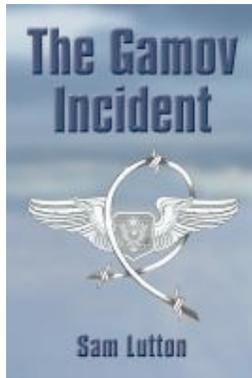


# The Gamov Incident



Sam Lutton



*In today's Russian Far East, an older gentleman walks into the newly opened U.S. consulate in Vladivostok and claims to be an American aviator, perhaps the lone survivor of a reconnaissance aircraft shot down by Soviet MiGs in 1954.*

## **The Gamov Incident**

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**Sam Lutton**

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## Chapter 1

Vladivostok  
Russian Federation  
September 1992

Cody Ballantine pushed open the heavy glass door to Number 32 Pushkinskaya—a featureless redbrick building perched on the bayside slope of a long-neglected city—and strode into America’s newest consulate. The temperature inside the lobby was slightly warmer than the frost-tinged air outside—an early morning chill foreshadowing the relentless approach of Siberian winter.

The Duty Officer, a fair-complexioned, thick-shouldered man in his early thirties, stood behind a waist-high reception desk anchored a few yards beyond the marble-tiled main entrance. “Good Morning, Boss,” the DO said as Cody approached.

“Hello, Paul. Anything interesting happen overnight?”

The DO’s expression soured, as though he had bitten into a wormy peach. “You mean here, or someplace pleasant and exciting?”

“Are you suggesting Vladivostok is drab and boring?”

Studied innocence replaced the dour expression. “Drab? Boring? Of course not. It has everything a brooding recluse could possibly want. Howard Hughes would love it.”

“Howard Hughes is dead,” Cody observed.

“Well, there you go.”

Cody stepped into an elevator and pressed the numeral ‘3’.

Although he would never express it outwardly, Cody shared the DO’s gloomy point of view. Except for the *Vory v Zakone*—organized criminals who operated a thriving black market—the largest city in the Russian Far East would never challenge Europe’s grander capitals for intrigue, architectural elegance, or political duplicity. Among Cody’s associates in the CIA, Vladivostok and the phrase ‘small potatoes’ were synonymous. His recent banishment to a desolate outpost in a far corner of Russia offered one last chance to revive his moribund career—or perhaps end it. As far as Cody was concerned it did not matter which of the two occurred, a bothersome fact he would likewise keep to himself.

The elevator doors slid open and Cody turned left down a wide corridor. He paused in a small reception area expecting to find his assistant, but Phyllis was nowhere in sight. Coffee dribbled from the machine into a Pyrex pot, filling the air with freshly roasted Arabica.

He unlocked his office door and stepped inside. The telephone Message Waiting light blinked impatiently, filling the dimly lighted room with an intermittent ruby glow. He flicked on the overhead lights and hung his overcoat in the closet. Then he visited the coffee maker, filled a porcelain mug and added a dribble of fresh cream.

Armed with morning brew, Cody settled himself behind the desk and took a careful sip. It was, as usual, perfect. He set the mug on a coaster, picked up the telephone, keyed his access code, and then listened to the message.

*“Hi, Cody. Al Jensen here. It seems the Company has finally recognized true talent and posted your sorry ass to Siberia, metaphorically and actually.”* The Moscow station chief’s good-natured chuckle echoed from the handset. *“All kidding aside, most of us have screwed up at one time or another. It’s the unfortunate consequence of what we do for a living. You are not the first guy to stub his toe in the Balkans and you won’t be the last. There’s something spooky about that part of Europe—pun intended. Anyway, give me a call if you want to chat about the New Russia, or anything*

*else for that matter. You might also want to think about King Solomon's advice. Meanwhile, keep your dobber up."*

The recorder stopped and the red light blinked out. He replaced the handset and sipped more coffee.

Cody's precipitous fall from grace four months ago still provided grist for the Agency's gossip mill. Most field agents, including Al Jensen, truly sympathized. However, as one might expect, the majority of Langley's stay-at-home careerists quietly welcomed the potential elimination of a professional rival. Their bogus commiserations reinforced Cody's belief that deception and hypocrisy were easily acquired human traits, especially in an organization that valued expertise in those unsavory but often-necessary practices.

He felt himself slipping into a cynical mood, a mental state that occurred with greater frequency these days, a sure sign he might be losing his edge. Cody found this troubling. Wallowing in self-pity was a pathetic exercise, a loathsome practice he abhorred. Winning and losing were normal outcomes of his profession. As the saying went: *Some days you eat the bear; some days the bear eats you.* In Bosnia, the proverbial bear had feasted on Fricassee of Cody Ballantine.

Al Jensen's reference to the Aramaic inscription etched inside King Solomon's golden ring was a reminder that victories and defeats were transitory—and often illusory. The biblical king's words, advice first brought to Cody's attention by the same Al Jensen, initially a mentor and now one of his few friends, emerged from memory: *This too shall pass.*

Well, maybe it would, and maybe it wouldn't.

He pushed those thoughts aside, checked his Breitling chronograph and subtracted seven time zones. It was two A.M. in the Russian capitol, a six thousand mile westward journey along the Trans-Siberian Railway. He made a mental note to return Al's call later in the day.

The intercom buzzed and he lifted the handset. "Good morning, Phyllis."

“How did you sneak by me, Cody? I left my desk for ten seconds.”

“Oh, you know. Stealth, guile and some other stuff I’m not supposed to talk about.”

“Yeah, right. Why do I bother to ask? Anyway, Paul is on line one.”

“Thanks, Phyllis.”

Had the Duty Officer remembered something? Cody pushed a lighted plastic button. “What’s up, Paul?”

“Sorry to interrupt your morning coffee, but there’s a gentleman in our lobby, a stranger who’s not on the Authorized Visitor list. He insists on speaking with the Consul General.”

“And you called *me* because...” Cody let the question dangle.

“Mr. Zane said you should handle this.”

Unlike the banished CIA officer, Consul General Whittier Hancock Zane considered his Vladivostok posting the crowning achievement to a long career in America’s Foreign Service. One’s perspective, Cody mused, was indeed a matter of one’s personal situation.

“I see,” he replied. “And why did Mr. Zane say that?”

“First, he was on his way to a meeting. Second, he said the situation appeared to be something you ought to handle.”

“Really? What exactly does our gentleman visitor want?”

“He won’t say. Not to me, that is.”

Cody felt his internal warning light switching to a higher intensity, a psychologically wary status a notch or two below maximum. “Who is this guy, Paul? Does he have proper identification?”

“Yes, he does. His papers ID him as Andrei Danilov, a Russian citizen.”

Cody sensed hesitation—a reluctance to volunteer extraneous information—and wondered whether the DO was another hapless exile, perhaps condemned to vile duration for excessive chattiness.

“What else did he tell you, Paul?”

“The gentleman claims to be an American citizen, one who arrived here under unusual circumstances.”

Cody's grip tightened on the handset, then relaxed. "And what do you suppose that means?"

"I have no idea. Mr. Danilov is unwilling to convey anything additional at this time."

Cody did not respond immediately. Memories of his recent Balkan assignment and the terrible calamity arising from bad judgment and misplaced loyalty came to mind. He toyed with the coffee mug while he considered possibilities.

An American citizen with Russian ID? ...in Siberia? How could that be?

Because Vladivostok served as home to the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet, the Soviets had closed the aging port city to all non-residents and foreigners for more than thirty years.

In light of the Soviet Union's collapse, that particular Cold War restriction no longer applied. The once-formidable USSR was dead, a victim of self-inflicted economic and social wounds. The city's reopening signaled a major shift in the political atmosphere.

Could this 'gentleman' be a deep cover agent seeking refuge? Cody doubted it. Other than covert operatives already in place, he had no information regarding additional clandestine assets in this part of the world. On the other hand, a nasty little scheme perpetrated by the discredited but still mischievous KGB wasn't out of the question either.

After a moment he said, "I'm coming down, Paul. Please escort Mr. Danilov to the visitor's conference room and keep an eye on him."

"Will do."

He broke the connection and buzzed Phyllis. She picked up immediately.

"Is Colonel Butler in his office?" Cody asked.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Please have him meet me near the first floor elevator."

"You mean right now?"

"Sooner, if possible."

"I'll track him down."

Five minutes later, Cody approached the conference room accompanied by the military attaché, an Air Force lieutenant colonel. Like Cody, Butler wore a worsted wool Navy blue suit, a button-down collared white shirt, and regimental striped tie. Although similar, their neckties did not match exactly. Cody found that happenstance mildly comforting.

The DO, similarly attired, stood beside the door. “Mr. Danilov is waiting inside,” he confirmed. “Other than a thick document stashed inside a briefcase, the gentleman is clean.”

“Thanks, Paul,” Cody replied. With enormous effort, he restrained himself from making a derisive ‘Three Musketeers’ remark. Instead, he silently vowed to retire his Navy blue suit. Or perhaps burn it.

The Duty Officer headed back toward his station in the lobby.

Cody stepped into the oak-paneled conference room trailed by the attaché. Andrei Danilov stood facing the picture window, his posture erect, arms folded across his chest. Beyond the window, Golden Horn Bay glittered in weak autumn sunlight.

A heavy gray overcoat and matching fur cap lay across one chair. Nearby, a fat leather briefcase squatted beside the conference room table. Danilov turned, dropped his arms and smiled politely. Cody studied his unexpected guest.

If one ignored the mediocre Russian-made suit and shoes, Danilov did indeed project a gentleman’s demeanor. Neat and clean-shaven, his clear brown eyes reflected guarded intelligence, like those of a chess master facing a highly rated opponent. The suit and shoes, although pressed and shined, contrasted with the imported cotton shirt and patterned silk tie, evidence Danilov shopped restricted access stores or had black market connections; perhaps both. Overall, his appearance and manner were those of an alert, moderately prosperous senior citizen.

“Good Morning, Mr. Danilov. I am Cody Ballantine, the Consul General’s personal envoy. And this,” he nodded toward the Air Force officer, “is Mr. Butler, my associate.” Not exactly the complete truth, he reflected—maybe not even close, but good enough for the time being. “Mr. Zane is engaged in another matter and regrets

his absence. Rather than have you wait, he asked me to represent him.”

Danilov nodded, apparently satisfied with the explanation. “Then I bid you good morning, gentlemen.” His smooth, resonant voice lacked the thick, easily identified Slavic accent. “And thank you for seeing me without an appointment.”

The courteous reply notwithstanding, the old man followed Cody’s example and did not extend his hand in greeting. That was noteworthy. Offering to shake hands when his American host did not might seem obsequious, thus placing the Russian at a psychological disadvantage. It was an interesting facet to Danilov’s frame of mind.

“Not at all,” Cody replied. “How might we be of service?”

“Before we get into that,” the Russian began, “if you don’t mind, may I confirm your identities, please?”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?” Colonel Butler said. The attaché’s voice carried a slight edge.

Danilov’s apologetic tone seemed genuine. “I understand your indignation sir, and please forgive my bad manners, but allow a cautious old man this small courtesy.”

Butler looked at Cody and raised an eyebrow.

The question was unexpected but Cody maintained his composure. “Mr. Danilov,” he said. “May I first see your papers?”

“Certainly.” Danilov produced a small booklet from an inside jacket pocket.

Cody scanned the passport-sized document. The photograph revealed a much younger Andrei Ivanovich Danilov. His hair, still thick, was much grayer now. Cyrillic text on the opposite page contained personal information. Assuming his papers were authentic, Danilov was sixty-three years old.

“I see you live in Ussurijsk,” Cody said.

“Yes, I have an apartment on Blyukher Prospekt, easy walking distance to my employer.”

“Which is?”

“The Primorski Agricultural Institute.”

“Do you teach there?”

Danilov shook his head. “I work as a linguist for the Institute’s Department of Agronomy. I translate agricultural textbooks, journals and research papers from English to Russian.”

That might explain the man’s excellent pronunciation and vocabulary. “Do you enjoy your work?” Cody asked.

“I find it interesting and challenging.”

Cody returned the identification. “How so?”

“For the most part, scientists and researchers rarely seek to inform the general population of their findings. Instead, they write to impress each other. The harder they try, the less coherent they become. I often restructure their prose to better explain what they actually mean.”

Cody suppressed a smile. His visitor possessed intelligence *and* a wry sense of humor, character traits common among many Russians. “I see. Well, you’ve traveled a long way this morning, haven’t you?”

“Indeed. One hundred and ten kilometers along the Trans-Siberian Railway is a great distance. Vladivostok, as the train conductors say, is the end of the line. Perhaps that phrase may prove accurate for other things as well.”

The Russian’s words seemed carefully chosen, the inflections deliberately applied. Was he alluding to a hidden past or an uncertain future? Cody’s earlier belief, that Danilov was *not* an American deep cover agent, began to waver.

Colonel Butler, obviously impatient with nuance and philosophical small talk, pressed the issue. “How might we assist you, Mr. Danilov?”

“First, your credentials please.”

“Of course.” Cody offered his ID. After a slight hesitation, Butler followed suit.

Danilov tilted the laminated plastic cards against the fluorescent lighting, his eyes lingering on the diplomatic identification. “Thank you, gentlemen. I appreciate your indulgence.” He returned the cards.

Despite his long-cultivated professional deportment, Cody found it difficult to conceal his growing interest. Danilov seemed to

exude *substance*, a hard-to-define quality Cody immediately recognized. Not exactly an aura, he supposed, but something similar. The word ‘gravitas’ came to mind, and experience taught him that such men warranted careful scrutiny. He said, “At the risk of repeating ourselves, what can we do for you, sir?”

Danilov responded with a slight downturn of his lips. Quiet resignation flickered across the Russian’s face followed by a look of determined reluctance. It seemed as though the old man had no choice but to commit an irrevocable act. Finally he said, “Mr. Ballantine, please be advised that my name is not Andrei Danilov. I am, in fact, a native born American citizen.”

“So the Duty Officer told me.” Cody nodded toward the leather briefcase resting on the floor. “I presume you have convincing evidence that you wish to present?”

“I do, but it is not in my valise.”

“I see. Then what are you offering as proof?”

“Only the truth.”

“Candor is a wise approach, especially when accompanied by reliable documentation.”

“Mr. Ballantine, such documents exist, I assure you, but they are not in my possession.”

“Oh? Then where are they?”

“In the United States, presumably hidden away and moldering in some dusty archive.”

Cody noted Danilov’s word choice: *archive*, a repository for older, perhaps historically relevant documents, rather than *file*, a term generally used to delineate records that are more current. Was that another subtle reference to his past?

“We can look into that,” Cody said, “and we shall, once you provide us with some basic information.”

“I understand.”

“You told the Duty Officer you arrived here under unusual circumstances. What, exactly, does that mean?”

Danilov’s resigned expression gave way to firm resolve, as though he had struggled with difficult questions before reaching a

decision. Now, apparently committed, he seemed to grow taller, an unexpected transformation Cody found mildly disconcerting.

“I was—am—Captain Andrew George Thompson, United States Air Force, serial number 45935A.” His eyes strayed for a moment to Butler, who did not respond. Danilov continued: “On August 3, 1954, Russian MiG fighter planes intercepted, fired upon, and destroyed my electronic surveillance aircraft, a four-engine RB-50 manned by fourteen crewmen. The attack occurred in international airspace, approximately fifteen miles south of Cape Gamov, over the Sea of Japan. That incident happened thirty-eight years ago last month.”

He paused and his face clouded for a moment as though bewildered. Then his voice softened to a disbelieving murmur. “Thirty-eight *years*? How is that possible?”

In the brief silence that followed, Cody sensed that Danilov’s mind was somewhere else, perhaps visiting a bizarre universe where the past folded itself into the present; where one’s future became knowable and terrifying and unchangeable—a madhouse of asynchronous realities from which there was no respite or escape.

The old man’s eyes refocused and he fixed Cody with a granite stare. “Sometimes, what life demands of us is difficult to accept, yet what I say is true. It now appears history and circumstances have given me an opportunity to return home and perhaps correct the official record.”

From the corner of his eye, Cody saw Butler’s lips compress into a thin line. The next questions were obvious. Cody spoke to his guest: “Your aircraft had a crew of fourteen? Are there others like you?”

“Perhaps, but I cannot be certain. Including the gentleman out front, you three are the only Americans I have spoken with since my capture.”

Cody, unsure how to proceed, stalled for time. “I see. Well, as you might imagine, I have no knowledge of that specific event, Mr. Danilov.”

A true statement, Cody admitted, but he also knew that incidents between Russian and American aircraft had been a common

occurrence during the Cold War. Colonel Butler, who might have more knowledge about such events, remained silent, thus allowing the CIA officer to lead the discussion, a courtesy Cody appreciated. What he did *not* want, at least at this moment, was the attaché to confirm or corroborate any of what Danilov claimed.

“I am Drew Thompson,” Danilov insisted. Then a half-sheepish expression creased his face. “I have not spoken that name in a long time. Nevertheless, it *is* mine.”

“With all due respect sir,” Cody said, resuming his original line of inquiry, “we require a bit more than your word. Do you have any kind of reliable evidence to substantiate your claim?”

Danilov extended both hands, palms up. “I have these. Take my fingerprints. I presume the consulate has such facilities. Send them to Washington. Check them against archival records. You may also take x-rays. I lost two molars and acquired several more fillings—stainless steel of course—but dental records, along with fingerprints, will verify my identity beyond doubt. Do you agree?”

Cody’s mind raced. What in hell was going on here? Danilov looked healthy and affluent, the antithesis of the bedraggled Russian citizen. How could an American military officer survive and prosper for nearly *four decades* in Russian captivity? Had he compromised himself? Were there others like him? Finally, and perhaps more interesting, what was he carrying in that damned briefcase—*valise*? Cody’s thoughts leaped beyond the present.

If Danilov was indeed a captured, uncompromised American airman and his ordeal became known—as it surely would—then public outrage would be difficult to contain. No amount of *glasnost*, the improved atmosphere between the United States and grudgingly democratic Russia, could diminish America’s compassion for soldiers who suffered captivity while serving their country. Likewise, there were the families of those servicemen who remained unaccounted for—relatives who stubbornly held out hope for missing husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers.

Although Cody felt growing anticipation, bitter experience and long hours of training tempered his enthusiasm. He thought about all those courses and seminars in behavior analysis—ideas rooted in

the teachings and philosophy of one Jack Paraday: a late, sorely lamented CIA interrogator and lecturer.

“Every human being is capable of lying,” Paraday once told a small audience of Agency operatives, one of whom happened to be Cody. “Whether president or pope, every man, woman, and child will, under the right set of circumstances, tell an outright lie; or, at best, conceal unpleasant facts or embarrassing information. In this unusual business we have chosen for a career, the natural-born ability to willfully mislead our fellow creatures is the one thing you can absolutely rely on.”

Paraday’s instruction focused on body language, eye movement, facial gestures, and a host of other techniques. However, schooling in those same methods had occurred on the other side. In short, everyone in CIA and KGB became expert at telling and concealing lies. To Cody, it seemed like a zero sum game.

However, Jack Paraday—a man of extraordinary ability—had also possessed an infallible gift. The aging cold warrior could somehow determine precisely when an individual lied. His often-proved talent was one of those rare, sometimes scary abilities that appear randomly among human beings every now and then. Some believed Paraday was a true psychic, a genius perhaps; others thought him a savant, or maybe a borderline psychopath. Differing opinions notwithstanding, one might fool a polygraph or another skilled interrogator, but one could never slip a lie past old man Paraday.

Cody, not similarly gifted, fully understood his shortcoming.

Yet, despite that caution, his curiosity nagged like an unsatisfied itch; he wanted to begin his questioning immediately, to hear Danilov’s story and probe for weaknesses. That approach was not possible, not yet, not without first briefing the Consul General and certainly not before informing his boss in Washington. Already treading on thin ice, Cody suppressed his natural instinct to push forward; instead, he chose what seemed like the next logical step.

He said, “Yes, what you suggest is a good place to start. Taking your fingerprints will not be a problem and we even have a portable x-ray machine in the dispensary. I’m sure someone even

knows how it works. First things first however: Are you requesting asylum and safe-housing inside the consulate?"

The old man shook his head. "Not at this time. Much has changed here. The communist apparatus is dysfunctional. The Interior Ministry, what is left of it, no longer follows me or monitors my activities. Like most Federation citizens nowadays, I come and go as funds allow, not as the MVD dictates. Until my true identity is confirmed however, I should continue my life as before."

Danilov's logic made sense. After decades of living inside the Soviet state, prematurely committing himself to a course of action was probably unwise. Assuming, of course, the man was indeed who he claimed to be.

"Are you on holiday today?" Cody asked.

"No, I work four days each week. This is my scheduled day off." He lifted one shoulder, a tiny gesture. "The perquisites of old age. I am not due back at the Institute until Monday morning."

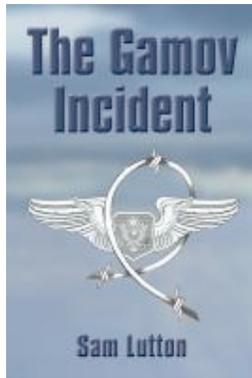
"I see," Cody said. "However, as you may already know, the verification process could be lengthy. Today is Friday. We will send your photograph and fingerprints, along with the Consul General's report, to Moscow via the afternoon courier. They will forward the originals to Washington, probably by Monday. The findings should arrive here the latter part of next week, or possibly not until the week after."

The heavy hitters in Washington would no doubt offer guidance regarding next steps; recommendations Cody intended to follow without deviation. Still, the process would take time.

"Mr. Danilov, if necessary may I contact you at the Institute?"

"I would prefer you did not."

Although the firm response was not surprising, Cody's professional curiosity remained piqued. He desperately wanted to probe for personal information: hometown, schools attended, and details regarding the shutdown. Equally important, he also wanted to explore the possibility of other survivors. Still, questions asked prematurely—or due to ignorance—could add credence to Danilov's claim. That approach might also conflict with specific directions from



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