

“Brass” Bannem drove his rock-hard fist into Nikita Moskvitch’s jaw and the commie spy sank to his knees, his neatly trimmed goatee quivering as his thin lips emitted a girlish whimper. The private eye stood over him, hands on hips, a nasty grin splitting his rough-hewn face, as raindrops pelted the brim of his fedora and dribbled onto the upturned collar of his London Fog trench coat.

“That hurt,” Moskvitch whined, and Bannem resisted the urge to puke. Russian agents were tough as nails – once. But most of the old guard had retired or died and the new crop didn’t have the same moxie. Moskvitch was typical of the breed; he would’ve been better off in a ballet school, wearing a tutu and making like a sugar plum, instead of playing spy games with the big boys.

Bannem bent down and grabbed the lapels of the pinko’s cheap, ill-fitting, made-in-Moscow raincoat and hauled him to his feet. Moskvitch tried to pull away but Bannem yanked him close, his Marlboro breath gusting into the enemy agent’s weaselly face.

“OK, Nick,” Bannem said. “Tell me about the microchip.”

“My name’s not Nick,” the wincing Red said through clenched teeth. “It’s Pete.”

“Bullshit. You’re Nikita Moskvitch of the KGB. Don’t try to deny it. I can smell a commie a mile away.”

“My name is Pete Johnson and I sell postal meters.”

“They’re called ‘postage meters,’ and I don’t wanna hear your cover story. You know where that microchip is and I want it.”

“You’ve mistaken my identity. Let me show you my credentials.”

He started to slip a hand inside his raincoat. Bannem slapped it away.

“I was just reaching for my wallet,” Moskvitch said.

“I’ll do it.”

The private eye patted him down, removed his wallet, shoved the commie away from him and inspected his credentials – business card, driver’s license, Social Security card...

“These are fakes,” Bannem said. “My ten-year-old nephew could do better with crayons. Doesn’t the KGB take any pride in their work anymore, or is all your forgery farmed out to Poland?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Moskvitch held out his hand. “I demand you return my property at once.”

Bannem shoved the cards back into the wallet and handed it to him, but Moskvitch didn’t fold the wallet and put it away. Instead he turned it so the top was facing Bannem, placing his thumb over the snap on the change compartment and squeezing hard. Bannem grabbed the Red’s wrist and twisted, just as a brown liquid shot out of a tiny nozzle inside the wallet. The liquid splashed on the sidewalk. The concrete sizzled.

“Acid!” Bannem said. “Why you dirty yellow-bellied rat!”

He twisted Moskvitch’s wrist even more and the Red yowled, his numb fingers releasing the wallet. Bannem kicked it into the gutter, then punched Moskvitch in the gut and the KGB agent folded up like an accordion. Bannem shoved a hand inside his trench coat and whipped out a Colt .45 Model 1911 nickel-plated automatic with walnut checkered grips. He cocked the hammer and placed the ice-cold muzzle against the Red’s forehead.

“OK pond scum,” he growled. “One last chance. Where’s that chip?”

Moskvitch’s only reply was a long, drawn-out moan. Bannem raised his left hand, ready to give the Red a good smack across the face, but he was interrupted by a couple of winos who came staggering out of a nearby alley and lurched toward him. The private eye glared at the pair

but they didn't pause as they passed him, didn't even seem to notice him or the groaning man at his feet. They wobbled to the end of the block and disappeared around the corner.

The private eye refocused on Moskvitch. "You're running out of time, Nicky boy. Unless you want a hole in your anatomy that God never intended, you'd better start talking."

The pinko laughed bitterly. "If you kill me, you'll never find that microchip. Dead men tell no tales."

"Who said anything about killing you?" Bannem replied, his voice low and cold. He aimed the Colt at the commie's crotch. "If you don't spill the beans, you'll be spilling something else. And your next job will be singing soprano with the Bolshoi."

Moskvitch smirked. "Ignorant fool. The Bolshoi is a ballet company, not a choir."

"Gee, for an American postage-meter salesman, you sure know a lot about Russia."

"I appreciate the fine arts, wherever they are. Culture knows no borders. The Bolshoi toured America several years ago and I took in one of the performances. It was a rare treat. If you'd ever seen..."

"I'll take my dancing square and my answers straight. And I'm asking you for the last time, where's the chip? I'll give you three seconds to tell me. One ... two ...

"Alright. Alright. You win. I'll take you to the drop. It's only a few blocks from here."

Bannem hauled Moskvitch to his feet again, turned him around and gave him a shove. He followed a few paces behind, his Colt concealed in the right pocket of his trench coat, his finger resting lightly on the trigger, the muzzle aimed at the commie's backside.

As they reached the corner of Thirteenth and Chandler Streets the rain suddenly subsided and the late-afternoon sun peeked out between the gray clouds, bathing a nearby church steeple in an orange glow. Moskvitch stopped, gesturing at the church. The sign out front said, "Darkness Before Dawn Ministries," although the "M" was missing.

"This is the place," Moskvitch said, and pushed open the wrought-iron gate.

"A church?" Bannem said. "Is nothing sacred to you commie scum?"

"There is nothing special about a church. Religion is the opiate of the people. I prefer to place my faith in the State."

As Moskvitch led the way up the narrow walk, Bannem gazed up at the steeple and thought about the Redstone rocket that had blown up on the launch pad at Cape Canaveral only a few months before. An accident – that was the official explanation, but those in the know suspected sabotage. And now a top-secret microchip – vital to the guidance system of America's new Saturn V rocket – had been stolen. If the Russians took the lead in the space race and made it to the moon ahead of the United States, they could build a missile base there and ...

Bannem shuddered and shoved the thought from his mind.

Moskvitch stepped up onto the porch, opened the front door and entered the church, passing through the foyer and into the nave. The place was empty. He sat down in the last pew, to the left of the aisle, and slipped a hand underneath the seat.

"Don't try any tricks," the gumshoe warned.

A smirking Moskvitch slowly pulled his hand out from under the pew and held it up so Bannem could see what he was holding – a small, rectangular box with a rubber band at one end and a piece of pink bubble gum stuck in the middle, partially obscuring the word "Hohner." The commie slipped off the rubber band, opened the box and took out a gold-plated harmonica, the chromatic kind with a button on one end that shifts the reed plate to change keys.

"What's the big idea?" Bannem said. "I didn't come here for a concert."

“Of course not. You are an uncouth American boor who has no appreciation for the arts. But the microchip you so desperately seek is hidden inside this harmonica, in a secret compartment protected by a sonic lock. It can only be opened if someone plays the correct combination of musical notes.”

“Oh yeah? Pretty clever.”

“Naturally. It is a Russian invention. Of course you could try breaking the harmonica open with a pen knife or screwdriver, but there’s no need to resort to such crude and time-consuming methods, is there? Besides, it would be a shame to damage such a fine musical instrument, not to mention...”

“Quit the palaver. If you know how to open the damn thing, open it, and be quick about it.”

“Very well.” He started to raise the harmonica to his lips, paused.

“What’s the matter?” Bannem demanded.

“I haven’t played in front of an audience in a long time. I must confess I’m a bit nervous.”

“Quit stalling!”

“My, you Americans are so impatient. Very well. I shall begin.”

The pinko began to play, but Bannem wasn’t too thrilled with the melody: “Yankee Doodle Dandy.” Typical of the commies, using a patriotic American song to advance their devious Red plots.

As the melody got to “mind the music and the step,” Moskvitch turned his head so the holes in the harmonica were pointing at the private eye’s face. With a nasty glint in his eyes he jabbed the button with his forefinger and Bannem ducked, fearing more acid, but this time it was a reed, zipping out of the G-sharp hole and striking the lapel of his trench coat.

Growling with frustration, Moskvitch hurled the harmonica at Bannem, hitting him in the nose, then lunged, knocking the private eye to the floor and landing on top of him. Bannem tried to aim his Colt at the commie but the pocket was too confining so he pulled the gun free. Before he could fire, Moskvitch grabbed his wrist with both hands, desperate to wrest the weapon from his grasp, and the men rolled around on the floor, cussing and panting and grunting as they grappled for the gun. For several heart-stopping seconds the muzzle was pointing directly at Bannem’s head, but the Red couldn’t get his finger on the trigger and soon the American’s superior strength won the day and the gun slowly turned back toward the enemy agent...

BANG!

Bannem just lay there for a few seconds, catching his breath, then shoved the dead Red off of him and rose to his feet. As he holstered his Colt he peered at his lapel; the reed was still stuck in the fabric. Gingerly he pulled it free, sniffed at the sharpened tip.

Cyanide.

He wrapped the deadly dart in his handkerchief and placed it in the left pocket of his coat, picked up the harmonica and sat down on a pew, turning the instrument over in his hands, pondering how to get it open. Had Moskvitch been on the level about the sonic lock? He doubted it. And he wasn’t about to blow into the damn thing to find out. Maybe he should just break the harmonica open with his pen knife. But he might damage the chip – assuming it was even in there.

He eyed the button on the end of the harmonica. Playing a hunch, he pulled it out instead of pushing it in.

Voila!

A little door popped open at the other end. He tipped up the harmonica and something fell out, landing in his outstretched palm.

The microchip.

He gazed at it thoughtfully – this little silicon wafer that bore such a hefty price tag, not only in money, but human lives. It had been stolen from a NASA research lab and the prime suspect was a brilliant female scientist who'd been working on the rocket guidance system. She was found dead in her apartment the morning after the theft, the victim of a drug overdose, but everyone who knew her insisted she never did drugs or alcohol, never threw wild parties, and hung out with a conservative, Christian crowd. That crowd included the man she'd been dating, who was observed leaving her apartment on the night she died but hadn't been seen since. Bannem figured the boyfriend had slipped her mind-altering drugs and brainwashed her into stealing the top-secret component, then finished her off with an overdose and swiped the microchip, intending to deliver it to the KGB. But Bannem had intercepted Moskvitch, throwing a monkey wrench into those well-laid plans.

Which left the Russians out in the cold. If they still wanted to beat America to the moon, they'd have to invent their own guidance system, without the benefit of stolen technology. Good luck with that!

Smiling with grim satisfaction, Bannem returned the chip to its hiding place, snapped the little door shut and put the harmonica back in its box, peeled the gum off the lid, tossed it aside and stood up, slipping the box into his pocket.

He started toward the foyer, humming "Yankee Doodle Dandy"...

"What's going on?"

He spun around. The door to the sacristy was open and a minister was approaching the altar, a Bible clutched in one hand. He was a tall, square-jawed and handsome, about thirty-five, with brown tousled hair.

"Hello, reverend," Bannem said casually. "I just stopped by to do a little ... searching."

"Soul searching?"

"Of course."

"You certainly made a lot of noise."

Bannem smiled. "I was wrestling with my conscience."

"I see. Well, God be with you."

"Thanks."

Once more Bannem headed toward the exit, praying the minister wouldn't come down the aisle and spot the body lying between the pews. The private eye had no time for explanations or delays, and wanted to be well clear of the place before the shit hit the fan.

"One moment!" the minister boomed.

Bannem turned around. "Yes?"

The minister started down the aisle, thrusting out an arm and pointing an accusing finger. "What is the meaning of this?"

How could he possibly have seen the body from that vantage point? But obviously he had.

"I can explain, reverend. You see..."

"Would you throw chewing gum on the floor in your own home?"

"Chewing gum?"

The minister pointed again, wagging a finger at the floor near Bannem's feet. The private eye looked down – at the wad of pink chewing gum he'd peeled off the harmonica box.

"That gum wasn't there a few minutes ago," the minister said, "so I have to assume you're the one who discarded it so carelessly. This is a church, not the city dump."

Bannem suppressed a sigh of relief. "You're right, reverend. I apologize."

He picked up the wad and shoved it into his pocket – but now the minister was getting closer, drawing even with the last row of pews, coming within sight of the dead body...

“Oh God!”

The minister gaped at Moskvitch, slowly swung his head back to Bannem, staring at the private eye with intense blue eyes.

“I can explain, sir,” Bannem said. “You see...”

“I see that you have chosen to take a human life in the house of God! You have defiled this holy place!”

“It was self-defense. The man tried to kill me.”

“Oh? And why would he want to do that?”

“He was a KGB agent and...”

“A KGB agent? Oh come now! Don’t add lying to your other sins!”

Bannem raised his right hand. “I swear to God.”

The minister studied Bannem’s somber expression, then held the Bible out in front of him. “Will you solemnly swear with your hand on the Good Book?”

“Sure.”

As Bannem reached for the Bible, the minister dropped it on the floor.

“Forgive me,” the clergyman said. “It’s my arthritis. It always acts up on rainy days – makes it hard to hold on to things.” He started to bend over to pick up the book, then winced, clutching at his back. “Ow! My lumbago!”

“I’ll get it, reverend,” Bannem said.

He reached down ... and everything went black.