, he is our comrade . . . and he shares the same goals."

"Goals, Boris?" Nicholas searched his friend's face but found no answer to his question.

Dark wool suits and big smiles greeted both of them when

they entered the spacious conference area. Valets ushered them to a grand room with deep cherry wood and expensive leather couches and chairs. Oil paintings of Krushchev and Stalin hung importantly. Chandeliers dropped out of the ceiling like huge spaceships.

Leonid Boskov, the former KGB chief, sat at the end of a table smoking a cigarette, then stood slowly when Boris and Nicholas found their seats. He didn't say a word. Didn't flinch an eye. Didn't even seem to notice them enter. He had gained at least thirty pounds since Nicholas last saw him. He wore a gray tie and suit, white flecks of dandruff covering his shoulders. A dime-sized mole rested on his chin, little hairs jutting from it. Nicholas recalled the picture of Boskov in *Newsweek* years ago when they dubbed him the East Bloc's most powerful man. More gray had set in at the temples. Several layers of flab drooped beneath his chin. His hands and face were wrinkles and dark spots. He lifted his shaggy eyebrows, protruded his thick lips, tapped the arms of a chair with his finger-tips.

"Gentleman," Boskov said, his squinting eyes inspecting them, "thank you very much for coming. Your visit shows your loyalty to what the Soviet Union once was. Russia is blessed." He dropped his gaze to the table, then lifted back, now with a grim stare on his face. As always, he was straight to the point. "We no longer present ourselves to the world as a power—as a super-power!—and I'm sick, as I'm sure you both are, at the way we are perceived. Today we no longer can pick up a phone and have the White House scrambling to our call. Today our neighbors in Japan are being touted as the next world power. Today we are *lapdogs!* And it makes me want to vomit."

Boris nodded. Nicholas stared. Boskov's meaty hand slammed the tabletop. Nicholas knew better to challenge Boskov's glare. He was now out of power, but the memories of his ruthlessness lingered. Nicholas remembered the story about Boskov hanging a man in front of his family for attempting treason. The traitor had conspired with the CIA over submarine intelligence at Murmansk, giving the Americans crucial information about top-secret maneuvers in the north Atlantic. Everyone who worked in the KGB also knew Boskov had been one of Stalin's pallbearers, and that in a safety-deposit box in Switzerland he had the hammer and sickle flag that rested on that coffin, willed to him by the former executioner. God

would judge Boskov in due time, but for now one learned to listen to what he had to say.

“We can’t wait fifty years—generations!— for this great country to once again flex its muscles, men,” he continued. “Crime and blight have ravaged our homeland. Today I pick up the paper and see where gangs have blemished Tolstoy’s grave. In the old days I would have climbed out of my chair and found the punks myself. Democracy . . . pffffttt . . . we were much better without it!” Boskov’s heavy stare fell on Boris. “Comrade Boris, please explain this to Nicholas for me. I get too emotional.”

Boskov sat as Boris stood. He cleared his throat, then tapped his heart.

“My inside aches, as I’m sure yours does. Nicholas, you have been called here to help shorten the gap to where we, the great Soviet Union, once were—at the top of the world militarily, politically and athletically. Decisions made soon are going to quicken our ascent to where we once were. We will again make the trains run on time, like what Hitler did in Germany. We will again dominate the Olympics like times past. Our athletes will make the world tremble once again. If we wait for nature to take its course, I’m afraid it will be too late. We will be no more than a memory, like the ancient Egyptians, like the Third Reich, like the dinosaurs of another time. And like the Mammoth Woolly, we will be frozen in the tundra for some archaeologist to find.”

Nothing but the hum of a ceiling fan could be heard. Finally Petrov, who had just entered, cleared his throat. “What exactly are you talking about here?”

“I’m talking about the next best thing to the fountain of youth.”

“Fountain of youth? As in holy grail?”

Boris turned slowly to the man, his eyes daggers. “Pay attention.”

Lights dimmed, and a screen dropped from the ceiling. Boris used a remote to activate a VCR across the room. A thirty-minute video played. Nicholas mumbled to himself, realizing what was being conspired.

“This is madness,” Nicholas said loud enough for three heads to turn in his direction.

Boris ignored the comment and cleared his throat as lights were illuminated. A crack of a smile decorated his fat face. “Do we understand? This, unquestionably, is our fastest way to world power. The fastest way to get our athletes back on the gold-medal stand. We *must* do it.”

Nicholas interrupted. “Wait, we’d take heat from our churches. From world leaders, including the freaking Pope himself. The White House would send in the Marines. This is simply crazy talk.”

“Screw the Pope and his god,” Boris snapped. “We aren’t telling anyone. This is as top secret as the mistress you have.” He paused, letting that bit of information seep through the room. “Can’t you see what God has done to us? Don’t you see the beggars and the thieves growing by the numbers each day? No, the almighty and his church will not come into play with our decision today. In order for the Motherland to rebound, we must take matters into our own hands. Immediately.”