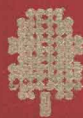


Jeffrey
Archer

A MATTER OF
HONOR



LINDEN
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ALSO BY JEFFREY ARCHER

FIRST AMONG EQUALS
A QUIVER FULL OF ARROWS
THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER
KANE AND ABEL
SHALL WE TELL THE PRESIDENT?
NOT A PENNY MORE, NOT A PENNY LESS

A
MATTER
OF
HONOR

Jeffrey Archer

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To Will

PART ONE

THE KREMLIN

MOSCOW

May 19, 1966

1

THE KREMLIN

May 19, 1966

"IT'S A FAKE," said the Russian leader, staring down at the small exquisite painting he held in his hands.

"That can't be possible," replied his Politburo colleague. "The Czar's icon of Saint George and the dragon has been in the Winter Palace at Leningrad under heavy guard for over fifty years."

"True, Comrade Zaborski," said the old man, "but for fifty years we've been guarding a fake. The Czar must have removed the original sometime before the Red Army entered Petrograd and overran the Winter Palace."

The head of state security moved restlessly in his chair as the cat-and-mouse game continued. Yuri Zaborski knew after years of running the KGB who had been cast as the mouse the moment his phone had rung at four that morning to say that the General Secretary required him to report to the Kremlin office—immediately.

"How can you be so sure it's a fake, Leonid Ilyich?" the diminutive figure inquired.

"Because, my dear Zaborski, during the past eighteen months the age of all the treasures in the Winter Palace has been tested by carbon dating, the modern scientific process that does not call for a second opinion," said Brezhnev, dis-

playing his newfound knowledge. "And what we have always thought to be one of the nation's masterpieces," he continued, "turns out to have been painted five hundred years after Rublev's original."

"But by whom and for what purpose?" asked the Chairman of the Committee for State Security, his voice incredulous.

"The experts tell me it was probably a court painter," replied the Russian leader, "who must have been commissioned to execute the copy only months before the Revolution took place. It has always worried the curator at the Winter Palace that the Czar's traditional silver crown was not attached to the back of the frame, as it was to all his other masterpieces," added Brezhnev.

"But I always thought that the silver crown had been removed by a souvenir hunter even before we had entered Petrograd."

"No," said the General Secretary dryly, his bushy eyebrows rising every time he completed a statement. "It wasn't the Czar's silver crown that had been removed, but the painting itself."

"Then what can the Czar have done with the original?" the Chairman said, almost as if he were asking himself the question.

"That is exactly what I want to know, Comrade," said Brezhnev, resting his hands on the desk and dwarfing the little painting that remained in front of him. "And you are the one who has been chosen to come up with the answer," he added.

For the first time the Chairman of the KGB looked unsure of himself.

"Do you have anything for me to go on?"

"Very little," admitted the General Secretary, flicking open a file that he removed from the top drawer of his desk. He stared down at the closely typed notes headed, "The Signifi-

cance of the Icon in Russian History.” Someone had been up all through the night preparing a ten-page report that the leader had only found time to scan. Brezhnev’s real interest began on page four. He quickly turned over the first three pages before reading aloud: “ ‘At the time of the Revolution, Czar Nikolai II obviously saw Rublev’s masterpiece as his passport to freedom in the West. He must have had a copy made, which he then left on his study wall, where the original had previously hung.’ ” The Russian leader looked up. “Beyond that we have little to go on.”

The head of the KGB looked perplexed. He remained puzzled as to why his leader should want state security involved in the theft of a minor masterpiece. “And how important is it that we find the original?” he asked, trying to pick up a further clue.

Leonid Brezhnev stared down at his Kremlin colleague.

“Nothing could be more important, Comrade,” came back the reply. “And I shall grant you any resources you may consider necessary in terms of people and finance in your quest to discover the whereabouts of the Czar’s icon.”

“But if I were to take you at your word, Comrade General Secretary,” said the head of the KGB, trying to disguise his disbelief, “I could so easily end up spending far more than the painting is worth.”

“That would not be possible,” said Brezhnev, pausing for effect, “because it’s not the icon itself that I’m after.” He turned his back on the Chairman for State Security and stared out of the window. He had always disliked not being able to see over the Kremlin wall and into Red Square. He waited for some moments before he proclaimed, “The money the Czar might have raised from selling such a masterpiece would only have kept Nikolai in his accustomed life-style for a matter of months, perhaps a year at the most. No, it’s what we feel cer-

tain that the Czar had secreted *inside* the icon that would have guaranteed security for himself and his family for the rest of their days."

A little circle of condensation formed on the windowpane in front of the General Secretary.

"What could possibly be that valuable?" asked the Chairman.

"Do you remember, Comrade, what the Czar promised Lenin in exchange for his life?"

"Yes, but it turned out to be a bluff because no such document was hidden. . . ." He stopped himself just before saying "in the icon."

Zaborski stood silently, unable to witness Brezhnev's triumphant smile.

"You have caught up with me at last, Comrade. You see, the document was hidden in the icon all the time. We just had the wrong icon."

The Russian leader waited for some time before he turned back and passed over to his colleague a single sheet of paper. "This is the Czar's testimony indicating what we would find in the icon of Saint George and the dragon. At the time, nothing was discovered in the icon, which only convinced Lenin that it had been a pathetic bluff by the Czar to save his family from execution."

Yuri Efimovich Zaborski slowly read the hand-written testimony that had been signed by the Czar hours before his execution. Zaborski's hands began to tremble, and a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead long before he had reached the last paragraph. He looked across at the tiny painting, no larger than a book, which remained in the center of the Chairman's desk.

"Not since the death of Lenin," continued Brezhnev, "has anyone believed the Czar's claim, but now there can be little

doubt that if we are able to locate the genuine masterpiece, we will undoubtedly also be in possession of the promised document.”

“And with the authority of those who signed that document no one could question our legal claim,” said Zaborski.

“That would undoubtedly prove to be the case, Comrade Chairman,” replied the Russian leader, “and I also feel confident that we would receive the backing of the United Nations and the World Court if the Americans tried to deny us our right. But I fear time is now against us.”

“Why?”

“Look at the completion date on the Czar’s testimony, and you will see how much time we have left to honor our part of the agreement,” said Brezhnev.

Zaborski stared down at the date, June 20, 1966. He handed back the testimony as he considered the enormity of the task with which his leader had entrusted him. Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev continued his monologue.

“So you can see, Comrade Zaborski, we have one month before the deadline, but if you can discover the whereabouts of the original icon, President Johnson’s defense strategy would be rendered virtually useless, and the United States would then become a pawn on the Russian chessboard.”

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APPLESHAW, HAMPSHIRE, ENGLAND

June 1966

“‘AND TO MY DEARLY BELOVED SON, Captain Adam Scott, M.C., I bequeath the sum of five hundred pounds.’”

Although Adam had anticipated the amount would be pitiful, he nevertheless remained bolt upright in his chair as the solicitor glanced over his half-moon spectacles.

The old lawyer who was seated behind the large partner's desk raised his head and blinked at the handsome young man before him. Adam put a hand nervously through his thick black hair, suddenly conscious of the lawyer's stare. Then Mr. Holbrooke's eyes returned to the papers in front of him.

“‘And to my dearly beloved daughter, Margaret Scott, I bequeath the sum of four hundred pounds.’” Adam was unable to prevent a small grin spreading across his face. Even in the minutiae of his final act, father had remained a chauvinist.

“‘To the Hampshire County Cricket Club,’” droned on Mr. Holbrooke, unperturbed by Miss Scott's relative misfortunes, “‘twenty-five pounds, life membership, finally paid up. To the Old Contemptibles, fifteen pounds. And to the Appleshaw Parish Church, ten pounds.’” Death membership, thought Adam. “‘To Wilf Proudfoot, our loyal gardener part-time, ten pounds, and to Mrs. Mavis Cox, our daily help, five pounds.

“‘And finally, to my dearly beloved wife Susan, our marital