

THE SHADOW SPY

A novel

By

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CHAPTER 1

Typically, an office party is supposed to commemorate an event like a birthday, a baby on the way, or the boss got fired. I was the boss. The party was for me. I wasn't being fired as such. I was being promoted, laterally, which is sorta the same thing. Everyone likes this kind of office party because it means there's going to be an empty seat to fill. The size and duration of the party depends on who's getting booted out and why. A black-frosted cupcake with a candle in the break room told me that the guy being honored in a perfunctory way was a dick. That would be me.

I worked in the basement for a section known as the Economic, Energy, and Business Bureau (EEB) as the senior analyst for Soviet affairs. If that wasn't enough to put on a business card, the EEB is part of the State Department where the Soviet Section doesn't show up on the organization chart. We were a dead letter box that no one bothered to check on.

Our purpose was to track, record, and archive abnormalities in trade practices between US and THEM. We were the meter maids who were supposed to catch any hints of bribery, corruption, fraud, extortion, embezzlement, and any of the other normal business practices of the Russians. Our ticket under the windshield wiper wasn't acknowledged by anyone, in particular our own State Department. In essence, we simply made post-it notes concerning what was happening on the world's business playground. In the three years I held the job, not one of my post-it notes made its way out of the basement.

Since the United States hadn't engaged in commerce, trade, business, or exchanged energy with the Soviet Union in the last fifty years, my section didn't merit space at the State Department. We were more or less off-street parking at Fort McNair. My little section had earned the unofficial name, 'The Monastery.' The name was a reflection of the medieval cloistered atmosphere of our workplace, not because we were engaged in any lofty enterprise.

My boss, Bob Blumel, simply forwarded an HR message and attached a note indicating a vacancy in the EEB Soviet Section. The vacancy went to the central registry for distribution in the same long-line message announcing my promotion. My boss advised me that I should formally make a visit to HR before stopping by his office at 'my convenience.' I had mixed feelings as I read the long-line official message and the personal memo.

As the spit-wad control officer and assistant section chief, my office party should have been a cupcake affair. I wasn't getting a promotion as such. I was being laterally transferred to another basement, the basement of the American Consulate in Leningrad, Russia for the next three years. It was a yahoo announcement for the gang of fifteen (my entire staff) because *I* was going and *they* weren't. The last guy that sat in my chair came back from Russia in a box, so no one wanted to claim my spot. The death was an accident, but still, it was an omen and a good reason to take a pass on the assignment.

If the CIA needed to put an 'agent in place'—better known as a 'sleeper'—the basement of the EEB was the perfect place and I was the perfect guy. In fact, I *was* that guy.

Most kids growing up wanted to become cops, firemen, or the president. Me, I always wanted to be a secret spy. I still have my Bosco Milk Chocolate master decoder ring, which I used in elementary school to flame Mr. Yapel, the assistant principal. He never deciphered the code and I never broke, which was, in my opinion, my greatest adolescent academic achievement. Having a photographic memory put me way ahead of Mr. Yapel.

The CIA recruited me after I completed my master's in Soviet Contemporary Society, a prerequisite post-graduate spy course. Even though I spoke and read Russian fluently, I still attended language school. From there, I was trained off-site (not The Farm), learning the craft and doctrine to operate independently in a foreign nation. I wasn't going to blow up trains and power stations, so we skipped the fun stuff and concentrated on the mundane tasks of hiding in plain sight.

After nine months of intense training, testing, and field exercises, I passed with flying colors. I was put to sleep in the State Department to await a future assignment. After three long, boring years, I had finally arrived, and I was jazzed.

I had no sooner made the announcement when my personal line lit up. It was a voice I recognized immediately, and it wasn't my wife's.

"Jefferson Memorial, one hour," he said.

My CIA handler, Phil Greer, wasn't big on conversation, but he was big on field exercises. The Jefferson Memorial was an easy ten minutes away, but I preferred someplace like the Smithsonian, where I was out of the weather and had huge airplanes to look at, and not in the heat looking at a bronze statue of a seedy-looking character in bad need of a haircut. Jefferson's statue reminded me of vagrants I'd seen sleeping next to his statue.

I found Phil easily enough. I slid beside him and said, "As much as you guys use the memorials, you should pay the National Park Service for the upkeep."

He smiled, but didn't shake hands. Phil had the build of a retired Eagles linebacker. I'd made the mistake of underestimating him during training and got my ass kicked. Never pick a fight with a guy who looks like he's had his nose broken a couple of times.

He gave me the once-over and asked, "You ready to go to work?"

"Does it have anything to do with my posting?"

He nodded in the direction of a short, pudgy man who had already had too much heat. "That's your new handler. I'm out of the loop from here on. Play nice, Findley. See ya around."

Phil left before I had a chance to tell him to screw himself, which was how I normally terminated a conversation with Phil.

My new handler looked more like one of the Seven Dwarfs than what I imagined a spy should look like. He was short, dumpy, out of shape, and completely harmless-looking. He had a pig face, sagging jowls, lips like mud flaps, and a doorstop for a nose. He waddled in my direction, looked me over, and said, "Findley, isn't it?"

I was caught off guard as I detected a strong British accent. I answered tentatively, "I'm Findley."

"Be a good lad and walk me to some shade. You Yanks insist on meeting in the most oppressive, God-awful places, and it's always a brutal test of physical endurance."

He mopped his face with a well-used handkerchief and sucked for air like a fish out of water. I said, "I prefer the National Air and Space Museum myself."

He laughed. "Name's Blenheim, Oscar Blenheim. You can find me at the World Bank." He explained that our meeting was just a meet-and-greet. My spying enterprise wasn't allowed to be chatted about while in any US territory, so the details of my assignment would have to wait until I was outside of the US.

He fanned himself as he sat on a park bench. Despite his discomfort, he was jovial to the point of distraction. I needed to pay close attention to his instructions and read through his doublespeak. Most of what he said centered on my transfer to Leningrad to take over as the vacant EEB section chief at the consulate. I had a casual question about the circumstances and asked, "What happened to my predecessor?"

"Haven't the foggiest. Have you heard something?"

"Yeah. He died on station."

"Really? Traffic accident? I hear Leningrad traffic is a perilous business. You should check with your people at State. They'll have more information than we can offer."

I didn't get any comfort from his ignorance, because a background brief helped set the landscape and was always a part of the mission brief. Small details were bothersome trivia that were essential and never taken for granted. Maybe I would get more answers as the situation developed.

He changed the subject. "Just now we're laying the corner pegs; it'll be a few months before we launch you off to the gulags. In the meantime, you'll see some radical changes come your way, so don't be put off and just go with the flow. We need to get you prepped, dressed in the proper clothes, so to speak. It'll all make sense in due course. One other thing. Sorry to bring it up, but your assignment will be non-accompanied. Leningrad's an awful place to take a woman, especially a woman like Helen."

It was interesting that he knew about my wife, but I wasn't surprised. When I married Helen we both knew that at some point this posting would separate us. Postings to Russia were generally of a year's duration and unaccompanied. Section heads, such as myself, were given long tours of two to three years with accompanied status. Due to living conditions, some elected to leave their families Stateside. The State Department encouraged families to go with their husbands, but what American woman volunteers to sit out three years of solitary confinement just because their husband's job is watching snow melt? Being sent to Russia was a career-breaker, a marriage-breaker, or both.

Helen had never bought into it, insisting that if Jane Goodall could live with apes for twenty years in the rigors of Central Africa, she could survive Siberia for however long it took.

While I was single, I enthusiastically looked forward to mingling with intriguing and mysterious women of Slavic origins. Now that I was happily married, my carefree umbilical cord had been severed. It wasn't just Helen's sore spot. I was deeply conflicted about becoming a member of a three-year Arctic expedition, leaving an attractive, wealthy socialite wife in the bowels of hedonism.

I countered by saying, "Many American wives and families go on assignment with their husbands to Russia."

“Take my word, old son. It’s ill advised. I’m sure you’ve heard the horror stories. Aside from that, you’ll have a lot on your plate and ‘other’ risks to account for. We’ll make sure you get plenty of home leave and excursions out of the country.”

That might have been Oscar’s first lie, but it wouldn’t be his last. “She knows her way around State Department protocol. You don’t know the tenacity of my wife.”

“But I do, old boy. Helen had a bright career at the World Bank and made a splash while she was there. You came along and ended all that. Shame, really. Tsk-tsk.”

I was just a name on the civil-service registry, but my wife’s name had been at the top of the DC social registry until she married me. We both knew that was an inappropriate subject, so we were pretty much done talking.

Oscar’s shirt began to darken with the dampness of his sweat. He struggled to his feet, wiped his face, and said, “That’s about it for now. I’ll shove off.” He handed me his business card as he shuffled his feet. “If something feels sticky, call me. Otherwise, I’ll see you on the other side of the Pond. Keep your head about you, Findley.”

Without a handshake, Oscar moved off like a sloth toward the metro station. His shirt-back was entirely soaked. His slacks, from his waistband to his butt crack, were embarrassingly drenched. I figured out why the CIA chose inclement conditions to hold council—it shortened the meetings considerably and I’d put that tactic in the back of my mind.

I had to like Oscar’s demeanor, but there was something more in-depth that put me off about the man. What had I learned from my meeting with him? Not one damned thing. There wasn’t a single hint as to the purpose of my assignment. Whatever it was would unfold on its own, and I had to wing it as I went. It was irregular in terms of any operational plan that I had studied during my training. Normally, before any deployment, an operative would have extensive pre-mission

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briefings pertinent to the assignment. Oscar inferred there would be none of that. I had the feeling that I was being dropped behind enemy lines in my Sunday suit without a radio to call in air support. I put it down to pre-mission jitters. It would all work to the surface.

CHAPTER 2

My office party could have been held in Bermuda or Tahiti, and no one would have noticed our absence. If my nutty wife had known about it, we'd have done one or the other. She's an ordinary suburban housewife with a not so ordinary background. Aside from being ridiculously wealthy, she resides in her own universe ... actually several universes ... and it's hard for me to keep track of which planet she's visiting on any given day.

Mary Beth Norton, the resident archive queen, had spent her lunch hour rounding up two dozen cupcakes. She went to the trouble to decorate the break room with black crepe paper, which was fitting. Mary was the longest-living relic of the section and had seen a dozen guys like me come and go.

While I had been passing the time of day with Oscar, the staff had drawn lots to determine who was going to be the 'acting' section head. Paul Shapiro had been drafted. Putting Paul in charge of anything was like making Jesse James the bank-vault manager. Paul's nickname was Gilligan because he never left the island and spent his time carving coconuts. His desk was directly behind mine, and for the last three years I had watched him arrange his space with voodoo dolls that he'd selectively moved around. I am fairly certain I was represented in his doll collection because I felt pinpricks when he poked needles into them. I also played Monopoly with him once a month because I felt sorry for his monastic social exile from the rest of the staff.

At mid-afternoon, Paul declared a section meeting in the break room to give me a surprise send-off. It was neither a surprise nor a send-off. Eventually, everyone had to show up at the funeral home to get their name in the visitors' registry. Paul made it easy.

When we were all assembled, Paul stood, put on a stern face, and spread his arms like Moses on the Mount. He boomed, "I declare this Black Friday. Eat your cupcakes and take the rest of the day off."

A stickler for details, Mary Beth challenged, "It's only Tuesday."

Paul rolled his eyes heavenward as if calling on a cosmic beam of enlightenment. "Can we please get into the spirit of celebration here?" He glared at Mary Beth and continued. "If you're hung up on Tuesday, and you *feel* a need for it to be Tuesday, I won't fight you over that. For the rest of us, it *feels* like Friday, Black Friday. Just get over calendar issues and eat your cupcake."

The staff laughed, but I knew Paul wasn't joking. Paul was truly colorblind to conventional barriers. Seeing beyond the genetic rote logic of the social choke points that we are all slaved to allowed him an open field to run upon. Paul was one of the most brilliant analysts I'd ever met, even though he was certifiably whacko.

I put down the peasant rebellion by informing my colleagues that I would be around for a couple of months to train my replacement.

Paul quipped, "Throw in a lot of coffee breaks, and you should have that square filled in a week, tops."

"Paul, there isn't a single person with an IQ above double digits who would apply for my position...."

Paul interrupted. "You did. Oops, sorry, I forgot about the IQ qualifier."

"Then we'll default to the factory setting, and, since Paul has been here longer than the rest of you, that makes him the new abbot."

That got a few chuckles. Paul regally stood, raised his head with mock humility, and said, "In that case I'm implementing a few changes around here. We'll start with the vow of silence, beginning tomorrow morning."

I was touched when my going-away gift was presented to me. The makeshift gift wrapping was a black-crepe oblong, shallow box that *might* fit into the backseat of my Chevy Malibu. There was snickering as I quizzically picked at the wrapping. My present from my esteemed colleagues was a stand-alone hammock.

With a dull yawn, Paul said, “We felt you’d need office furniture when you take up your post in Leningrad.”

We all had a few laughs, and my party stretched beyond the usual fifteen-minute time allotment. Since it was Black Friday, the staff slunk away, and at the end of the day, it was left to Mary Beth and me to turn the lights out.

I had yet to inform my overwhelming other half about my assignment. Why they called a three-year lockdown in a concrete bunker behind enemy lines a ‘tour’ is still beyond me. Give me a cab, a guide, twenty bucks, and I’d finish a tour in a day. Better yet, just send the postcards and call it a day.

‘Unaccompanied’ gets complicated when you’re trying to start a family. I racked my brain trying to figure out a way around the problem. I could commute daily from Finland because the Finnish border was a few miles up the road from Leningrad. The problem with that was entering or leaving Russia required individual visas that took weeks to apply for and more weeks for approval. Judging from my predecessor’s weekly reports, I could fake it by breezing through the door, sign in, then slink off to a villa in the south of Spain for three years. Once in Spain, or wherever, I’d make shit up and forward it via Leningrad back to DC. Since I was moonlighting as a spy, I’d have to rethink that alternative.

I twisted a few other ideas around in my head and ran up against the same problem with bureaucracy and a metaphor called the ‘Iron Curtain.’ It would be easier to get conjugal rights at San Quintin versus Leningrad.

Helen and I lived in a moderate suburban residential subdivision populated by do-nothing Beltway drones who toiled for Uncle Sam the

same as me. Our house was at the end of the cul-de-sac and we had the standard deal, 1,800 square feet of living space, a lawn I could cut in five minutes, and a two-car garage.

I slipped through the garage door and hadn't made it to the kitchen where Helen was busy preparing dinner when I heard her sweet voice announce, "I'm making an Italian lamb roast. You'll love it."

I shouted back, "How do you know the lamb is an Italian? It could be a New Zealand knockoff for all you know."

I heard her squeak a giggle as she rounded the corner. She was passionately touchy-feely, which made concentrating on conversation impossible. Two years into marriage and we both had a hands-on need to pet like teenagers.

When we completed our ritual greeting, I asked, "So, what's for dinner besides Little Bo Peep?"

She slapped my behind and said, "Beaver tail."

"Not now, honey. Something's come up that we need to talk about."

"Come to the kitchen while I put the tortellini on. You can slice cucumbers for the salad."

We hardly touched our dinners as we discussed the major topic of the day. My topic was trying to talk her out of joining me in Leningrad. Her topic was my resignation from the State Department. We brainstormed so that we could meet in the middle and come up with a solution that would work. The aim was mutual, but no amount of brainstorming produced a livable arrangement for two people too attached to become unattached.

"Doug, I know this is your dream assignment, but you've reached the end of the road in your career path. You don't have the temperament to kiss ass. Can you seriously see yourself ten years from now? Bob Blumel has to die before you get a promotion."

I had a convincing lie that was waiting for the opportunity she presented. "This assignment puts me in the passing lane. When I finish the tour, I'll be Blumel's boss. Honey, this is my make-or-break moment,

and I can't turn it down." I couldn't tell her it was my first mission as a no-shit, for-real spy. *That* was my dream assignment.

She folded her arms and wrinkled her brow. "Doug, I've given up my career to have a family. I lost our child. I'm an embarrassment and shunned by my family, former colleagues, and friends." She pointed a stiff finger at me and continued. "I live within the means of your salary, cut the lawn, and keep house. I've adapted, so *don't* ... just don't run off on your retarded, crappy assignment for three years, expecting me to hold down the fort at this end."

We had covered this territory on numerous occasions and had had a plan, a solid, united plan, until Oscar had planted his bomb earlier in the day. "Helen, honey, I'm not being asked. I'm being told it's not an accompanied tour." Technically, I was lying, but was it really a good idea to have a spouse underfoot while taping out code in the attic with the KGB trying to find the transmitter?

She leaned into the finger pointed at me and raised her voice. "Quit it, Doug. I know exactly what you do for a career, remember? You're a glorified file clerk. You don't have to work for a living. If you really want to go to Russia, we'll make it a vacation stop."

I'd admit that my sack-lunch career was lame, but giving in to her lush lifestyle was an invitation to disaster, and we both knew it. The CIA had gone to a great deal of trouble to stack me in the State Department deck, and quitting wasn't an option. The only way anyone leaves the CIA is after they receive the post-mortem report from their own coroner.

Blowing my cover on the domestic front on my first day of being a real spy wasn't an option either. Helen *thought* she knew the deal, and she wasn't backing down.

Helen was no stranger to the EEB basement. It's where we'd met. She had a master's degree from Wharton in International Business, with a law degree and lots of insider endorsements. Her dad was a high-powered lobbyist with a long client list of dictators and scumbags from

all over the world. It was only natural that he bought her a job with the World Bank, where dictators and scumbags received financing.

I hit it off with her the minute I saw her. The State Department HR queen introduced her as an ‘intern’ from the World Bank on temporary assignment. I couldn’t find my tongue as I was standing on it. She was about 5’10” without heels. I couldn’t inspect the entire package without moving my head, so I concentrated from the chest up. All that took time, and when I finally looked into her flirty, innocent brown eyes, she looked at me as if I’d been photographing her centerfold layout.

She extended her hand and said, “My name is Helen Bertrum. I’ve been sent by the Bank to learn as much as I can about Soviet business intercourse. I’ll try to stay out of the way, and if I don’t, let me know.”

I can’t let a turn of phrase dissipate politely. “The Russians screw everybody, so that should catch you up.”

Her laugh caused a tingling pulse to run through me. We talked longer than we should have, and the longer we talked, the more I realized that Helen was hopelessly out of my league.

Aside from being the new office eye candy, Helen showed a strong desire to grasp Soviet economic trade practices, which, I explained, consisted of bartering, baiting, and, if all else failed, invasion.

She was a quick study and was appalled at the level of corruption inside the Soviet economy. I was more appalled by the level of corruption inside our own economy, which we joked about. How we got around to dating, considering our different points of reference, was all her fault. Halfway through her two-month internship, her hots for me made the inner-office gossip circle.

At first, I was flattered, but at the same time I felt intimidated. I knew that I was just a passing novelty with a two-month expiration date. Our social elevators didn’t stop on the same floors. Socialites of her caliber might have a fling with the pool-boy, but free associating with the masses amounted to abduction. It shocked everyone, including me, that she got off her elevator and climbed aboard mine.

She was fine with dinners of spaghetti and cheap chianti, walks in the park, matinee movie tickets, and smoky jazz clubs. Spending the night in my crap one-bedroom apartment gave her a cause, as she redecorated it to her own taste. Once she had it like she wanted it, she moved in. I mean permanently moved in, even though she kept a residence much nicer than mine on the swanky side of town.

If her parents ever found out about us, there would've been a SWAT team surrounding my apartment complex. I knew she was living a fantasy, and a secret escapade. I went along with it and was certain that her Stockholm Syndrome would eventually wear off.

It came time for her to move on, but she didn't. I had never met anyone who had such a happy disposition all the time. I mean, *all* the freakin' time. If she had an annoying habit, it would be that she'd never talk about her family or how she grew up. Not one word. There were times she'd disappear for a few days and turn up happy and yappy as always. I intuitively thought her visits to her other world were not cordial visits to see Mom and Dad.

Our puppy-love romance hit a snag when we discovered we were having a puppy of our own. I didn't even blink. Running off to Virginia to a justice of the peace was my idea. Helen was reluctant, throwing barricades and complications in our path. I told her, "When you hang shower curtains dressed like a Victoria's Secret model, you should consider the consequences."

She never looked back, and we've been happily in lockstep ever since.

CHAPTER 3

If the wheels of democracy turn slowly, it's generally because the wheels of the bureaucracy that drives it are uselessly spinning in the mudflats caused by their own inertia. Case in point: My little sidebar memo from my boss to stop by at 'my convenience' turned into a bog. My 'convenience' for the past week had been a dozen phone calls, casual strolls to his office, and a couple of intentional ambushes in the employee cafeteria. His convenience didn't coincide with mine, and I finally made an appointment ... next week.

Bob Blumel was a professional seat-warmer well entrenched in the EEB empire. As long as I didn't make waves and filled all the administrative squares, I received 'good' fitness reports. As long as he didn't make waves, I assumed he was rewarded with 'good' fitness reports. That's how the system worked. Coincidentally, that's how the Communists ran things.

I saw my boss maybe once a month at the section-head conference. All the other section heads sent surrogates, and I eventually caught on. His surrogate would meet my surrogate, initial the square, and move on.

Blumel was an offensively arrogant buffoon who prided himself as ladies' man. His dashing passes at the ladies in the steno pool earned him a few trips to sexual-awareness clinics which hardly registered with him. He had shed his leisure suits, but the disco swaggering gait was a permanent affliction which earned him the nickname Disco Bob.

I heard Disco Bob's booming voice from his outer office. "Findley, get in here."

I looked up and saw him posing in the doorway. He looked like a cast member of *Planet of the Apes II*. His hair was slicked back with axle grease from a hairline too close to his bushy one-brow eyebrow. Even by East Coast Mafia standards, his hairdo was annoyingly exaggerated. The picture was completed with long arms and legs, and fat fingers that he proffered to me.

He said, "Come in, come in. You're just the guy I need to talk to."

He loped off to take his throne behind a custom desk of fine mahogany. He waved me to a seat and started talking before I had a chance to sit down. "How do you feel about the promotion I got for you? It's a cushy job. Did you know I personally, by-name, requested you for the assignment?"

The flattering bullshit was a roll-my-eyes moment, and I concentrated hard not to do it.

He asked, "You know what's going on in Russia, right?"

I ran the Soviet desk, and of course I knew what was happening. They were preparing for war as per usual. My posting to Leningrad was *not* a coincidence, not by a long shot.

Leningrad in particular was a gold-rush town fired with promises of vast opportunities to mine the decayed hulk that Russians called an economy. Every hustler with a dime in his pocket was going to Russia to cash in on the fire sale. Americans were late to join the bandwagon, but they were lined up waiting for State Department travel and business restrictions to loosen up.

One of my jobs at the EEB was to advise and oversee joint ventures and investments in Russia to insure they were transparent, aboveboard, and fair. The Russians artificially inflated the value of the ruble and erected trade barriers around their import policies. On the export side, more Russian tractors were plowing fields in Kansas than inside Russia. The trade policy was a giant ski jump, and all I could do was issue

warnings. It took all of five minutes of my day to issue citations of caution to eager speculators looking for a quick buck.

Bob cleared his throat and croaked softly, “The World Bank is sending a delegation to Russia. They’re doing an exploration on some kind of assistance program for the Reds. It runs against the grain here, but you know that. We can’t prevent them because we can’t be seen as issuing directives to an international private bank.”

The World Bank, an international community chest that seeds goodwill across the globe by throwing huge amounts of cash at third-world underdeveloped countries, is anything but the charity it purports to be. It’s a private bank that sharks loans to countries that have no credit rating and are upside-down broke. The cheap loans have strings attached to bring these rogue barbarian states into the greater circle of global humanitarian behavior. For practical purposes, the World Bank is Uncle Vito making payday loans to homeless people from a back-alley dime-store sharking front while pretending to be the Salvation Army.

I hadn’t heard of any rumors that the World Bank was embarking on a rescue mission to prop up the Soviet regime. I knew they played a huge hand in Poland and were dabbling in other Soviet-bloc nations. Bob had a sly grin that I wondered about.

He said, “By chance, the World Bank has asked us for expertise in Soviet affairs. It’s a temporary assignment until the Bank comes up to speed. I immediately thought of you. How would you feel about moving uptown where you’ll power-lunch, get some sunlight, and check out the tellers?”

Bullshit. He had immediately thought of himself. Now I knew why he’d been dodging me. He wanted the job and spent a week trying to pry his way in. Notwithstanding the political and social clout I’d married into, the World Bank had a dress code and grooming standards.

“What about my assignment?” I asked.

“Still stands. This is a side project to earn brownie points. Just observe and advise. The Bank likes to splash money around, and you’ll be walking in high cotton. Consider it a working vacation.”

Blumel wasn't fooling me. I saw Oscar all over the arrangement. The CIA was not about to allow a private bank to make deals with their arch rival without having someone in the bleachers. I was to be that guy.

I was originally scheduled to leave on my State Department assignment just in time for Halloween. Somewhere above my pay grade, a decision had been made to loan my services out to the World Bank. That idea caused some constipation, and my departure date was slipped to coincide with the World Bank expedition to Moscow.

I was being sent over to the Bank as a technical observer and adviser, with the understanding that I was not to spy on World Bank activities in Russia. I understood *completely*. I'd just observe and pass my observations to my bosses at the State Department.

My CIA handler had no illusions about the arrangement. The CIA was getting a box seat handed to them. Oscar's shop was preparing its own plan that I wasn't privy to.

I emptied the junk from my desk in the basement of the monastery and carried the cardboard box uptown to the World Bank headquarters building. I met the director in charge of the proposed mission to Russia. His name was Marshall Gordon—a Bertrum family friend, and Helen's old boss. He personally came down to the HR department to smooth my way.

Marshall was very much the diplomat. He was tall with an angular build and reeked of personal charm. A silver-gray comb-over hid a bald spot, which gave him a seasoned appearance. Bright oyster-sized blue eyes oozed a calm intellect that was disarming. Marshall could have been Santa Claus at Macy's on his day off, but I knew he didn't get where he was by being Santa Claus.

He said, "I miss my princess. How is Helen adapting to suburban life?"

I'd just met Gordon, so I crafted my answer. "She's content and happy."

"I've known her all her life. She surprised everyone here when she resigned. Helen had a very bright future, but we all make choices in life, and I'm not so sure that she made the wrong decision."

“You’re the first person to express that opinion.”

He chuckled. “I speak from experience. My wife, Jane, gave up the social scene and a bright career to become a diplomat’s wife, and we went all over the world together. She’s never regretted it.”

“Helen made her own decision. I had nothing to say on the matter.”

“That must’ve been a new experience for her. Helen is like a daughter to us, and we watched her grow up. Did you know that she spent a few summers with us when we were on foreign assignments?”

He said it in such a way that assumed I’d seen the photo album. “Helen never talks about her childhood.”

“No wonder.” His big oysters retreated into their shells. Family hour was over. Diplomats have a knack for making people feel at ease by letting them talk about themselves and pretending it’s somehow important. We talked about me and my Midwest roots for far too long. He sorta drifted the conversation to my qualifications as an expert on Soviet affairs and wanted to explore any affiliations that I might have with left-wing loonies.

That was it. He had my profile, but he wanted his own litmus test. He asked, “How does a young boy from fiercely independent pioneer stock end up absorbed with something so diametrically opposite?”

Gordon didn’t have an understanding of our own history, or how it had morphed. I answered, “The Russian and American pioneers have a common bond. Most of them were running from oppression of one form or other. It’s still a work-in-progress in Russia. Did you know the most prominent youth organization in Russia is called the ‘Young Pioneers’? It’s a sentiment that I can identify with.”

I didn’t tell him that by the time I’d entered college at the age of seventeen, I had mastered Western history, and since spies should be well versed in the culture of their adversaries, I’d enrolled in Soviet Studies. Nor did I mention that I had a hot mentor who took me to her bosom, and I received a more rewarding education.

“Do you sympathize with the current regime? More directly, are you a socialist?”

I'd been asked the same question hundreds of times. "The Soviet system is a cult tyranny dependent on the servitude of its subjects. The entire production of the Soviet economy is dedicated to enhance the party apparatus, *not* the overall welfare of the Soviet people. Slavery isn't socialism." I paused and checked the mask peering at me. I needed a better answer. "The ruling regime is an oligarchy and is in the service of its own interests. Does that answer your question?"

Gordon eyed me cautiously and smiled. "You sound like a diplomat. I've met a few Soviet experts and they come in two categories: staunch anti-Communists or radical Communists. Which one are you?"

He was baiting me, and he wouldn't like my answer. "You're talking from hindsight, sir. The future of the Soviet Union depends on how far the oligarchs are willing to go to stay in power, or, more to the point, how willing you are to finance their power play. You have to know I'm the EEB guy the State Department sent over as the power-play monitor. If you really need a Soviet consultant, the private sector has eminent counsel available. Would you mind telling me why I'm here?"

"Why not you? State will have someone like you in the delegation."

"The State Department doesn't have spies, they have monitors." I was leaning on Gordon and looked for a telltale. His placid expression didn't change.

He said, "You still didn't tell me which category you fit into. It would be nice to know so we can set the parameters of your scope of 'monitoring.'"

"Academically, I'm impartial. I will tell you this: Famines and revolutions have a way of coinciding, and the next revolution in Russia will be a horrific bloodbath. Keep in mind the Bank of London and Chase Manhattan Bank backed the Bolsheviks in the last revolution, and we know how that turned out. You're walking a thin line, Mr. Gordon." That should have pissed him off, but it didn't.

He seemed to shrink an inch as he relaxed. "Go on," he said.

"You're running out of time. The Baltic states are agitating for complete independence, and the Russian generals are waiting for the

spring elections before they unleash their tanks. If that happens, Gorbachev falls and all bets are off. The World Bank brings something more important to the table than financial stabilization. It brings world opinion. That's what Gorbachev needs more than anything if your intent is to stave off rebellion."

He looked past me as if a meteor had just blown a hole in the roof.

There was an office pool back in the basement where I'd come from worth a hundred bucks that said I wouldn't last a month. I was fairly certain I wouldn't make it to the end of the day after my candid answer. Slowly, Marshall's gaze came back to rest on me.

He said, "That assessment would get you a pink slip if it ever got back to the State Department."

"It already has. I've written position papers and sent them up-channel, which should tell you something. They never make it out of the basement, or they don't read position papers over there." I shrugged my shoulders and looked around for my box of trinkets. When Gordon looked at his watch, I began constructing my resignation letter in my head. Helen would be happy, and we'd have to plan a quick vacation to Russia before the revolution started. I prepared to make a dash for it when Gordon used his palms to motion for me step down from the starting blocks.

"Let's find you a proper office to work from. We're in uncharted territory with the Russians, and we need to get the staff up to speed in a hurry. Until further notice, clear your lunch hour for a daily update. I want to know exactly what progress we're making and a daily report."

Holy shit. Power-lunching with a senior director of the World Bank every freakin' day was better than cupcakes in the break room, and I couldn't wait to collect my bet and rub Disco Bob's nose in shit.

CHAPTER 4

I worked in the Business Protocol Section of the Bank. My job was to educate the delegation traveling to Russia on the customs and practices of Russian business managers, the pitfalls and harassment traps of living in the Soviet Union, travel bans and restrictions, and a host of other activities that could land them in Lefortovo prison. The rest of my time was spent writing position papers and following the ongoing unofficial negotiations with the Soviet government, which were stalled. No one could find the right name to classify the visit, let alone who would sponsor the Bank.

I found the work more rewarding than my job in public service. Any time you work above street level, it's a promotion even though your salary remains stagnant. I gave three two-hour seminars for the employees slated to be on the mission. Even though it was a mandatory meeting, the brass sent staffers to take notes while they took the opportunity to sneak off to play golf. At least I had an audience, which was more than I could ever say about my job over at State. Actually, the staff thought it was comedy central, and they genuinely looked forward to my serious sermons.

Like anywhere, there is always hostility at the water cooler when the new guy in the office power-lunches with the boss. The flip side of that was the horde of toads sucking up to the guy that had the boss's ear. However it worked out, I was socially elevated in the hierarchy of the office pecking order. My co-workers called me by

name, Doug, or Mr. Findley, instead of ‘Stalin,’ which was my State Department moniker.

I also got a promotion on the home front. I was no longer a blue-collar sack sack-lunch civil servant. I worked with World Bank directors, and the J. C. Penney sackcloth wardrobe had to go. I came home to silk ties, slick suits, Lenin shirts with my initials on the cuffs, and shiny Italian shoes. Helen might as well have dressed me in tights and a tutu, which is how I thought bankers dressed. I wouldn’t dare show up for my weekly report to Disco Bob wearing \$400 suits, so I saved my favorite bargain-basement crap which I’d bought when I’d first gone to work in DC. The rest got pitched.

I did bitch about it to Helen, and I reminded her that she was not staying within the budget.

“You look like a serious man on a mission,” she’d say, as she smoothed my lapel. I was indeed that, but she didn’t need to know about it. She hinted that I should explore some possibilities of changing jobs permanently. All she had to do was place a call to Marshall Gordon, and I’d be earning twice my salary at the end of the week.

I honestly gave it some thought, but my diplomatic immunity as a State Department employee would evaporate if I was caught spying in Russia. The KGB and the CIA had worked out a mutual trade agreement that was similar to the NFL draft when we caught each others’ spies. They’d trade their hostages for one of equal value from time to time. Private citizens weren’t included in the annual draft exchange.

We skipped through the month of October without gaining any ground in the negotiations with the Russians. We had originally planned to be home by Christmas, but the trip looked like it would be delayed until after the first of the year, which was fine with me. I saw the problem. The goofballs sitting in the negotiations were the same idiots that skipped my seminars, and they were being heavy-handed with their Russian counterparts.

Marshall dropped into my office and flopped down on a metal folding chair I had for visitors who never stopped by. He put his elbows on his knees and his face in the palms of his hands. Suddenly, he looked up and shook his head. He said, "I've had my fair share of ignorant, stubborn bastards to deal with, but these Russians take the prize. The Russians at the embassy are just as frustrated with Moscow as we are. They're at a dead end, and so are we. The Soviet economy is months, if not weeks, away from total collapse, and the Kremlin sits on its hands." He shook his head.

Marshall wasn't telling me something I didn't already know. He appeared thoughtful as he assessed the deadpan look on my face, and I saw that he was thinking. "Doug, I'm out of ideas. You sit there as if you know something we don't. If you have any ideas, now would be a good time to bring them out."

It wasn't my place to overstep my authority, and I told him so. He was pissed, so what would it hurt if I told him my thoughts? My check was from the State Department, so I didn't mince words.

"I covered that problem in lectures two and three. If the pipe-smoking senior staff had attended class, you wouldn't be where you are."

I saw him shudder. He said, "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were poking fun at me."

I'd already opened my yap, so I continued to make trouble for myself. "I've been following the talks, and I've forwarded position papers on the progress which no one bothers to read. What I have to say is just my opinion, but comes from an informed basis, which is more than I can say for the people speaking on behalf of the Bank. You don't even have someone who speaks the language, which is an outright insult. They don't take your delegation seriously because the composition of the panel doesn't have much clout or the rank to make shit happen. You need to send in the first string."

Marshall nodded, which gave me an open field to run on. I said, "You're talking to the wrong people. The Communist Party of the Soviet

Union *is* the Soviet Union. The attitudes are institutional. Russians always shoot the messenger. You're asking someone inside the Politburo to be a messenger. If you intend to get anywhere, change the message."

"I don't understand. We're in a position to rescue them before a civil war breaks out."

"Your guys act like firemen carrying fire hoses into a burning building, while the Russians are pretending it's only a small grease fire. Admitting anything more than that is a refutation of Communist supremacy."

Marshall did a head turn as though his chiropractor missed a spot. He'd entirely missed the point. I said, "Change the venue. You stand out like Jehovah Witnesses handing out fliers in Vatican Square."

Marshall chuckled. "Is this the way you lecture?"

"Yeah, it is. Stupid analogies get more attention than bland facts. I embellish here and there to get a few laughs. It seems to work."

"You've got my attention. Do you have specifics in mind?"

"Leningrad is the hub of international activity. It's the bridge to the West, and the political climate is better suited for your intentions."

"How so?"

"It's more corrupt than Moscow. You'd be surprised what gets past the customs officials. You'd be better off dealing with the Leningrad Oblast than Red Square. Call it what it *isn't*. Something like a joint trade summit, a monetary symposium, anything but a loan conference. Let the Russians save face by letting them advertise that *they're* making the steps to more cordial relations with the West."

Marshall gave me a recriminating look. "We'll forfeit our bargaining position."

I laughed. "Mr. Gordon, you work for the World Bank, and you should know better. How many signatory nations have you done business with that promised human-rights inspections, free elections, and a shitload of peace and goodwill? What makes you think the Russians are any different? When has the World Bank ever been in the enforcement business?"

“That’s enough, Mr. Findley. We’re not perfect, but we try to change the misery on this planet.”

“I’m just telling you not to get your expectations too high. Remember, the Russians have to sell this to their own people and put their own face in it. They’re fiercely proud people, and they won’t tolerate taking orders from Washington.”

“The World Bank doesn’t take its marching orders from the United States.”

“I stand corrected.” My snide admission was a gut-buster, but Marshall wasn’t laughing.

He stood and said, “I like your suggestions and I’ll take them under advisement. I want you to sit in on the meetings” (he made a pacifying gesture with his hands) “in an advisory role only.”

The World Bank certainly did not take its marching orders from the State Department, so why was I being installed in negotiations? I said, “I’ll just be a team player, make a few Cliff Notes to pass around during break.”

“Something like that.” It was Marshall’s turn to laugh as he strolled out of my office.

CHAPTER 5

Marshall Gordon took my advice and buried the place and purpose of the World Bank expedition to Russia. It took a couple of months to prod the Russians to issue sponsorship for joint ‘cooperative talks’ between the World Bank, the Ministry of Finance, and the Leningrad trade commission.

The World Bank delegation was flying to Stockholm to attend a conference as a precursor to pitching their tent in Leningrad. The conference was being held to iron out any problems with the participants and to set an agenda. Actually, it was going to be more like a strip-search to see what everyone was *really* bringing to the knife fight.

The day after New Year’s, Helen saw me off at the gate. I was the last one to board the TWA all-nighter to Stockholm. I was last because it had yet to be determined if I was going in steerage or the baggage bin. Helen made jokes about my fear of flying. Taking a tuna boat to Stockholm wasn’t an option, so I loaded up on drugs just to get on the plane.

This gave Helen and me time to drag out our parting ritual. I attempted to keep her from crying while she was attempting to make me cry. I professed my eternal love and she upped the ante by gushing, “I love you more than life itself.”

How do you top that? I learned at that time that, when you travel a lot, you have to have a repertoire ready for instances like that. I plucked at my chest as if I was ripping my heart out, and I sailed my zinger as I proffered my precious gift into her care: “I leave you with my heart.

Microwave for three minutes or until brown.” That made her cry. Finally, there was a last call, and I heard my name. I trucked off, Charlie Chaplin-style, to the departure gate. I could see her laughter behind her tears. I see them to this day.

The TWA 1011 aircraft was a three-engine behemoth that had more seating sections than a soccer arena in Iran. To the left of the main cabin door was first class, followed by business class. I turned *right* and headed down the economy class aisle, looking for 11D. The seat-numbering system was not brain surgery, but this was the first time I had ever traveled by air.

I was lost as I got toward the back of the airplane to find the numbers increasing. I gave up searching for 11D and glanced around to discover that there was hardly anyone on board. Some of the staff members were scattered about, so I found a familiar face and took a seat next to the unsuspecting victim.

I knew the guy was from the Bank. I tried to strike up a conversation by introducing myself. His name was Bill Stover, a button-down New York City boy. City Boy reminded me, “My name is William.”

I deliberately chose Billy to sit next to because if I was going to die in a plane crash, I wanted to be sure that I took a banker with me. I said, “Well, William.... Looks like we have the bleachers all to ourselves.”

William made a big deal moving his crappy half-lens reading glasses an eighth of a centimeter up his 4-foot snooty snout. He focused a pair of dull blue eyes at me, rolled them for effect, and said in an ‘I can’t be bothered’ tone of voice, “It’s the dead of night, the middle of winter, and our destination is within an inch of the Arctic Circle. What did you expect?”

I’m from pioneer stock, so if I was going to be sequestered in a time capsule with someone for more than ten minutes, I was going to break out my harmonica, sing, and share my water rations with the other guy. You shouldn’t attempt hospitality when your seatmate is a stranger from

the Eastern Seaboard. The accepted travel behavior is to sit in your seat and not transgress their invisible pod. Do not touch, speak, look, or sniff the air that they breathe. I didn't know the rules, so I quipped good-naturedly, "Hey, I've booked a sleigh ride around the Swedish Royal Palace this afternoon, want to come along Bill ... William?"

City Bill snapped his *New York Times*, pretended to concentrate on something really important, like my obituary. So that's how it's going to be? The flight was rough right from the beginning, so rough that City Bill couldn't keep his focus on the *New York Times*. He threw the paper in disgust onto the floor. I was near panic and fought the bouncing and twisting, which pissed off my seatmate. I flailed like Bruno Hauptmann, the Lindbergh baby killer, being strapped into the electric chair.

I didn't think I could take seven more hours of crap, or Bill's crap, so I started over again.

"Listen, Mr. Stover, we've got seven more hours of this and four months to share with each other in Russia. I think you and I should strike a mutual accord and start over again."

Exasperated, he turned to me and asked, "Where are you from Mr. ... uh...?"

"Findley, and I'm from Missouri-a."

"That's what I thought," he snorted.

Some New Yorkers like guessing what shitty part of the States you come from and they like to rub your nose in it. Bill had that satisfied look of having 'made me.' "You've been at the Bank what? Four months?"

"Let's see. Yeah, it's been four months." He had to know me from the lectures that I had given to the delegate staff, which he either forgot, or maybe he'd skipped class. Hell, I was the expert on this trip. I didn't say that as he was over-talking me anyway.

"I have a master's from Cornell, earned my bones investing on Wall Street, spent another three years at Commerce, and six years at the Bank. I'm the assistant to Director Mueller. What are you even doing in this delegation?"

I knew the tone of voice by now, and I am one thing: predictable. “I’m here as an adviser to tell you when the Russians are lying their asses off. I, Billy my boy, have two master’s degrees and a law degree in International Commerce. I speak the language fluently, and I’m *the* resident expert on Soviet affairs. If you’d attended any of my lectures, you’d know this. You’d also know that I don’t work for the Bank.”

Would I really let Billy off the hook with a little one-upmanship? I made enough enemies without soliciting more. “If Dr. Mueller butts heads with the Russians, I’ll be around to help sort things out.”

William snorted again and looked straight ahead. Guys like him bruise easily. He couldn’t stand the thought that I could prove to be of some value to his mentor. The assumption that I could was eating at him.

Every time the airplane hit a turbulence jolt, I’d overreact like an orangutan cooped up in an orange crate. My unreasonable behavior wore on William’s tolerance, and it was impossible for him to ignore me.

There’s always something about self-important pricks with bloated egos. They expect guys like me to hold their narcissistic mirrors so that they can dance with their own image and have their hands free to play with their small dicks. I was throwing rocks at his mirror, which pushed his pride to the breaking point. The smug bastard was playing right into my hands.

He finally snapped. “Let’s get one thing straight, Mr. ... uh....”

“Findley.”

“Right, Mr. Findley. As a staff assistant, when and if we need an interpreter, I’ll call on you. In the meantime, make yourself invisible in the steno pool. Try not to embarrass the mission.”

“I know my place, William....”

“Mr. Stover to you.”

Stover had more buttons to push than a ghetto boom box and I hit them all. “Mr. Stover, Marshall Gordon has issued me explicit instructions....”

“You mean, *Director* Gordon?”

“Yeah, that guy. Didn’t you get the memo? When it comes to the Russians, I’m to observe and advise Dr. Mueller. I’m an ad-hoc member to make sure the Russians don’t slip one past Dr. Mueller and the delegation.”

Billy was torqued off and let slip something that he shouldn’t have. “The Bank has no business talking to the Russians. In the meantime, we should sit back, wait for the Soviet Union to collapse on itself, and work with the pieces that are left. Director Mueller shares my opinion.”

That was news to me and a cause for concern. “I edited Dr. Mueller’s opening statement and he seems pretty gung-ho to me.”

It was too late for William to reverse his comment, so he attempted to explain it away by saying, “This mission is a fishing expedition. You don’t really think the Bolsheviks are going to allow the World Bank to set up shop in Russia? We won’t get past the Stockholm conference.”

“Stockholm is just the warm-up for the main event in Leningrad. We’ll all get cozy, kiss each other on the cheeks, and tell dirty jokes in Russian.”

Stover’s irresistible urge to overwhelm me with his importance drove him to reveal more inside information that I shouldn’t have heard. “Dr. Mueller and I see it the same way that you do at the State Department.”

The career bureaucrats at the State Department had spent the last forty years playing global cat-and-mouse games with the Soviets. Helping the Russians out of a sinking wreck was not their vision of victory. Throwing the Russians a lifeline was an act of profane sacrilege. Stover assumed I shared the same mindset.

He spent a few minutes alluding to a sabotage plot to derail the World Bank mission. The head of the delegation, according to Stover, was the mastermind behind it. As far as Stover was concerned, the mission was a stalling tactic burning up time while the Russians were busy lighting torches to burn down the Kremlin.

We were over international waters and out of US territory, so Stover’s conversation with a CIA special agent was no longer protected. The

bastard *thought* he was explaining the obvious to a dumb scribe. I made mental notes that I'd pass along to my CIA handler when I met up with him in Stockholm.

Billy smirked at the retard sitting next to him. "Just so you know, I packed for a week."

Helen packed for me, and I was good for six years. She even threw in a bathing suit in case the hotel had an indoor pool or if I wanted to join the local polar-bear club.

Bill seemed certain with his pessimism, and I wanted to know more about it. "I've seen the draft of the agenda and it looks like everyone has signed off on it. Stockholm should be a mere formality."

Bill scoffed and ignored me as if he had failed to relay the simplest instructions to his simpleton squire.

I heard an announcement from the flight attendant. "The pilot has announced that the seat belt sign will be turned off shortly; however, please remain seated, with your seat belts securely fastened. Will passenger Douglas Findley please push the flight-attendant call button."

I was wondering what I'd done wrong. Maybe I was supposed to be in the baggage bin, which would make Billy happy. I pushed the button. The flight suddenly got very smooth. "Wow, Mr. Stover, I should have done that forty-five minutes ago."

One look at his twisted expression affirmed that I had successfully maintained my cover as an ignorant State Department drone. Out of nowhere, a charming lady was standing by my seat with a long-stemmed glass of champagne. She handed it to me and said, "Mr. Findley, may I see your boarding card?"

While I fished around looking for my boarding card, I said to Billy and the flight attendant, "I'm really supposed to be sitting in the ejection seat. I always book it just in case something goes wrong."

She looked down at my card and said, "Mr. Findley we've been looking for you. You're in 11D."

"The ejection seat, right?"

“No, Mr. Findley, 11D is first class. If you’ll get your things, I’ll bring your champagne to your seat.”

I didn’t bother to say goodbye to *William Stover*, who had a pained look of consternation on his face. I knew that we staffers were all booked in the cattle section, and we had joked among ourselves about the proletariat being flogged by capitalist gangsters yet again.

Stover thought the flight attendant had made a mistake and he was the one selected for the cushy upgrade.

She handled it very delicately by asking, “Is your name Douglas Findley?”

With no explanation, I collected my carry-on and whispered politely, “I’ll see you in Stockholm, and we can finish our discussion.” I gave him an Eddie Haskell dumb-ass shrug and went on my way.

Eyes followed me as I made my clumsy way to the front of the airplane when the light came on. I could be half a world away from Helen, but she had a way to reach out to me and tell me how much she loved me. She knew my fear of flying and booked me into first class to make the trip less intimidating. That choked me up for a minute.

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