

READER TESTIMONIALS

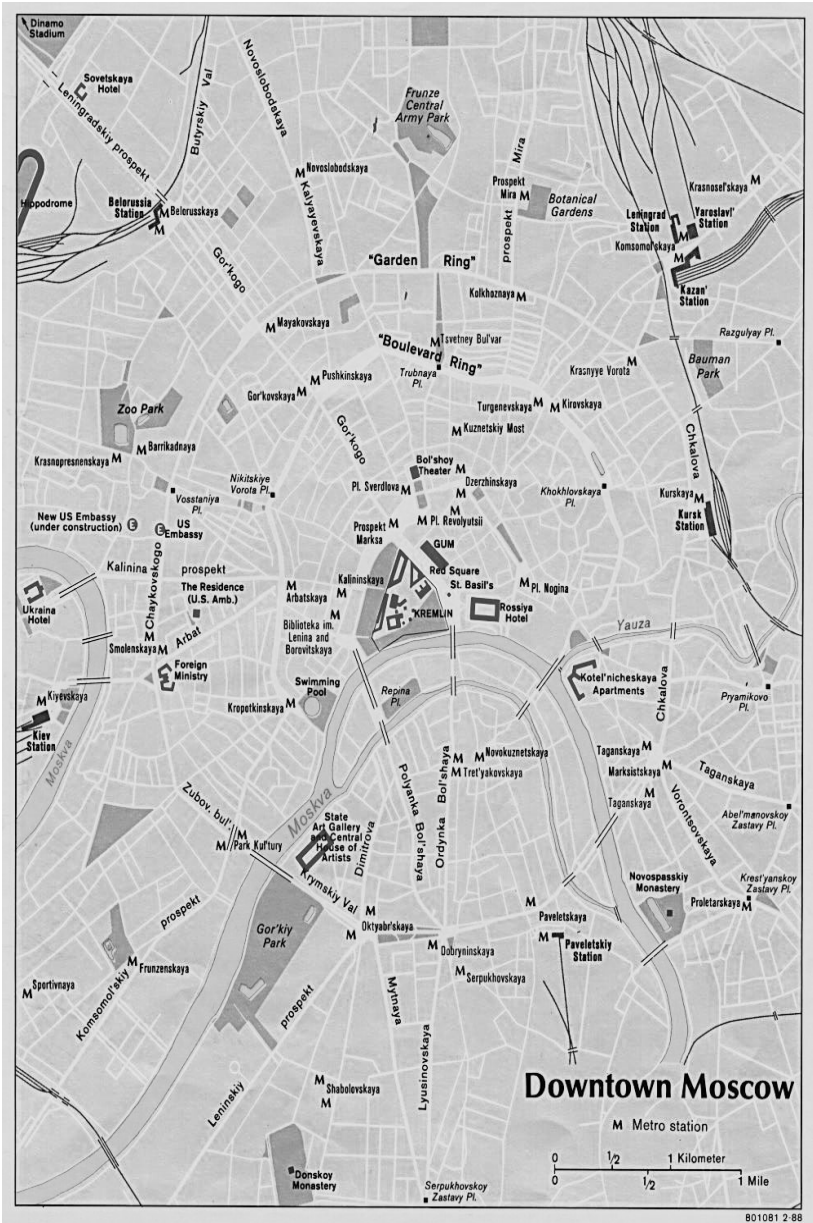
“A captivating read that blends terse pacing and a gut tightening sense of impending doom with a dry wit that celebrates the uncomfortable dance between protagonists with opposite world and political views. *Putin’s Useful Idiot* provides a poignant reminder that nothing is ever as it seems and things I always relied on as unshakable truths are actually nothing more than illusory conceits shrouded in smoke and mirrors. The book is a joy.”
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“I surely recommend *Putin’s Useful Idiot*, it is a very well written novel and has a captivating story!” — Ramona Portelli, International Journalist.

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“*Putin’s Useful Idiot* is the next bestseller on Amazon—at thriller from beginning to the last page—filled with truisms regarding the KGB in Russia during the 1980s—and how you can trust no one—espionage at its best!”
— Dr. Jan Hammond, Associate Professor Emerita State University of New York.

Map of Downtown Moscow – Early 1980s



**PUTIN'S
USEFUL IDIOT**

.....

A ROMANCE OF CULTURES

-

THE INTRIGUE OF SPIES

A NOVEL

BY

KENYON KANE



3rd Coast Books, LLC

Montgomery, Texas 77356

2020

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DEDICATION

TO MY WIFE LAURA,
THE MOST COURAGEOUS AND NOBLE
WOMAN I HAVE EVER MET

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CHAPTER 1 – CUFFED

Handcuffs, stamped with a metal hammer and sickle, one cuff locks around my wrist, the other to a tubular bed frame. Wearing an over-sized bathrobe with a Soviet star on the pocket, I'm butt naked underneath, except for the plaster cast on my right leg from mid-thigh to my ankle. Not that I'm shackled in a contorted position—heck they even gave me a pillow, though it stinks of bleach. But it's hard to sleep with one wrist shackled, even though I wouldn't be sleeping tonight anyway. They don't want me to sleep, that's the point. They want me to think about the evil I've done and confess. But it doesn't really matter because by this time tomorrow I'll either be free to go where I want when I want, or I'll be beat-up and suffering in a Soviet prison transport headed for a Siberian labor camp. I just hope I don't have to pee tonight, but they'll be coming for me soon enough. And I've seen their work, and it ain't pretty.



10 DAYS BEFORE – LANDING IN MOSCOW

Hanging around the baggage claim area at the Sheremetyevo International Airport, I'm ass dragging waiting for my bags to emerge after an eighteen-hour travel day. All I want is a bed, a bottle of water and a place to smoke a Marlboro Red, but right now I can't claim my luggage. All the carousels in the baggage area have broken down, and the Soviet repair crew has shut-off their power. I'm straddling a carousel because the Soviets don't provide chairs in the baggage claim area, and a carousel is the only place to sit while I wait. There are no coin-operated beverage dispensers either—like at JFK.

It's solely a business trip nothing personal. I don't know anyone in Moscow, never been here before, and don't intend on staying long. My job

is to close a real estate transaction with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and though I appear to be an adventurous entrepreneur carving out a space for capitalism in downtown Moscow, in fact I'm not.

Instead, I'm here to produce black money and use it to bribe KGB field operatives. To do it, I've contracted with the Soviets to buy a hotel in downtown Moscow, the Pushkin Hotel, and because of my business associations, the U.S. Treasury is going to issue a guaranty to Deutsche Bank, my lender. Based on the Treasury Guaranty, Deutsche Bank will loan me one hundred percent of the cost of the Pushkin Hotel purchase, plus the bribes I'm paying to the KGB operatives, plus the renovation of the Pushkin Hotel to Holiday Inn standards, plus a deposit of one million dollars tax-free into my pocket; but no additions that's it. The loan amount is fixed and there's nothing extra, and I can't get an increase in the loan amount without returning for approval to both Deutsche Bank and the folks back in the District. Since I've rigged the transaction to keep the illegal stuff, like bribing the KGB, off the books and non-detectable, I can't afford to go back to Deutsche Bank for a bigger loan because the request for more money would trigger another commitment committee review, and this time the Bank might discover the illegal payments.

I know it sounds like an odd profession, using the full faith and credit of the U.S. Treasury to rig transactions to produce black money to bribe foreign officials, but that's what I do, and I've done it for almost twenty years; in Northern Ireland, Grenada, Panama, El Salvador, and the Gaza, to name a few.

When an assignment completes and funds, I get paid a lot of money straight off the top of the funding. The year before last I would have received about \$500,000 if I'd completed the post-invasion Grenada deal. But if a transaction doesn't close, I make nothing.

Officially I am not employed by the government, and I am not a contract asset. I'm merely an independent businessman. I never signed a contract with the government, and none was ever offered to me. I am not a field operative, and I have not been trained to be a field operative. I am not a spy and do not engage in espionage. I did not receive a service sidearm; I do not pack a weapon of any kind. I am not a martial arts master and have no honorary belt in any color. My only training for this work was over a decade ago at Quantico, and that training focused on interpretive science—the science of listening to what people say, and reading what they write, and watching their countenance, all to determine what they are thinking and projecting what they will do.

I received and accepted my real estate project in Moscow in one face-to-face meeting at the Metropolitan Club near the White House. At the

meeting I was told to purchase a hotel in Moscow, rig the transaction to produce black money and use the money to bribe certain KGB field operatives identified on a list prepared by the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs. These particular KGB agents were obstructing the westernization of the Soviet economy they told me, and the KGB agents had agreed to retire and leave the Soviet Union if they got the money from me.

Westernization, or Perestroika as the Soviets call it, is the brainchild of Acting Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Specifically, in this case, they told me, both sides wanted to arrange for the issuance of hard currency credit cards by western banks to Soviet residents, and to free-up the Soviets to use their cards to buy western consumer products on credit. If we could flick this switch they had said, and American Express could issue hard currency cards in the Soviet Union, the West would add two hundred million consumers to sell to with over a trillion dollars of credit to spend. In other words, this whole real estate project they'd promised me was about effecting a permanent change to global economics.

Upon my acceptance of the project, I received a dossier I did not have the security-level clearance to open (according to the stamp on the cover); a street map of Moscow without most of the street names; five ten-dollar bills, probably dyed with invisible ink, and an American Express card in my name. I was instructed to use the card, though I was told I would never receive a bill.



Forty-five minutes pass, still no bags.

I spot my plane buddy standing on the other side of the hall. He sat beside me in the exit row on the Aeroflot flight from London to Moscow just now, an older British gentleman with a big square face and a full head of ghost-white, wavy hair on top. His age-spotted skin is sagging down his forehead and collecting over his brows, and beneath his eyes, and below the base of his chin, till it rests in jowls atop his red silk, black paisley print bowtie. His small eyes—little white balls—are tinged blood red, I guess from exhaustion. His bulbous nose cratered by huge pores shines with sweat, though it isn't hot in here.

Leaning with his back against a wall, his legs appear to be weakening. He's not holding up well waiting for the bags to come out. Outwardly a pleasant chap, but inside, I got a sense in my gut this old Brit has a sinister side to him.

He had some choice words for me on the plane no doubt and set off conversing in a usual way. Trite salutations had led to the customary

introductions.

“Richard Hart, my name,” I told him.

“Cheers,” he had replied, and never said his name.

In his accent, British boarding school and aristocratic, the old Brit had been speaking with me about the inclement weather, the English Football League soccer standings, his last afternoon tea at The Montcalm Marble Arch, and the time he smooched the Queen's hand. But not long after that, the old Brit steered our dialogue away from the typical topics discussed between plane-pals, and that's what made me suspect his true motivations and instilled in me a sense of dread even before the plane landed for my first day in-country.

You see, the old Brit asserted we had met before, and I knew we hadn't.

“Tell me,” I asked in skepticism because I didn't remember him. “Where?”

Pointing his index finger toward the ceiling, “Baring Brothers,” suggested the old Brit.

“I've been to Baring Brothers,” I smiled, “but not for years.”

“I'm certain of it,” he promised me.

“There is a little museum on the top floor,” I told him—just to quiz him to find out if he'd ever been to Baring Brothers. “Memorabilia,” I went on, “from all the projects Baring had financed. You must have had the tour,” I said as I searched his face for clues.

Had the old Brit been there?

Drilling down deeper, I detailed it for him. “There is even a section carved out to commemorate one of Baring's proudest achievements,” I pointed out, “do you recall it, sir?”

“So many achievements to sort through,” acknowledged the old Brit, and he grinned like the Cheshire cat.

“Oh no,” I needed him. “This achievement stands-out because it is so *Anti-British*.”

But the old Brit had no answer and didn't rack his brain to think of one.

So, I answered it for him. “Baring financed the construction of the USS Constitution,” I informed him. “Though I don't quite understand why,” I quipped, “financing the USS Constitution would be prideful to a venerable British Bank, a foreign ship that sunk more British ships than any other.”

“Because you Yanks paid them back,” he countered, and we both laughed.

“How is it you came to be at Baring?” he asked me matter-of-factly. A bit rude for an old Brit and quite out-of-place from my viewpoint to ask a plane-pal why he went to a bank meeting. I wanted to tell him to mind his own business, but I've resolved to be more diplomatic since the Grenada fiasco, and so I decided instead just to divert a bit from the old Brit's question instead of responding to rudeness with rudeness.

“I was at Baring to meet Mr. Baring,” I told him.

“I know the gentleman,” he murmured.

“His reading glasses are a kick, aren't they?” I asked the old Brit knowing Mr. Baring didn't need reading glasses to review documents or read the London newspapers.

But the old Brit just shrugged it off. “Yanks,” he joked with a tsk-*tsk*, “God love you.”

An awkward silence befell.

The jowls beneath the old Brit's chin began twitching, and then his lips moved to inquire, “Your first time to Moscow?”

“Yes, is it obvious?”

“First time behind the Iron Curtain?”

“Yes,” I answered. “And you? Seems like you've been coming to Moscow for a while.”

“Since 1944,” said the old Brit with a veteran's ego.

“I see. What were you doing in Moscow in 1944?”

“Killing Nazis.”

I laughed.

But the old Brit ignored me and continued without breaking pace like he was on a mission to prepare me for what laid ahead. “That is how I can tell you most assuredly,” advised the old Brit, “you appear quite unprepared, sir.”

“There's a Moscow street map in my bag, but it's only got a couple of street names on it; perhaps the streets where the hookers hang out?”

“Your street map is without street names because maps that have street names are classified by the KGB as 'strategic assets.' Obviously, we all realize the KGB is not credible—indeed,” the old Brit pointed out, “the

Soviets distributed street maps with street names at the Olympic games, and for free. But as an excuse, the KGB can use the map against you to put you in prison. Not long ago a Yank like you was taken into custody for a minor offense, a claim by a woman he had made unwanted advances toward her. Upon learning about the complaint most of us in Moscow thought it untrue because the complainant was a professional, if you understand me, a *Beriozka* girl.”

“Translation?” I asked for.

“A *Beriozka* girl is a state-licensed prostitute, who can work in a hotel for hard currency provided she tells the police and KGB who she has been with and what she witnessed.”

“Employed by the KGB?”

“Yes. Somehow the agent possessed a Moscow street map with the street names, and he was branded a spy, no trial, sent to Siberia for ten years, and we have no way to retrieve him.”

I nodded. But I didn't care because I wasn't fearful of being picked up by the KGB on a trumped-up charge on this project. After all, I'm working with the KGB, not against them. So, to change the subject, I decided to wind the old Brit up with some humor.

“Ten years and no way out?” I replied. “That would kill your career,” I joked and waited for a chuckle.

Instead, he looked askance. “A Siberian labor camp is not a topic to joke about,” warned the old Brit. “The Soviet Union is a dangerous place. Powerful men are losing their livelihoods as changes are made. They will fight very hard to keep them. And Russians are cold and cruel people. In London and New York, there is fierce competition between competitors in the markets, and traders may toil to spoil their competition financially, but in Russia, it is acceptable business behavior to murder your competition.”

Thinking about my assignment, I laughed.

Who else but me would go to Moscow to bribe old-guard KGB field operatives to retire?

“I doubt I have competition,” I told him.

“Not you,” he reprimanded. “Competition between those you work with in-country, and those you do not work with in-country. The enemies of your Soviet contacts will find your identity and become *your* enemies.”

“I'm not trained in hand-to-hand combat,” I confessed with a bit of sarcasm since I'm six foot four and muscular. “Not expecting violence,” I

admitted, "I'm just a businessman."

Cockeyed, the old Brit looked me over. "Right," he acknowledged with skepticism. "Well you Yanks know what you're doing," he hypothesized, dabbing with his red silk handkerchief at the goo in his eyes. But then he concluded with "I pray," before lecturing on.

"I have three rules of conduct for you to follow," he announced.

"I see."

"One, be wary of anyone who asks your name in a public place. Name and identity theft are an industry in the Soviet Union, as is espionage, money laundering, and extortion. Only criminals or KGB operatives will ask you your name in a public place.

"Two, never let them take you to a hospital unless you are about to die. Many foreigners arrive at hospitals never to be seen again. Hospital is synonymous with prison, especially a mental hospital or a military hospital, and once you go in you will never come out.

"And third, never admit anything. Even if you are caught and your denial is an inarguable lie, lie and keep lying."

I responded in gratitude. "You're being very helpful," I had told him. But I'm not sure I believed anything he'd said to me starting with running into me at Baring Brothers.

"Brits and Yanks have always had a close relationship," he pointed out, grinning like he had a secret he was hiding, and because I didn't know it, he'd one-upped me. "Today," he went on, "it is more than clear we share the same goals, as do the Germans, don't you agree?"

That took me back. Did the old Brit know about my German Bank? Was he more than just a plane-pal?

"Mr. Hart," he continued, "have you thought about completing a transaction with a communist government? No? It is not the same as Panama or Grenada. In the Soviet Union, the government owns all the real property; there is no private ownership. If you are an American and you come to Moscow to purchase real property, you must buy it from that part of the Soviet government that controls the real property. Like for example, the tourist part of the government, if you intend to buy a hotel."

I nodded and turned to look out the window. I didn't like the old Brit's example because it reflected my assignment to buy a hotel in Moscow, and so I had felt at the time, it was time to end the conversation. Out the window though, the view didn't hold my attention, just miles and miles of snow-covered plains dotted by a stand here and there of snow-covered fir

trees.

On the other hand, the old Brit didn't know enough to realize that other Soviet governmental agencies own hotels in the Soviet Union, not just the Soviet tourist agency. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, in fact, the KGB controls the hotel I'm here to purchase.

"Notwithstanding," continued the old Brit, "whatever you are doing here, and I do not confess to care, the prime motivating factor for the Soviets is greed, and the relief is hard currency or anything you need hard currency to buy."

"Like blue jeans?" I asked.

"Like food," he chortled jiggling the bully bags of beef hanging beneath his chin. "Greed," he repeated, but this time with particular emphasis on stretching out the 'ee' sound, like it was the "secret word" on a Marx Brothers television gameshow.

Pulling his black leather briefcase from beneath his feet, he placed it on his lap and released the brass latches on each side. "But this is, in fact," he announced, "the most effective tool you have to complete your assignment no matter what your assignment may be, and I am going to gift it to you now because I have another one in my office in Moscow."

"Thanks."

"As soon as I can find it in here of course . . . Yes, here it is," he said offering me a small box. "You will treasure this equipment, trust me."

The graphic printed on the outside showed two silver coils welded together and attached to a power plug. "May I donate this to the American cause?" he said, holding out the box to me.

"It boils water?" I asked.

"To a froth."



I've been waiting an hour now for two crummy bags, and I'm concerned my Ministry limousine sent to fetch me from the airport will give up and leave without me.

What the old Brit on the plane had to tell me would concern anyone ordinarily, but I wasn't surprised, and I think he exaggerated the peril to make himself look heroic. Although, they *had* warned me back in the District, "Moscow is hazardous duty." If I die in Moscow my widow somehow gets double, which doesn't mean a lot to me since she's divorcing

me anyway. Regardless, no one informed me why Moscow is hazardous duty. After all, it's not like jumping out of a plane over Grenada. But "hazardous duty" isn't a joke, and usually warns of brutality. Folks die or disappear overseas all the time while engaging in hazardous duty, and it never gets reported, especially in the case of folks like me without any family back home to make a stink about the missing person.

Even so, and even though Moscow is the first hazardous duty of my twenty-plus year career, I didn't ask about the hazardous duty tag, because I had no choice. I didn't want to go to Moscow, and I'm not here because I'm a lonely divorcee daydreaming idealistically of sexual encounters with Soviet women. Judging from their Olympic team, Soviet women look like bears anyway. No, I had no choice but to take on the Moscow hotel project, plain and simple.

And I had no choice, because I failed last time out, to complete a project in Grenada, my second project there, and that wrecked my relationships. That second time in Grenada I was supposed to erect an electrical generation facility to supply electricity to Grenadian government housing that had none; my task as always was to produce black money and bribe a government official, a *generalissimo* serving as the island's Defense Minister. I had finished the first project in Grenada, before the Reagan invasion in '82, and I had received my fee. But after the invasion, Grenada 2.0 didn't complete, and it was my doing. I couldn't pay the bribe to the Defense Minister.

Nothing happened in the business to prevent me from paying the bribe. I could have drawn down the money, paid the bribe and funded the project. But I didn't, and I don't know why I didn't. I'd always done it before without any trouble. It's my career. But this time, maybe what I had witnessed in Grenada changed me. I haven't figured it out yet. I haven't produced a balance sheet in my head, gains on one side losses on the other, because on initial reflection there weren't any benefits from not paying the bribe, only personal tragedy.

Not paying the bribe turned into a huge deal, a cathartic event. People wanted me to get lost and not come back, so nobody gave me another project to work on. I don't know how to do anything else but rig transactions and bribe people, and at my age no one else is going to hire me to do what I do. And historically I've been successful at what I do—or at least I had been until recently.

So I accepted the Moscow project because there was no other option unless I wanted to walk away with nothing, and I can't afford to walk away just yet because I have to fund my wife's divorce proceedings against me, and the pay-out of some kind of bribe to her for her signature on the

property settlement agreement. I didn't cheat on her or anything like that. She had other reasons to file for divorce. She receives no alimony. She was only my wife for a couple of years, and she's the only wife I've ever had.

I have no kids, no siblings and my parents are dead, so I miss her because she was the only person not involved with my business I could talk to, and so she was the only person in my life I could be open with and wholly trust to be on my side. I've been an only-child loner most of my life, and I married my ex to avoid ending up alone. But here I am, all by myself again. No matter, because as it turns out, my soon-to-be ex-wife was only with me for the money. When I returned from Grenada without any and told my ex she'd have to cut back on her clothes and her hairstylists, she packed-up and left me and filed for divorce.



Over an hour now and the Soviet mechanics still don't have the carousels running. At any other airport, they'd hand-carry your bags to the baggage claim area and put you on your way. A few minutes ago, I tried to just leave and walk out into the customs inspection area, but the Soviets won't let you leave the baggage claim area without your bags.

Even before the old Brit had schooled me on Moscow's environment, I'd heard CIA operatives returning from Moscow complain endlessly about the food and accommodations, though at the time I had doubted Moscow was as bad as they were reporting because everyone in the agency exaggerates their Moscow miseries to earn more political capital for going there.

And of course, you can't drink water out of the tap.

My bottom line, I only know one guy whoever went to Moscow and signed a binding contract with the Soviets—Hans Schmit, a German fellow my age, who was at the time, a senior vice president working for an international German steel producer.

According to Hans, the way he tells it, he goes to Moscow and signs a contract on behalf of his employer to sell the Soviets a boatload of the purest, cleanest, shiniest stainless-steel made anywhere in the world. The Germans use this grade of stainless-steel to make surgical instruments. The Soviet purchaser buys the boatload of steel for twelve million Pounds British-sterling, according to the signed contract, and agrees to pay the steel manufacturer in Germany, Hans' employer, by same-day wire transfer as soon as the steel goes over the side of the boat and sets down on the dock in Odessa.

Hans loads the boat and sends it to Odessa. It docks. But he can't get

paid, because he can't unload the steel from the ship to the dock. He doesn't possess the right permit. He has the permission slip to moor the freighter in the Soviet Union, but the Soviet dockmaster in Odessa requires an unloading permit before he will allow Hans to unload the steel cargo onto the dock. Hans doesn't have an unloading permit and didn't know he needed one.

The Soviet buyer contacts Hans and says he can obtain the unloading permit, but the price now is nine million sterling for the same boatload of steel, three million less than the twelve million specified in the bulk-sale contract the Soviet buyer had signed before the freighter left Hamburg.

Hans being German, does not accept. He calls around the Black Sea and sells the boatload to the Turks for ten million sterling. Unfortunately, Hans does not possess an exit permit for the boat to leave the Soviet dock, and he can't hire tugboat service without the exit permit, and the ship full of steel can't navigate away from the dock on its own power and steerage. So Hans has no permission to unload the steel, and no permit for the freighter to leave its mooring in Odessa.

The Soviet buyer now offers six million sterling.

Hans still resists. He hires a Soviet lawyer to grab him an exit permit. But the lawyer takes the hard currency retainer and then cannot be reached on the telephone and does not return messages.

In the meantime, the pristine German stainless-steel sits in a stationary, rusting boat. And all the while the boat must keep and pay its crew, pay the fuel to run the generators and pay the dockmaster the daily dock charge to moor the boat in Odessa. And all of these out-of-pocket costs come from the pockets of Hans' employer.

One day Hans receives new instructions from his boss at the steel producer's main office in West Berlin: his authority to conclude the contract with the Soviets has been revoked. That same day the Soviet buyer unloads the steel from the boat and onto the dock and pays three million sterling to Hans' employer by same-day wire transfer. The next day Hans is fired.

Though I sympathized with Hans at the time, his experience doesn't concern me. I think I'm smarter than Hans. Hans was trying to engage in commerce with the Soviets, something I am not doing and would never attempt. I'm doing *my* thing in Moscow—I'm bribing the KGB—and teaming with the KGB to do it.



I've waited ninety minutes now for my two bags.

I didn't sleep on the initial flight from New York to London, and after arriving in London there was only enough time for a quick breakfast before boarding the Aeroflot flight to Moscow. Tired, famished, thirsty, in need of a place to smoke a cigarette, my back hurts. Certain my limousine driver has headed back to Moscow by now, I'm dreading the task of finding a taxi while lugging my bags around.

My candidacy for this Moscow project attracted immediate attention because my service record shows I speak Russian fluently, which I did when I graduated college, though I'm trained to act like I don't. I haven't conversed in Russian in such a long time I'm a bit slow in retrieving Russian vocabulary from my memory, and I fear my pronunciation is sometimes so bad I miscommunicate what I want to say and worry my unintentional misstatements will embarrass me someday.

Before I departed from JFK, I was given the Moscow street addresses of the United States Embassy and the newly established American Express office, although these addresses were meaningless since the street-map they had given me didn't have most of the street names. Also provided were the names and phone numbers of my contact officer at the Embassy and my contact at the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, a soldier by reputation, a colonel in the KGB. The Colonel they told me was the Soviet point-man authorized by the KGB and the Red Army to manage the Soviet side of the transaction—meaning the sale of the Pushkin Hotel by the Ministry to my shell company, and the pay-out of the rigged surplus to the old-guard KGB objectors.

All this being said, I heard a rumor yesterday that the Moscow project isn't about credit cards. The chatter says we're retiring individual KGB officers because they are obstructing the scheduling of a bilateral conference between President Reagan and Acting Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev, their first, to reach an agreement on the de-escalation of the two countries' nuclear arsenals.

Though the rumor came to me from contract agents I'd befriended in the Caribbean, and who I trust as much as anyone involved with my business, no one can provide any evidence the rumor is true. But if the Moscow project is all about nuclear disarmament, then those KGB field operatives who are not informed of the real scheme could become much more difficult to retire if they find out; they might want a lot more money to let nuclear disarmament slide by. Disarmament is not the same as issuing hard currency credit cards to the People's Collective. Nuclear weapons are a strategic matter to them and a source of Red Army pride. Credit cards are not strategic, not to them. To a KGB field operative, a hard-currency credit card is a luxury item.

Since my funding is locked in at fixed levels and my financing must cover the KGB retirement payments, my concern is that the KGB targets will find out about the plans for a Reagan-Gorbachev disarmament conference, jack up the price of their retirement package, and run me out of hard dollars. And if I fail to deliver all the retirements this time, right after my failure in Grenada last time, my career is over, and I receive no retirement benefits since I'm just an independent businessman, and, thanks to my ex-wife, I don't have enough saved up to retire now, not to New York City. I'll wind up living in a hut in Mazatlán or under a bridge in Miami.

My only comfort is my contact at the KGB—the Colonel—is reputed to be bona fide powerful. Though technically our file lists him as a major, it appears his commission to the rank of Colonel is approved and working its way through the “*apparachiks*,” Soviet for bureaucrats, and they say he will be the youngest man to obtain the rank of Colonel in the history of the KGB. I told my brother-in-law about the Colonel and his reputation before I took off for JFK to catch the plane to London, and he scoffed at me.

“How powerful can a mere colonel be? Don't you need a general?”



Two hours, still no bags, still no power in the carousel.

I notice the old Brit on the other side of the baggage claim area; he's still leaning against the wall for support, but now his pantlegs are shaking. There's nowhere to sit, and I feel bad for his predicament. He was kind to give me the boiler. I guess you can't buy them in Moscow. I think the mini boiler is for tea—you know the English and their obsession with afternoon tea. So I don't know if I have a use for it, but it was generous of him to give it to me, a total stranger.

I fear he's going to collapse, so I decide to head over to offer my help.

That's when the power in the carousel comes on, the lights flash, and the bags come out.

Another thirty minutes go by waiting in the customs line, watching the border guards open every bag and search for contraband. Contraband they define as any product made in the West not for personal use unless the carrier has a permit to bring it into the Soviet Union. Oddly, when I reach the front of the line, the guards don't touch my bags, and I pass through the border without any delay. Still, looking at my Rolex watch, it has taken over two and a half hours to claim the bags and pass through customs, and I'm certain the limousine I thought the Soviets would supply me has gone.

The airport's interior is dark and loud—so dark I can't read a newspaper—so loud I can't hear the people talking near me. Examining the ceiling three stories above my head, there are thousands of small hi-hat lights. Not commercial hi-hats like back at my office or atop the Eastern Terminal at JFK, these hi-hats look more like one-pound Yuban coffee tins, opened, turned upside down, and fixed into the ceiling with a deadbolt. Of the tens of thousands of coffee-can light fixtures bolted into the ceiling, only one in ten contains a light bulb. And of those few hundred bulbs, half are dark and burned out, and of those actually lit, perhaps a quarter are flickering and on the edge of shutting off. Because of this, the airport is dim. Not that I can't make out people or furniture, but the terminal is too dark to read *The New York Times* or the gate number on your boarding pass no matter how close you hold it to your face.

And the terminal's ceiling and walls reverberate like they have no sound baffling inside them because every sound is echoing. Echoes turn one voice into several, turns the tens of passengers and staff into hundreds of voices, and this cacophony resonates through the semi-dark abyss so loudly I cannot hear the man standing next to me, and he senses it I think, and leans toward my chest.

“Robbed are people here, wallets, passports,” the man informs me as he extends a weather-beaten hand through the frayed ends of a green military jacket. Faded shadows in the cloth around the cuffs and beneath the service chevrons on the sleeves show me this military jacket belonged at least at one time to someone else whose “bars and stars” were not the same as those adorning the military jacket now.

“I'm not looking for a driver,” I tell him.

He chuckles. “Gypsy cab in New York City iz not my job.”

“Okay.”

“Iz what name, you?” inquires the man.

“Excuse me.”

“Iz okey-dokey,” he tells me with a smile. “See uniform, the military man me. See the medals?” he asks me referring with his hand to the service ribbons on his chest. “My medals.”

“I see them,” I reply pretending to scrutinize each of them to be polite. “Very impressive.”

“Buy one for dollars?” he pitches me pointing to a ribbon decoration on his jacket made from two gold embroidered bars about six inches long set horizontally on a green-khaki background.

“Special ribbon,” the man tells me with pride puffing-up his chest, “earned only by Soviet soldier severely wounded in combat.”

To be complimentary, “You deserve a lot of respect,” I respond smiling.

He grins.

“Sell you ribbon for ten dollars,” he proposes, “what you say?”

“No,” I answer him briskly. “Now go move along.”

He laughs at me. “It's a joke,” he confesses. “Picking you up, Mister Hart,” he tells me with his thumb to his chest, “my job.”

“Really. Now you know me?”

“Da,” he replies as he nods. “I see picture of Richard Hart in Hart's Visa application.”

“Really?” I ask him. “Do you have some sort of military identification? Can you show it to me please?”

“*Mudak osla*,” he grouches. *Mudak* is asshole, not really an anatomical asshole, more like a commentary about someone's character, and *osla* is a donkey; asshole-donkey is sort of the translation. I'd call it jackass in English, but I don't know.

Whom though is he calling a jackass, him or me?

He reaches into his pocket while I pretend not to know what he said and withdraws a Red Army ID card.

The man's face in the photo resembles the man talking to me. But his face in the picture is a lot younger than his face appears today, and it's odd because in the photo his head is shaped round like a circle, but now his head is oblong—shaped a bit like a peanut. His appearance is more manicured in the photo; his face is clean-shaven, his black hair is cut-short and brushed-back; the black strands shine like he'd ‘gooped’ it flat.

But now, standing in the airport, his hair is long, down to his shoulders, and I see some gray strands in it, and his hair bushes out from his head on the sides and in the back in snarls of uncombed clumps. He's unshaven, at least a few days, and even so, a coarse, black-hair goatee has overgrown the stubble at the downward tip of his chin. His nose is pointy at the tip but thickens noticeably at the bridge, like he's a busted-up prizefighter. He looks a bit emaciated too, and his uniform stinks of sweat.

According to the card, his first name is Petrov. But in the dim lighting, I can't read the Russian script well enough to make out the letters of his last name, or any of the smaller script like his official title or his office address,

let alone translate any of it.

“DaaAA?” he queries, his voice rising in pitch.

I nod and hand him back his card.

“DAAaa,” he concludes his voice lowering in pitch.

“I was expecting a limousine driver,” I inform him, “in a VIP-service uniform.”

“*Mudak osla*,” Petrov reiterates, calling me a jackass to my face while he bows his head toward me and clicks the heels of his Soviet boots.

“Carry this?” Petrov inquires indicating to the leather bag at my feet. “Expensive leather, Mr. Hart?”

“It's Ostrich, and no,” I answer him. “You can take the two suitcases though.”

“*Mudak osla*,” he calls me again as he picks up my luggage begrudgingly.

He leads, I follow, through the rotunda, then through the glass doors out onto the concrete sidewalk of the passenger loading zone. The concrete surface of the sidewalk is dissolved in places exposing iron rebar eroded by rust. Remarkably the lighting outside the terminal is brighter than inside, but yellow light, the bulb color we use in the United States at our Federal penitentiaries out by the concertina wire.

Petrov points to an old-fashion four-door sedan parked by the curb in the loading zone and tells me this beat-up old car is my limo.



From my seat in the rear, the inside of Petrov's car, a GAZ 23M, resembles my first car, a 1952 Oldsmobile—the large round steering wheel for instance, and the dashboard design, the large ring-shaped gauges with the thin red pointers that jump around as the car accelerates and decelerates, and the one-band AM radio, although Petrov's radio has no light, and a cracked face, and . . .

“Music okay?” queries Petrov as we turn onto the pavement and drive away from the terminal.

“Sure,” I reply. “What's on the radio?”

“Not radio, comrade,” he tells me wagging his finger back and forth. “Radio just for poop-a-ganda.

“Eight-track,” he announces holding up a cartridge and gesturing to a black box bound with electrician's tape beneath the center console. “Iz my

favorite American song,” he tells me with a smile as he slides in the cartridge. “Iz special recordinks.”

I'm a bit nauseous at this point, I think from the flight across the Atlantic, followed by the plane across Europe. I want some water, a cigarette, and some fresh air. I ask Petrov to stop where I can buy bottles of water, but he doesn't answer me straight away, and by the time he thinks of an answer he's interrupted—the eight-track makes that strange grinding sound that eight-tracks tend to make and starts to play.

I reach into my coat pocket for my pack of Marlboro Reds and my box of matches.

Petrov stares at me in the rearview mirror as I put the filter between my lips.

“May I smoke?” I ask.

“May I?” he counters.

“Please do.”

Petrov grins but makes no move.

“Oh, I see, you want one of mine?”

“Da,” says Petrov.

I pull the pack from my pocket again and extend it open across the back of the passenger seat. Slowing the car, Petrov rotates around to peer into the cigarette pack, and then he scrutinizes each of the cigarettes remaining in the box, evaluating the purity of the identical paper rims encasing the starched white filters. But he's still driving even though he isn't looking where he's going.

“Hey, Petrov,” I shout at him, “keep your eyes on the road.”

He chooses a cigarette and by the filter-tip extracts it from the box. Only then he turns around to face the road in front. But he doesn't bring the Marlboro to his mouth. No, he turns it sideways so he can roll it under his nose and smell the tobacco's aroma—like it was a stick of cinnamon.

“Amerikanski cigarettes,” he sighs as his eyes roll back.

I strike the match and bring it to the end of the cigarette dangling from my lips.

“Thank you, *tovarishch*,” says Petrov ingratiated; *‘tovarishch’* means comrade to me but in a friendlier way, like we say ‘pal’ in the States.

Smiling, “Petrov loves the Marlboro Reds,” he remarks as he puts the

cigarette between his lips and lights it with a Red-Army lighter.

“I see that,” I say.

“What Hart want I can get,” boasts Petrov, I guess to pay me back for the Marlboro with his unique services.

I inhale and feel the nicotine pulse through my bloodstream.

“What Hart need?” Petrov contemplates thinking to himself, and then he grins as if he has thought-out an answer. “Methinks Hart wants woman!”

“I'm married.”

“Me take Hart to place Amerikanski made, Arman-Hammerinski Square.”

“Is there a bar?”

“Bar not necessary;” answers Petrov, “girls catwalk to Petrov's car so Hart can pick-out woman Hart likes most, and then we take her to Hart's hotel.”

“O-kay,” I respond, though just to shut Petrov up; I don't mean it.

But glancing at me in the rearview mirror Petrov appears frustrated by my answer like I'm not getting what he's telling me. “Girl puts ass in car only for dollars,” he informs me no-nonsense.

“Not interested,” I tell him.

“Why not?” questions Petrov, “Iz Hart faggot?”

“AIDS.”

“No AIDS in Soviet Union,” states Petrov with pride. “AIDS iz capitalist disease.”

“Could I have the cigarette back?”

Petrov frowns and starts to turn around.

“Relax, just a joke,” I say patting him on the shoulder, “like yours, Petrov.” But then I ask him again if he knows where to stop to pick up bottles of water.

I mean I see the snow outside. I'm thinking if you're not going to stop and let me buy some bottles of water, let me get out of the car, breathe some fresh air, wipe my face with some snow, maybe put some snow in my travel-worn mouth.

Just then though, I spot a monument out the window, a row of giant

steel jacks like the kind of jacks Americans used in the 1950s to play “ball and jacks,” only these jacks are twenty-five, maybe thirty-five feet high instead of half an inch tall like the jacks in the game.

“What's that?” I ask pointing to the monument, not because I'm interested but as an excuse to pull over and get out of the car.

“Barricades against Nazi tanks,” reports Petrov. “The Easy Monument.”

Doesn't look easy to me, but I have my excuse to get out.

Like a tour guide, “Barricade iz monument,” Petrov lectures, “it commemorate furthest Nazi advance before Moscow gates in winter 1941.”

“Pull over,” I instruct him, pointing to a place to the right where the plows have left a gap in the snowdrifts.

Petrov edges to the side of the road and slows to a stop.

But suddenly, the black car in front of us screeches off the road right in front of us blocking our path forward. Then, as I turn to look back toward the airport, another black car has pulled off the road only ten feet behind us pinning us in.

I roar at Petrov, “What's happening?” but he's devil-may-care.

“Ministry of Internal Affairs iz in black car in front;” replies Petrov nonchalantly, “the KGB iz in black car in back.”

“What?”

“Iz easy—Internal Ministry iz in front to spy on you; KGB iz in back to spy on Internal Ministry. And everyone iz here to spy on me. Welcome to Soviet Union, tovarishch.”

“They will arrest me?”

“They will not get out of cars,” he claims with disgust.

“Why not?”

“Italian shoes not good in snow.”

I crack-up.

The old eight-track fades through the last rift of Johnny Cash to the applause of a live crowd. After a short pause, a lone guitar, a full twelve-string, strums three chords: a major, a major, and then a minor.

I open the door to the car; the frigid night air fresh off the snow invigorates my face, breathes mint through my hair. I toss the cigarette into the snow.

A soulful harmonica joins the twelve-string piping perfect parallel thirds, and the two rock along in a ballad tempo. Just three chords, a major, a major and then a minor, three chords, louder and louder—a snare drum rattles, and a rim shot punctuates the end of the stanza.

And through the snow above my ankles, I footslog on the pilgrimage to the tank traps. I know the song on the eight-track now. I rotate from the waist to look over my shoulder back at the car. Petrov stands outside the passenger door, his arms across his chest for warmth, fog marks each of his breaths.

And then, just as I make it to the foot of the first steel pillory, the harmonica solo ends, the crowd applauds, and as I scrape snow off a tank trap bare-fingered, two men sing, whiskey voices bellowing in harmonizing thirds, *Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven's door*.

My palm wipes the snow across my face, sweet refreshment; some dribbles into my parched mouth. And as I slurp more snow from my hand, I inspect these metal jacks entombed in reinforced concrete like the sword Excalibur. Military classes I sat for in college recalled the desperate struggle that took place here, the heavy casualties suffered on both sides. But what I find peculiar for a war memorial, there are no names. So many heroes, and yet not one name is inscribed upon the smooth metal sides of the jacks, and no statue of Stalin.

I swallow more snow. What did the Soviets do with all the dead bodies I ponder? From October to December 1941 over a million Red Army soldiers died here. Where'd they all go? Some Soviet dead rest in a cemetery I think, north of Moscow, but not a million of them, probably less than a hundred thousand “actually” in the ground. What about the Nazis—add another five hundred thousand dead bodies.

And that's when I realize. I'm standing on them. All the dead bodies I figure decomposed into the ground. The steel jacks aren't a monument. They're a headstone marking a mass grave of over a million dead bodies whose skeletons remain buried somewhere underground from Moscow past the airport.

And *Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven's Door* ends.

I return to the backseat in the car happy about quenching my thirst, but sad thinking about what the tank barricades mean to me. To me, the giant jacks are not a symbol of geopolitical hegemony, a geographical point in the sand where an advance came to a halt. To me, the giant jacks give homage to all the fathers and mothers who never saw their sons again; all the women without husbands; all the empty beds in empty rooms; all the empty hands with no one's hand to hold.

Petrov's GAZ car and the two black Skodas, one in front, the other to the rear, pull in unison onto the road. And from the heavens above, flurries drift earthward like tinsel hanging from unseen clouds. As seen from way up high, where Santa flies through puffy flakes of gentle crystals, below three specs drive down the road in the dark, no headlights, toward one bright light in Moscow off in the distance.



Our three-car caravan breezes down a four-lane thoroughfare toward the heart of Moscow, the highway lined on each side with eight-, nine-, and ten-story buildings shrouded in darkness, no street lighting, each of them made out of the same filthy gray brick—once white, I suppose.

“Stop somewhere, Petrov, where I can buy bottled water,” I tell him.

“Your hotel,” says Petrov, “iz Pecking Palace.

“Close-by we are,” he adds pointing across the dashboard. “Iz up and to left.”

Out the car window, I can spot Red Square all lit up like a beacon in a city otherwise devoid of night-lighting, but only for a moment as we speed by it.

“Peking Palace restaurant very famous,” declares Petrov. “Sometimes only Moscow place foreigner can eat.”

“I’m really very thirsty,” I repeat. “Been flying for hours.”

“Restaurant sold by big boss to Communist Chinese government.”

“Stalin you mean?”

“Of course, Big Boss!” he confirms to me, and then he nods ‘da’ to himself for emphasis.

A few cars are traversing the streets, but there isn't any real traffic. But something in my view seems unusual. Nobody has their headlights on.

“No need,” Petrov responds.

“How so? The sun's gone down hours ago.”

“Headlamps iz for emergency only.”

“Why?”

“Takes four years to get new one.”

He grins while his fingers stroke the goatee at the tip of his chin when suddenly Petrov slows down in front of an old building and pulls over to

curb. As before, the black Skoda in front of us pulls over, and the Skoda behind us pulls over pinning our car between them.

I can read the signage above the entrance.

“Народная больница для ветеранов.”

The first word looks to me like *Peoples*—and the last word is *Veterans*. In fact, the sign reads *for Veterans*. And the other word, the second word, I'm not sure at first, but the word is not “hotel.”

“Not my hotel?” I shout at Petrov. “Why are you taking me to a hospital?”

“Relax,” suggests Petrov. “This won't hurt.”

“I'm not going in there,” I howl swiveling to check if the KGB guys behind me are getting out of their Skoda.

Petrov grins. “Of course not,” he replies. “Hart—three hours late, and me must pick up person to drop-off on road back to barracks.”

A uniformed figure opens the car door on the front passenger side, grabs the body-frame above the door and jumps into the seat both boots off the floorboard.

“Hart make complaint?” questions Petrov.

She sits in front of me, so I can't see her except for the silky black hair tucked under a *pilotka* side-cap and draping just to the base of her neck.

“I'd like to get to the hotel,” I reply.

She exchanges greetings with Petrov in Russian. She turns to look at me over her shoulder, but she doesn't speak to me. Even in the dim-lit car, and though she only faces me for a moment, I can see her skin is light, and smooth, and flawless, like ivory. Her eyes appear to be gray, but then as she twists away from me to face front, and her eyes reflect the light from the dashboard, I see her eyes are blue.

She's not what I'd call “attractive,” not by New York standards, but she's not a bear either; she's thin, and her neck and shoulders look wiry under her uniform. But her clothes stink, like the German Shepard my neighbor back home keeps outside in the yard all day.

In Russian, she says to Petrov, “I not trust him.”

Petrov chortles and then points out to her in Russian that she never trusts anybody. He starts up the GAZ again and we gradually accelerate down the road surrounded in front and back by our unmarked escorts.

“Not true,” she argues.

“Name one person you trust.”

“My Mother.”

Petrov snorts. “Daaa, I agree. Madame Director is trustworthy. But only because her words are predictable. Her viewpoint is always first and primary to the benefit of the collective, and dogmatic, and Marxist.”

“And what?” inquires the woman. “You are no longer part of the collective, Petrov? Have you switched sides?”

Petrov does not respond—so the woman continues.

“Petrov, has become a bourgeois capitalist,” she muses with sarcasm, “or are you the gangster now?”

“Aren't they the same?” Petrov replies to her while grinning.

She laughs. “You make me laugh;” she admits to Petrov with mock begrudgingness, “no matter the crisis, you always can make me laugh.”

Motioning to me over his shoulder with his oblong head, “I think *mudak osla* meets the Colonel tonight,” Petrov queries. “No?”

She nods while she whispers to herself. “Petrov is a bad, selfish bastard,” she says to be funny.

“Hmm. Selfish? *Okay*,” he agrees and nods to himself. “But bastard too? My mama's sex life is not your business, Laura.”

KENYON KANE



CHAPTER 2 - THE PEKING PALACE HOTEL

Petrov's car putters idling at the curb in front of the Peking Palace Hotel.

“Tip you?” I ask him.

“Of course not,” Petrov asserts, but then he clasps his hands together in prayer. “Me borrow Marlboro for drive back to barracks?”

Reaching into my pocket, I hand him the box.

“Iz good to make the meeting, Meester Hart,” he tells me to my back as I move out of the car.

I say good-bye to him; “*Do svidaniya*,” he says to me.

“Good-bye,” I say to the lady beside him—she ignores me. And as I close the rear door behind me and head into the hotel, I hear her ask him, “*Mudak osla?*”

“*Da*,” replies Petrov, “*bol'shoy mudak osla*,” meaning a ‘grandiose asshole-donkey’.



“Your passport and entry visa,” requests the desk manager, a man in his fifties with thick black hair greased straight back over the top of his head and a black, bushy mustache framing his upper lip. It strikes me right away—this desk clerk groomed himself to resemble Stalin. Donning a black two-button suit it's tailored smartly to fit him, but fade lines wrap around the shoulder yoke and fringe the cuffs marking each time the coat was

lengthened to fit a new recipient.

“Can you just make a copy?” I reply, “I’m sick to my stomach.”

“No sorry,” he apologizes while plucking my passport and entry visa from my hand.

“Please, I need a shower and a bed.”

“No copy, Mr. Hart,” the gentlemen informs me.

His eyes rise from the visa to inspect my face. “Written permission is required to make copy of anything or is a People’s crime.”

The lobby is a broad rectangle. A staircase at the far end spreads out at the base into a robust rotunda. Old World banisters border each side providing a grand presentation reminiscent of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers gliding up and down its washed-out white marble treads.

There’s a knot in my chest now, the kind that forms right below the sternum, a dry ball of viciousness expanding into my lungs. “Can I please have a bottle of water?” I ask the desk manager.

“Your key, sir,” he responds, handing over my room key—a cylindrical bar with a single square iron blade welded to its end.

“My passport?”

“We keep.”

“Excuse me?”

“We keep passport and entry visa here when you in room,” he informs me. “When you leave, we give them back. When you come back, we take back.”

Trying to be courteous, he smiles.

The procedure is not unusual to me; it’s the same in many countries around the world, like El Salvador for instance. But it always makes me nervous when my travel documents aren’t on my person because you can’t go anywhere—you can’t leave the country without a passport.

“I’m here as a guest of the Ministry,” I remind him, “and I want my passport back.”

With a smile on his face, he replies with courtesy, “I will ask for you, Mr. Hart; I don’t enact the rules,” he adds, “my job is only to enforce them.”

“Like everywhere else on this planet,” I reply. “What time is breakfast?”

"The elevators are to the right," he informs me indicating with his index finger, "and turn left at end of the lobby."

"Don't you need a credit card?"

"Your charges paid by Ministry."

"What about the telephone?"

"There is a phone in your room, Mr. Hart."

"What about the charges for dialing out, like to New York, or dialing another phone in Moscow?"

"You can't, Mr. Hart, there are no outside lines, only inside lines within this hotel. If you want to call outside this hotel you need to make an appointment a day in advance, and you need to tell us the phone number you are calling, the person you want to speak to on the other end and your reason for the call, like business or pleasure. The Ministry operator will connect you at the appointment time tomorrow when she has your party on the line."

"To call a number in Moscow I have to go through all that red-tape and wait a day?"

Nodding, he finger-combs his thick black hair back over his head.

"Eighth floor," he informs me.

I start to say something more, but I'm getting a headache and need to lie down.

"Would you care for escort, Mr. Hart?"

"Escort?" I say tilting my head back and closing my eyes. "No thank you. What I want is a liter bottle of Evian."

To the opposite side of the lobby he points, to a set of Romanov double doors.

"Can someone take the suitcases to my room?" I inquire.

He nods, and then leaves the front desk to enter the back office I guess to file my passport and entry visa.

A placard suspended on a gold rope hangs around the two ornate brass doorknobs tying the Romanov double doors shut.

The gray dot-matrix letters on the placard read in alphabets of Russian, Chinese, Japanese, English, Italian, French, Arabic, Spanish, Greek, and German, 'Restaurant Closed'. But I'm too thirsty to pay attention to the sign, and though the doors have ornate brass handles, the doors have no