



## A Secret Meeting

Ivan's heart pounded wildly with excitement. Forcing himself to appear as if he were simply out for a stroll in the golden Moscow evening, he kept his eyes on Alexi Petrovich a few blocks ahead of him.

Alexi was walking with his hands in his pockets, whistling softly as if he too had nowhere to go. A year older than Ivan, Alexi at fourteen knew exactly how to manage these things.

All the same, Ivan blinked in surprise at the suddenness with which Alexi turned in at a small, gray gate. In an instant, he had disappeared.

A wrinkled grandmother, her rosy grandchild clinging to her hand, passed Ivan. 'Good evening, young *Tovarisch!*<sup>1</sup> She glanced approvingly at Ivan's curly brown hair and athletic posture.

'Good evening, *Babushka.*'<sup>2</sup> Ivan was almost to the gate. Could she tell anything was amiss? He resisted the urge to look over his shoulder and went quickly through the small entrance. In a moment an apartment door flew open and he was hurried into a crowded room.

'Ivan Sergeivich.'<sup>3</sup> God be with you!' Alexi embraced his friend in the Russian manner. Other young people around them nodded at Ivan in greeting or reached out to shake his hand.

1 Comrade. 2 Grandmother or old woman. 3 Russians often greet one another with a person's first and middle names.





#### IVAN AND THE SECRET IN THE SUITCASE

Ivan wedged himself on a small, stiff couch beside Alexi and two other boys. It was hard to control his curiosity, but he knew it would not do to show his interest in who was present. Ivan had never been to a Christian youth meeting before. Even here, police informers were not unknown, and newcomers were watched and treated with caution.

A boy, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, stood guard at the window. Without touching the tightly closed drapes, he stood on an angle to the edge in such a way that he could see everyone coming down the street from one direction. At the other side of the window, a girl with long, light hair stood guard, looking in the opposite direction so that all cars stopping or people walking could easily be observed.

An older boy stood at the apartment door, opening it when someone came and shutting it again as quickly as possible.

Across the room, a girl strummed a guitar so softly that the music could hardly be heard. Young people spoke in whispers. After a few minutes, singing began, so quietly that at first Ivan had difficulty in recognizing the hymn.

Soon all joined in. As they half-whispered, half-sang the lovely Russian melodies, a deep peace fell over the group. A feeling of joy flooded Ivan. How wonderful to praise God with so many other Christian people!

‘But it is so dangerous,’ Momma had pled. ‘And just now, when we are planning our holiday in Hungary. We don’t want to get into any trouble.’

Poppa had looked thoughtful. Their trip was a



once-in-a-lifetime event. They had saved for many years to be able to travel to Hungary to visit their relatives. It would not do for Ivan to be discovered attending a Christian prayer meeting in a private home!

Katya, lifting up a ladle of steaming cabbage soup, had inhaled blissfully. Still holding the hot soup spoon, she shrugged her ten-year-old shoulders impatiently.

‘My teacher, Marina Akhmatova, says that we have freedom of religion in the Soviet Union. So then, why is it against the law for Ivan to pray and sing with other boys and girls? How can that be a crime against the Soviet people?’

Poppa pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. Momma continued to slice the dark loaf that she had just bought at the bread store. Ivan sat down too, facing his father with an anxious look.



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‘And also, Momma,’ Katya continued without waiting for answer, ‘you and Poppa promised Ivan he could go after his birthday. He’ll be all right. Nobody ever gets caught.’ With a bright grin at Ivan, she carried four soup bowls into the living-room to set the table for supper.

Poppa shook his head with a smile. ‘Katya knows very well that our law forbids Christian meetings outside of churches.’

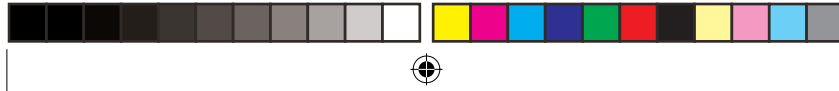
‘But it’s not fair!’ Ivan declared. ‘Young people are even forbidden by law to go to church. We are supposed to wait until we are eighteen. Poppa, Momma, you know that is not God’s way. That’s why you promised I could go to the youth meeting.’

‘I would not say our laws are very nice.’ Poppa sighed and smiled again at Ivan. His huge hands, accustomed to heavy factory work, ruffled Ivan’s hair gently.

Ivan nodded in sudden relief. ‘The laws aren’t nice, Poppa. And it is right that I be with other young people who love God. To sing with them and pray with them and hear how it is with them.’

Poppa stood up and took the plate of bread from Momma’s hands. ‘We promised him he could go this year, Natasha. We must trust him to the Lord.’ Ivan loved the way Poppa patted Momma’s cheek and the shy, quick way she smiled at him.

Now, sitting in the crowded apartment, danger seemed far away. One of the girls rose to recite a poem she had written. A deep blush reddened her cheeks but her voice was clear and sweet.



A SECRET MEETING

*...And as I walk along life's way,  
There is no price I will not pay,  
No cost too high to follow God.  
He gave me life through His own blood.*

She sat down quickly as she finished, her head bent and her long braids falling softly forward. An older boy rose and, small Bible in hand, began to preach. He wore the usual dark suit and white shirt of the Soviet student. But the room was so crowded that beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he preached. In spite of the airless, hot room, a look of joy lit his face as he talked about Jesus Christ and the rewards of following Him.

It was a good sermon, but Ivan found it hard to concentrate. He wondered where the boy got the Bible he held so carefully in both hands, and who he was. Most of the young Christians in the room were unknown to Ivan. He longed to be able to meet each one.

Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in the hallway outside the apartment. Immediately the Bible disappeared into the crowd of young people. The preacher sat down. The guitar disappeared. Not a person moved in the room. Not a sound was made. All eyes were on the sentries by the windows. They shrugged in bewilderment. No one had entered the building.

A leader put his ear to the apartment door and listened intently. With a grin, he turned back to the room. 'It is a bicycle!'

The news flashed in low whispers around the



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room. A neighbor in another apartment was taking his bicycle out for a ride. Smiles passed from person to person as eyes stayed on the boy still listening at the door. Finally there was silence in the hallway. The watchers at the window nodded. The young preacher stood up again. The Bible was passed back to him, and the sermon continued as if there had been no interruption at all. When he finished, more hymns were sung as softly as before.

After a time, Ivan noticed that one after another, young people began to leave. Never more than two, usually alone, they slipped quietly out of the meeting.

Alexi, noticing Ivan's surprise, leaned toward Ivan and whispered an explanation. 'It would attract attention if several of us left at the same time.'

Ivan nodded. But as he stood up to leave, Alexi pulled at the sleeve of his shirt. 'Ivan, we want you to stay. There is something more going on. We need your help.'