

Of Our Own Device

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Disclaimer: This story is a work of fiction even if
built upon a wide range of true events, some of them
historical, which were extensively covered by media
and in various memoirs. It also features a number of
real life people whom the author has never met.

Warning: this book contains explicit sexual content
and language that may not be suitable for young people
under 18 years of age.

For Teddy for whom love is all that matters.

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“Love is a striking example of how little reality means to us.”

Marcel Proust, *In Search Of Lost Time*

PART I - A RELUCTANT SPY

Chapter 1

The second act of *Evgenii Onegin* was nearing the end. Without turning his head, Jack skewed his eyes at his company for tonight, a visiting jazz diva from Chicago. She looked mesmerized, probably as much by the handsome Russian tenor who played Lensky as by the aria he was singing.

Nine minutes.

From his seat at the end of the second row in the amphitheater, Jack could see half of the stalls, but most importantly, the courier in row fifteen, the last seat on the right. He was doing good: unremarkable in his dark-framed glasses and camel-colored blazer, motionless, eyes glued to the stage. Like everybody else in the audience, much of whom were foreigners. The rest were from all over the Soviet Union and for them, attending a performance at the Bolshoi was as sacrosanct as a visit to the White House was for an American on a trip to Washington. Especially when the show was Tchaikovsky's *Evgenii Onegin*. And never mind that it was performed by a guest ensemble from Leningrad—Bolshoi Theater was the place one had to visit while in Moscow.

Jack cut a glance to the other side of the amphitheater. William and his wife were in the first row, both looking engrossed in the opera. But Jack knew he didn't need to worry. He was covered.

Seven and a half minutes.

The courier rose from his chair and tiptoed to the nearest side exit.

Five.

The stalls, the amphitheater and dress circles in front were still, no one else seemed to be following the courier out. William leaned in and whispered something in his wife's ear. She nodded. All clear on Jack's side of the audience too.

Two.

On the stage, Onegin arrived at the duel scene and would soon start his haunting duet with Lensky.

Jack leaned in to whisper in his date's ear. "Connie, I need to go out... to the gents." He grinned sheepishly at her arched eyebrows. "Sorry. I'll be back... Or will wait for you by the door."

She glared at him, shrugged and turned back to the stage. The Lensky-Onegin duet wasn't something keen musicians like her wished to miss.

Just as Jack had thought. He threw a last glance at William, stood up quietly, bending forward to mask his height, and slipped through the side exit.

The narrow, curving corridor with antique brass-and-crystal lamps on the

wall was empty. And so was the hall, exquisitely decorated with bas-reliefs, frescoes on the vaulted ceiling and brightly lit by three majestic chandeliers.

However, when Jack stepped onto the marble U-shaped double staircase, he caught a glimpse of a man walking down the last flight of stairs—tall, lean and blond; dark slacks and pullover.

Shit. He could swear no one else had left the audience after the courier. William had given him an “all clear” signal too. So either this person had sat in one of the few seats outside of Jack’s and William’s lines of vision—the one percent chance they had resolved to take—or he hadn’t been in the auditorium at all.

Which meant he might not be a spectator.

Which meant he might be one of the KGB surveillance squad.

Dammit! What now?

Think, Smith. Think!

He couldn’t turn back to the auditorium, shouldn’t: doubtless there were many eyes here, watching him, watching all foreigners who might behave suspiciously. Usually, he wouldn’t hesitate to behave oddly, as if acting on the spur of the moment. It was part of his elaborate alternative cover. But not today, not on a collection operation. Even if it was a dry run. Today he must stick to the plan, to the minute, as though this were a real op.

OK, so... If he’d just go into the toilet and take a leak, there was no way the tails could link him with the courier, right? Worse came to worst, he wouldn’t be able to collect the dead drop. But then they would know for sure whether the KGB had singled him out, or that his deep cover had held so far. It was a win-win, one way or the other. Jack hoped he would be able to collect though.

He swiftly descended the carpeted stairs, heading to the men’s rooms on the ground floor—just someone desperate to relieve himself. As he reached the bottom of the staircase, the courier emerged from the corridor leading to the toilets and started ascending on the other side. His eyes skimmed over Jack, a polite but blank expression on his face. He didn’t know Jack; for him the deaddrop op was for real.

When Jack opened the door to the men’s room, the tall blond man was standing at one of the urinals. He was young, no more than twenty-one, twenty-two, judging the profile of his face. A bit young for a KGB operative. And his neatly combed hair was too long. Nah, not KGB... Too eye-catching with that body—lean, muscled and lithe at the same time. Especially in that close-fitting navy blue pullover and the dark gray slacks, snug around the narrow hips.

As if he had heard Jack's thoughts, the youth whipped his head around and glared at him. Then just as abruptly, he turned away and zipped up.

Jack walked quickly into the furthest stall, locked the door and started noisily undoing his belt. He heard the steps, then the water running into the washstand. Then the men's room door opened, then closed softly and silence fell. He waited for five minutes, walked out of the stall and lingered by the washstand for another two. Still nothing. He slipped into the stall where the deaddrop was and locked the door. Another three uneventful minutes passed before Jack stepped onto the toilet bowl and collected the item left by the courier—a matchbox in a clear plastic bag glued to the inside of the cistern high on the wall. He flushed the plastic bag in the toilet, slipped the matchbox into the inside pocket of his jacket and exhaled sharply. Done.

And he was still in the clear.

It had been four months since Jack was transferred to Moscow to replace one of the junior staffers in the office of the Cultural Affairs Officer at the Embassy. The position was a clean slot that had never been used by the CIA before, and the Soviet/East European—or SE—Division had worked hard to secure it for someone like him, a rookie without a track record *and* with an alternative cover.

Unlike other case officers who could easily blend into any environment, any crowd, Jack's whole appearance went against the fundamental rule of anonymity imperative for field officers: six feet tall and brawny, with a shock of chestnut hair, striking, bright blue eyes and a broad, goofy grin that lit up his whole face, he was a man people noticed immediately. Only his name was ordinary. In fact, it sounded like too obvious an alias: Jack Smith. His classmates and even a few instructors at the Farm, the training facility at Camp Peary, Virginia, used to joke about it. Some of them hadn't even tried to hide their skepticism about his suitability for the job.

However, high and continual visibility was the main idea behind the new tactic to be tested: those placed under this alternative deep cover were supposed to attract attention to themselves from the get go and maintain it with their behavior at all times. The objective was to be categorized by the enemy's counter intelligence services as someone not to be taken seriously and therefore not worth wasting resources on. This was how Joe Coburn, SE Division's chief of clandestine operations, planned to beat the suffocating, around the clock surveillance the KGB put on his case officers with known or suspected covers. This was how he had decided to plant two of his staffers behind the Iron Curtain, and one of the two rookies selected to test the new approach had happened to be Jack.

Thus, a year into his overt job as an assistant cultural affairs officer at the US Mission in Frankfurt, Jack was summoned to HQ and instructed to pack his bags to be shipped to Moscow.

On March 1st, 1985, Jack landed at Sheremetyevo Airport.

* * *

It started drizzling again, and the traffic was infuriating. It always was in downtown Moscow when it rained; or worse, snowed. He should have taken the Metro and left his car at the diplomatic compound where he lived. But Jack enjoyed driving his blue and white Mustang convertible. A lot! Even secondhand, acquired and transported from West Berlin, the car was way above Jack's personal budget and aspiration—had it not been for the Agency's special allowance he could have never afforded it. But it was part of his meticulously crafted identity (a spy in a flashy car? Surely not, unless he was James Bond!), together with his job, his hobbies, his pursuits. Everything that made up his life, for as long as he was on this deep cover posting. And that was okay with Jack. Especially the Mustang. So he drove it whenever he could, even if it meant that he had to fight his way through erratically merging and parting flow of sturdy, mostly old and dirty Soviet-made cars, driven by hurried and frustrated drivers, mostly men.

The Russians.

They turned out to be not entirely what Jack had been taught about them. Even after the month-long, twenty-four/seven, immersion course at the Army's Russian Institute in Garmisch, Germany, he still hadn't quite deciphered them. There was something about them that he couldn't put a finger on.

But hey, he'd just been here for four months, right? What he could do was make more friends with locals. Part of his job anyway, and the part that had always come easy to Jack. Sometimes it surprised him how easy it was for him to make quick friends with people—something to do with his smile, he figured, his easy banter and his willingness to make a fool of himself to make them laugh. More often than not, they would soon conclude that Jack was their best friend. He never dissuaded any of them.

It took him a while to find an empty spot amongst the non-Russian made vehicles with red diplomatic plates on the narrow street behind the Embassy. He locked the car and hurried towards the back gate, navigating around the puddles on the potholed sidewalk, keeping clear of the rainwater that poured from the roofs in long silver strings.

“Hey, Jack. Have a late night? How was she?” The marine at the gate winked at Jack as he waved him through.

Jack grinned, zipped his thumb and forefinger across his mouth and walked through the full-height turnstile.

A mile and a half from Red Square, the US Embassy was a Stalinist neoclassical building clad in yellow stucco and generously adorned with obelisks, pedestals and thick cornices. Jack thought it was not entirely different from the massive nineteenth-century buildings of downtown Washington D.C. Made him feel like home... Well, sort of.

And even more so inside the compound, with all Americans milling around—diplomats, secretaries, security and support personnel, contractors, engineers and Seabees from the Navy’s construction corps who were renovating the old chancery building. Lately, there had also been a steady flow of visitors of various designations, from different government agencies. Jack found his way through the busy courtyard, smiling broadly, tossing off heys, and what’s-ups and catch-up-laters left and right.

As he entered the central, office part of the building, Jack stopped to chat with a girl from the visa office whom he had taken out for a ride in his Mustang a couple of times. She wanted to know if he was free the coming Saturday. When Jack pleaded guilty that he wouldn’t, Katia was upset. But she quickly came around when he offered to bring her goodies from Helsinki where he was planning ongoing this weekend.

“Oh, Jack, you’re so sweet!” She was all smiles again. “I’ll give you a small list, alright? It won’t be very long, I promise!”

“Alright... Listen, Katiusha, I need to run. I’m sooo late.”

“Of course, Jack, go. See you later in the canteen?”

Jack gave her a wave and another toothy grin and hurried towards the elevators.

The tiny office he shared with one of the other six USIA staffers was located on the sixth floor. It was one of the Embassy’s “top floors” where all sensitive reporting was generated and transmitted—political, economic, military, consular, analysis and assumptions, rumors and hearsay; the State Department’s, Pentagon’s, CIA’s, FBI’s, NSA’s and God only knew who else. These floors were accessible only via a bulletproof metal door located on the last, ninth floor. No Russian had ever set foot through this door, Jack was told by the security officer who had given him the mandatory briefing on his first day of arrival in Moscow.

Jack stepped out of the plywood-paneled elevator, fumbled inside his shoulder bag, looking for his ID badge.

“It’s okay, Jack. Come on in.” One of the marines at the door, a youngster fresh out of school, waved him in. “You are late today.”

“No problem, Frank, I got it. Don’t want you guys getting in trouble.” Jack flashed the badge and a grin at the kid and complained, “Bloody traffic! I hate it when it’s raining here.”

“Better than no traffic whatsoever.” The other marine swore under his breath. He was sitting behind a tiny station tucked in the corner on the side of the metal door and didn’t even raise his head from whatever he was scrutinizing on the three monitors in front of him.

Jack nodded sympathetically and walked through the heavy door.

Their job was no fun: the thirty marines who guarded the chancery building and the Ambassador’s residence, Spaso House, lived on the Embassy grounds. They were allowed to venture out in the city only a few times during their assignment, and only in groups of at least three. *And* they were not allowed to socialize with the locals, not even with the Embassy’s local staff. No wonder they partied like there was no tomorrow every weekend at their little bar in the northern wing of the building where they were quartered.

Jack bounded down the internal staircase and hurried along the narrow, carpeted corridor to his office. He stopped at the door and fished the office key out of the bag. As a rule, the offices were locked at all times from either inside or outside, even the ones on the secured floors.

“Hey, Jack.” His co-worker poked his head out from his tiny cubicle across when Jack walked into his own and sat down. “Thought you wouldn’t be able to get up this morning.”

“Morning, Glenn. The traffic’s hellish today. Thought I’d never get here.”

When Jack didn’t elaborate, Glenn grunted skeptically, then said in a more serious tone, “William was looking for you twenty minutes ago. You’d better go see him. Like *now*. I suspect he isn’t in a good mood today.”

By virtue of his position as Jack’s direct boss along both the overt and the covert lines, William Osbourne was one of the two people at the Embassy who knew Jack’s real occupation; the other was the CIA’s Chief of Moscow Station, the COS. During their very first meeting, William had told Jack bluntly that he had opposed Jack’s selection for this posting and the only reason he was here been that the chief of ops had insisted on his candidacy. Jack had thought he caught a fleeting shadow of unhealthy curiosity in his new boss’s eyes when William asked if he knew Joe Coburn well. Jack suppressed the urge to snap “what the fuck does *that* mean?” and said neutrally, “like everybody else?”

Thus, his association with William Osbourne had a peculiar dimension that went unnoticed by others, but made some people think that Jack was William Osbourne’s protégé. Ha-di-ha!

Jack was still trying to find his way around the heavy-duty politics he had

been plunged into since he joined the Company. It was different from what he'd been told about the job when he was recruited. It had started with the spy craft training, alright: on intel gathering and analysis, paramilitary and clandestine activities like surveillance detection and agent recruitment. However, since he actually began working, he had been spending most of his time writing reports—on whom he had met that day, what they had said, and how many times he had been followed. Not to mention trying to figure out the intricacies of relationships, positions, interests and priorities of his superiors and peers. It felt like everybody spent more time on the fringes of the job than actually doing it.

Granted he had participated in a couple of clandestine operations—one in West Berlin about a year ago and one in Moscow, a month after his arrival. Plus, he had ID'd and assessed a candidate for recruitment, a diplomat from the Czechoslovak consulate in Leningrad. It was after this latter achievement that William's opinion about him seemed to have marginally improved—he had started cutting Jack some slack.

Jack stopped in front of the door with the nameplate saying "William L. Osbourne III, CAO" on it and knocked cautiously.

"Come in. It's unlocked," a voice from within called.

Mr. Osbourne obviously had his own rules. Or maybe he had just been waiting for Jack to report.

"Why, Jack, good of you to drop by this morning."

William didn't look up from whatever he was reading when Jack stepped into the room. The CAO was indeed not in the right mood, Jack knew it the moment he walked into his office.

"I'm sorry. The traffic was atrocious, and I stupidly took the car, instead of the Metro." Jack had figured out early on that his boss liked it when people admitted their foolishness rather than blamed it on circumstances, especially when Jack was doing the confessing.

William looked up from his papers, grunted and held his eyes over his black-rimmed glasses. "No problems with the singer, whatshername?"

Doh! Is this a diplomatic office or a fraternity dorm, for Christ's sake?

"Everything is fine. I delivered her to her hotel after the late dinner last night. Tim will pick her up at eleven and take her to Spaso House to meet with Mrs. Hart."

"Good... I hear she's already called the office this morning, asking for you. Said she needed an escort who spoke Russian."

Jack rolled his eyes and smiled apologetically.

“All right, sit down, Jack. I need you to take care of two things for me. First, the Foreign Minister’s office called. Unfortunately, neither the Minister nor any of his deputies will be attending the July 4th reception tomorrow.”

“Oh. Anything happened?”

“Probably... We’ve been told that Deputy Minister of *Culture* will attend instead.”

“Deputy Minister of *Culture*?” Jack arched his eyebrows.

“Yep. Leonid Dmitrievich Novikov.” William’s upper lip curled slightly as he read the name on a document on his desk. “The man was appointed two months ago, out of nowhere. Probably another of Gorbachev’s cronies. Ambassador Hart has asked me to take care of him at the reception... Now, we’ve also been informed that the Deputy Minister will be attending with his daughter.”

“His *daughter*? Is this a new *glasnost*-themed protocol?”

“Maybe, who knows? So, I’d like you to *take care* of Miss Novikova at the reception. I know it’s short notice and you won’t have time to run her background. But I’m sure you’ll be just fine playing it by ear.”

“Are we sure she’s the right material?” Jack said the last word under his breath.

“Don’t worry. You won’t have to baby-sit her, if that is your concern. According to the spokesperson, she’s seventeen or eighteen. All right?... Good. Now the second thing. The upcoming Youth and Students Festival. I want you to attend all events with the American delegation. Especially those sponsored by the Sovs. Glenn and Steve will take care of the press. You and Bruce will take care of the delegates. There’ll be around three hundred of them. Most with leftish inclinations. So start reading up,” William said and mouthed “the files”. “You know the drill.”

“I’m on it.”

“Good. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I’d like to go to Helsinki next week, William. I’m running short on personal supplies. And if that’s alright, I’d like to stay over the weekend... If there’s nothing pressing, of course.”

The CAO looked sternly at him, and for a moment Jack thought he would say no. His heart fell. But then William’s face relaxed, and he nodded.

“All right, you can go and stay for a weekend... But first make sure that our guests are taken good care of tomorrow.”

“Yes, of course, William. Thank you.”

Jack was already turning the doorknob when the CAO asked, “By the way,

how's the preparation for the physicists exchange program going? Anything of interest on the Berkeley team?"

Jack returned to the desk. "Nothing worth mentioning for now. But I'll need your help to get the materials on the Russian team. So far, we've been given only one name—Professor Volkonsky, Mikhail Alexandrovich, academician. The father of the nuclear winter theory, according to the Soviet textbooks."

"Volkonsky? I know the name. Well, besides the fact that it's the name of an old Russian patrician family." William Osbourne prided himself on being an expert on Russian history. "All right, I'll see what I can get." Jack was half way to the door when his boss added as an afterthought, "Oh, and by the way, good job last night."