

# Moscow Rules

Cornwell

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“The following is based on a true story.” When you see that in a movie you know that what you’re about to see is completely false. Here, it means that although all the events you’re about to read are true, they may not have happened in exactly the way they’re presented. Many identifying details have been changed: names, places, nationalities, agency affiliations, and more.

A while ago I wanted to take a vacation. There’s a nongovernmental organization (NGO) I volunteer with that does a lot of good work for civil liberties. Having been volunteering with them for about a decade now, they asked me to travel to Gdańsk, Poland, for a major meeting of these NGOs.

When I was a kid Poland was as far away as the surface of the moon. It was in the heart of the Soviet bloc and they weren’t fond of Americans. All that changed on April 25, 1999. Odds are good none of you remember that, but—in my business, April 25 is an unofficial holiday. That was when Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic joined NATO, the Warsaw Pact was now well and truly dead, and we breathed a sigh of relief at how finally we were entering a new era of peace.

Since Poland is a NATO country, I was allowed to travel there without much paperwork. All this made me happy as a clam up until my wallet got stolen before I’d been in the city two hours. This was bad, but not a disaster: I still had my passport, and I’d already checked into my hotel. (Good luck checking into a hotel without a credit card. In the developing world *baksheesh* can do wonders, but Europe’s astonishingly honest.)

I walked back to my hotel, twisted my ankle painfully on a curbstone, and saw the rest of the convention chose this moment to check in. The desk was overwhelmed. I flagged the concierge and indicated my twisted ankle. The hotel staff helped me to a comfortable davenport and the concierge promised he’d keep track of my ‘virtual’ place in line.

A few minutes later a woman about my own age—let’s call her “thirtyish” in the interests of vagueness—sat on a chair near me. “Czy mówisz po polsku?”

I barely knew what she was saying. I’ve picked up a smattering of a handful of languages in my travels, but my Polish is nearly nonexistent. What little I know I picked up from chasing a lovely Pole around in undergrad many years ago. I can order dumplings and

You can ignore anything in the right hand column. I’ll put asides, jokes, and interesting bits of trivia here, but it’s not necessary to understand what I’m writing.

They didn’t call it the “Warsaw Pact” for nothing.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Us, the good guys.

It was a really nice two and a half years.

I’m not allowed to leave the U.S. without the government’s permission.

*Baksheesh* can cover anything from a tip, to an expected fee, to outright bribery. Bribery is a bad idea, since you can easily run afoul of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, but tipping and normal fees are okay.

“Do you speak Polish?”

More people have learned foreign languages from trying to impress people they’re attracted to than all other reasons put together. Incidentally, *pierógi* are awesome and you should try them sometime.

find out where the restroom is, and that's about it. So I did what you should always do if someone pretty smiles at you and says something incomprehensible: you should smile back. "I'm sorry, I don't understand." I followed it up with, "Do you speak English? *Parlez-vous français? Deutsch?*" I was holding Russian in reserve, because many Poles have a visceral dislike for Russians.

She looked puzzled. She was pretty, and she had a great smile, so in desperation I tried: "*Linguamne Latinam loqueris?*"

"Do you speak Latin?"

She burst out laughing. "Yes, yes, I speak Engl—has *anyone* ever answered '*sic est, Linguam Latinam loquor?*'?" She spoke flawless English with a Continental accent, which is to say it sounded fluent but weird. That's what happens when you learn English in Italy from a Belgian with French classmates learning alongside you. There is no single 'Continental' accent: they all speak it slightly differently. "What happened to your foot?"

"Yes, I speak Latin."

I explained to her about the curbstone and my wallet getting nicked. She was aghast: only a few hours in Gdańsk and this already happened? Without further word she stood up, left, and reappeared a few minutes later holding a bag of ice. "I made friends with the housekeeping staff when I got in," she explained as she gave it to me. "I wasn't expecting it to pay off so quickly!" We laughed, I put this bag of ice on my ankle, and we started talking.

She was Katarzyna, and she was from Warsaw. There was this big civil liberties convention and she thought she'd show up for it and talk with people in order to get a feel for what the civil liberties situation was like around the world.

"So you're here to talk to people. That means . . . what, you're a journalist, then?" I joked.

"Is it that obvious?" She laughed. "No, no. Not a journalist. I mean, I write a blog, but I don't think that counts. I'm just interested, you know? My father's a lawyer: he gave me a lifelong interest in civil rights and governments."

I breathed easier. I may have had permission to talk to people from NATO nations, but journalists are always off-limits. So, safe in the knowledge she was from Warsaw and not a journalist, we struck up a lovely conversation for about half an hour before the concierge came over to me. With Katarzyna's help I was able to clearly communicate the events to the hotel staff. The concierge brought over some forms I had to file with the local police, which were all in Polish, and Katarzyna helped me with these as well.

When all was said and done she reached into her pocket and pulled out a lollipop—one of those cheap ones that comes wrapped in paper, the kind a bank would give to its customers. She unwrapped it, popped it into her mouth, and leaned back into her seat.

“So. What’s the next step?”

I shrugged. “Find a way to get money. Find dinner.”

She fished another lollipop out of her pocket. She offered it to me and I took it. “Do you have any ideas for how to do that?”

I shook my head. “Not yet.” The lollipop was some kind of mixed berry flavor. I may have had a twisted ankle and no wallet, but I was at least enjoying a lollipop with a lovely and really nice Polish woman, and this is a thousand times better than how I usually spend my Saturday nights. In this business you eat a lot of meals straight from the microwave and watch a lot of Netflix.

“Well. You’re a guest in Gdańsk and you’ve already had an awful day. Why don’t you let me take you to dinner? There’s a perfect little seafood restaurant down the way.”

Things were now about a million times better than my average Saturday night. Not being a fool I said yes. We wound up sharing a plate of black paella, which is a mixture of rice, squid, sea snails, a little bit of rabbit, and squid ink.

Before you think that it sounds like something that would gag a maggot, let me tell you that it tastes incredible, and sharing a plate with a lovely redheaded Pole makes it even better. Over dinner we managed to genuinely impress each other: it turns out we both have high-level skills in a demanding technical discipline, and . . . well. She could have easily played at my level of the game, and that’s not something I’m used to saying about anyone except my co-workers. When I told her this she laughed and said no, but she thought if I worked hard I might be able to play at hers.

There’s something just impossibly attractive about a confident, accomplished, pretty woman who’s done nothing but help you and give you lollipops.

We returned to the convention hotel, went to her room, and . . . well. We were rudely interrupted by the fact that although black paella tastes wonderful, kissing someone who’s had black paella is exactly the sort of thing that would gag a maggot. Neither of us expected that. After a wave of mutual nausea and “oh, God, what did we eat?”, she hit the bathroom to brush her teeth. I was about to walk down the hallway to take care of my own breath when her phone rang.

“Could you answer that?” she asked me through a mouthful of brush and toothpaste. “It’s my co-worker Alex checking up on me.”

“He’s making sure you’re all right?”

“Sure. You know, strange Americans—intrigue—you could be a spy!” she laughed.

I had a good laugh and thought *oh, how right you are* as I hobbled to her phone. I answered it, held it to my ear, was about to speak,

It’s actually not paella at all. The correct term for it is *arròs negre*, *arroz negro*, or “black paella” depending on whether you’re eating it in Catalonia, the rest of Spain, or the rest of the world, respectively. It looks like paella, tastes like paella, has the same ingredients as paella, but the instant you add squid ink it’s not paella. Why is this? I have no idea. Ask the Catalonians, since they invented it. But first ask them for a sample.

Kissing someone who tastes like snails is bad enough. A writhing tongue being rather snail-like, though, your brain quickly goes to some revolting places.

and—

*“Kak delishki, Katyusha?”*

I stopped, did a double-take. My Polish is lousy but my Russian is pretty good.

“She’s in the bathroom right now. Are you Alex? I’m sorry, I don’t speak a word of—was that Polish?”

He laughed. “Yes. I am Alex. I work with her in Warsaw.”

*You’re a slick liar, Alex*, I immediately thought. I asked two questions: he answered one of them honestly, knowing that I’d probably assume he was talking about both questions. Never tell a lie to someone when you don’t have to: it’s almost always easier, and much easier to explain later, if you let them infer lies from honest things you’ve said.

Alex continued. “She asked me to check up on her. It’s nothing personal, I promise.”

I laughed and hoped it didn’t sound nervous. “I understand. Conference, strange Americans. She says you think I could be a spy.”

Alex gave a chuckle. “She’s basically like my little sister. Forgive me for being protective?”

“I get it. If you’ll hold on a minute. . .”

“Of course.”

It took Katarzyna about thirty seconds to finish brushing her teeth. That gave me thirty seconds to think about what was happening.

1. When Alex thought Katarzyna was on the phone, he greeted her in Russian. And it wasn’t just a brief greeting, either: he asked her how the evening had been going—he expected her to understand the question, and probably to respond in Russian.
2. He called her Katyusha, not Katarzyna. But the diminutive of Katarzyna is Kasia, not Katyusha.
3. Her name’s Yekaterina.
4. She speaks Russian, her co-worker is Russian, she has a Russian name, and she said she’s from Warsaw.
5. She doesn’t just have my exact skillset ... she *has my exact skillset*. Not just the technical skills, but the human ones, too. She made friends with the housekeeping staff immediately on checking in—I was aiming to do that. She kept lollipops in her pocket and used them as icebreakers—I keep chewing gum in my pocket for the same reason. She broke the ice with hospitality by getting me literal ice for my ankle—and I was taught nothing breaks the ice more quickly than hospitality.
6. She was working for the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service.

“How’s it going, Katie?”

Again as the side effect of chasing a woman around in undergrad. Are you beginning to spot a recurring pattern in my language skills? Beats Berlitz hands-down, let me tell you.

There’s nothing wrong with being a slick liar. Being able to lie convincingly is a skill, not a character flaw. Compulsive honesty is the lack of a skill, not a virtue. Morality isn’t about what skills you have: it’s about the ends to which you put them. Some of the most honest people I’ve known have been exceptional liars: it was *because* they were so good at it that they felt a special obligation to be particularly honest.

7. I just played tonsil hockey with one of Vladimir Putin's spooks and I'm on the phone with another.

This was now about a million times worse than my normal Saturday night. I was suddenly homesick for mac'n'cheese and Netflix.

Katyusha tapped me on the shoulder, gave me a peck on the cheek, and made a shooing motion to the door. "Go. Brush up."

Instead, I sat down in a chair.

She spoke to Alex for a bit in Russian. I wish I could tell you what it was about, but honestly, I wasn't paying attention. I was too busy trying to think.

8. They didn't know who I was. If I was a target, she would've been under protective surveillance the entire time and Alex wouldn't have needed to call her.
9. No, wait, that's wrong. They didn't know I was a U.S. intelligence contractor, but they *did* know, based on my presence in the hotel, that I was associated with a civil liberties NGO. When Katyusha saw me in the hotel with a twisted ankle, she probably figured she'd see if she could make an asset in an NGO for the low, low price of some ice, a lollipop, some compassion, and dinner.
10. . . . did she arrange for my wallet to be stolen? No. I was a target of opportunity, not a target of selection. Stealing my wallet would've meant I was a target of selection, and I'd already figured out I wasn't one.

She hung up her call, tilted her head as she looked at me, smiled. "You're not going to visit the lavatory? Cold feet or something?"

The best way to keep someone from backing out is to encourage them to do what they've already indicated a willingness to do—encourage consistency. She wanted to close escrow and I was backing out, so she was encouraging me to go through with the decision I made.

"He called you 'Katyusha'," I answered quietly.

She frowned and sat down on the edge of her bed. "Yes."

"He's your co-worker. The two of you work together. In Warsaw."

She nodded, her eyes becoming troubled.

"You're posted at the Russian Embassy in Warsaw."

She sighed, put her head in her hands, and said a dirty word in Russian. Then she looked back up at me. "I didn't lie to you, you know. You asked if I was a journalist. I said no. I said I write a blog. I do. And when I'm out of the Embassy I go by Katarzyna—the Polish version of Yekaterina. A lot of people here don't like Russians very much. It's just better, you know?"

The big c again: she was demonstrating that she's been consistent, which normally leads people into believing the speaker is trustworthy. I shook my head abruptly. "You're Russian, working at the Russian Embassy in Warsaw, and you're here at a civil liberties conference."

"Yes!" she agreed. "But only because I love this stuff. I really did learn it from my dad! And I hate what my country is doing to its own people. I just want to... to reach out to people, you know? To meet people. I'm allowed to do that, you know? Just because I work for the Russian Embassy doesn't mean I like all the things we're doing!"

I wanted to believe her. I just couldn't. There's always free cheese in a mousetrap.

"I'm sorry," I told her, "but this is a dealbreaker. If my group finds out I'm tangled up with you... " I spread my hands out. "It'd hurt our cause. We'd lose credibility. I really like you—"

"—I really like you, too!" she protested.

I was surprised to discover that even though I knew I was being played, I still liked her. A lot. And I hoped that maybe she wasn't lying about liking me. And then I realized this, too, could have been a clever manipulation. We feel benevolent towards those who like us. By declaring how much she liked me, she was making a play for my goodwill.

And I found myself liking her anyway.

"—but I can't jeopardize my group's good name. I'm sorry. I think it's best if we just ... don't talk again."

With that, I stood up and walked out of her hotel room, my knees almost buckling with fear as I walked. She noticed.

"Is your ankle all right?"

"It's fine," I told her, and immediately regretted it. After telling her we needed to not talk again, that knee-buckle let her re-open the door. *Dammit* she was good.

"If you change your mind... "

I closed the door behind me and walked into my hotel room.

I knew I was out of my league. I've been taught the basics of counterintelligence operations, sure—find someone in my business who hasn't—and I've sat in on a few continuing-education classes about this sort of thing. This was the first time I'd come face-to-face with the Russian Bear, though, and I wanted to talk to someone who'd been doing this since there was still a Soviet Union. So I called up a friend who cut his teeth on the KGB and had boots-on-the-ground experience in Red Square. He reminded me of my obligation not to share any classified information over an insecure line, and then we started talking.

Honestly, it felt rather a lot like being shot at and narrowly missed. It was the same mix of euphoria, exhilaration, and vomit-inducing nausea. It's a potent mix. I have never in my life felt so truly and completely alive even while feeling so sick I just wanted it to end.

After I told him my story he let out a whistle. “Anna Chapman she ain’t,” he said. “Okay, so, you’re burned. What’s your plan?”

I made a frustrated noise. “Look! Listen, I have no money, no credit cards, I’m tired, I’m stressed, and I *almost climbed into bed with Vladimir Putin’s number one daughter*. So far my day has been completely awful, but the one piece of good news is I *didn’t* let on that I’m in the Game.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The moment the door closed she did an after-action review to see where things went off the rails. It took her half a minute to replay events and discover it all fell apart after you picked up her phone. Two seconds later, she realized you speak Russian. By the time the minute’s up she’s figured out that in less time than it takes her to brush her teeth you clued to the reality of the situation. All this while being distracted by thoughts of being imminently laid. She adds all that together and reaches the only possible conclusion. You, my friend, are an *Amerikanskiy krysa iz nerzhavayushchey stali*. An American stainless steel rat.”

I blasphemed. Then, “So what am I supposed to do? Leave? I can’t bow out of the conference. If I do that I become twice as interesting. Same thing if I get a different hotel. And I can’t get tangled in any of this, because I’m on vacation and the Powers That Be hate off-the-reservation freestyling crap. They’re already going to give me an earful about going all James Bond in Gdańsk and I *haven’t even done anything*. I haven’t gotten laid, I haven’t shot anyone, I haven’t been arrested, I haven’t revealed secrets, I haven’t created an international diplomatic crisis, and I’m *still* in trouble.”

My friend laughed. “So far, Cornwell, you’re getting a B for performance, maybe a B+. You’ve done a lot better than you think. All you have to do is keep your head and play by Moscow rules.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If you’d slept with her your career would be over, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So would hers. You saved her career. She’s going to remember that. And—she wasn’t trying to flip you, she wasn’t looking to collect a resource in an NGO.”

“Wait—how do you know that?”

“She has your technical skills. She’s a technical expert. Would we give you an assignment like that? She wasn’t playing you, Cornwell. She genuinely likes you. And now that she knows you saved her career, she respects you, too. The RFIS doesn’t give that stuff out lightly.”

“But she’s smart enough to know I was mostly saving *my* ca-

Anna Chapman is the most famous RFIS officer to have operated in the United States. This is why her name is synonymous with the Keystone Kops: she didn’t have enough good sense to stay away from the cameras.

In the novel *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling called espionage “the Great Game.” The name stuck. When capitalized, ‘Game’ always refers to the intelligence trade.

“We must be as stealthy as rats in the wainscoting of society. It was easier in the old days, of course, and society had more rats when the rules were looser, just as old wooden buildings have more rats than concrete buildings. But there are rats in the building now as well. Now that society is all plastic and stainless steel there are fewer gaps in the joints. It takes a very smart rat indeed to find these openings. Only a stainless steel rat can be at home in this environment.” — H. Harrison

The Moscow Rules are a set of unwritten rules-of-thumb the Community developed largely in Moscow while playing hounds-and-hares with the KGB. Your particular Moscow Rules are the ones given to you by your training officer; there is no definitive set. Since I’m your T.O., here are the rules you need to follow in a foreign country:

reer. . . ”

“I didn’t say you got much respect out of it. Just some. And on her side, she wasn’t playing you. Odds are good it was exactly what it seemed to be. She met someone nice who could match her geek point for geek point, and. . . ”

“You’re telling me she was sincere? This is a human rights conference! You know better than anyone else how badly the Russian government is violating them! The only reason she’d be sent here is—”

“You contract for a government that waterboards people, so you’re really not one to talk. And who said she’s here on assignment?”

I blinked several times and blasphemed again. “She’s here on vacation. She met a really nice guy who she was really attracted to, and. . . ”

“Yeah. The exact same thing as you. It’s scary how much of a mirror she is.”

I sighed. “So do I stay or do I go?”

He sighed. “You stay. You trust that she’s going to act like the professional she is. You stay out of her business, she stays out of yours. . . maybe this doesn’t blow up. Moscow rules, Cornwell.”

I spent the next week avoiding her.

## *Epilogue*

A week later I was sitting in a coffeeshop near the convention when a redheaded Russian walked in. She walked up to the counter, ordered a beer, and then came over to join me. She didn’t say a word to me. I didn’t say a word to her. She pulled out a book to read: Harry Harrison’s *The Stainless Steel Rat Wants You!*

I looked over at the book cover, looked up at her, made eye contact. She was smiling, but she didn’t say anything.

I picked up my own reading material: her Master’s thesis on American cyberwarfare defensive capabilities. Her smile grew a bit wider before she went back to her reading, and I went back to mine.

She stayed just long enough to drink her beer, then stood up and walked away. I watched her through the window as she walked across the street towards the subway entrance. She never looked back: I wasn’t expecting her to.

After all. Moscow rules.

I never saw her again.

1. Blend in.
2. Live your legend.
3. Listen to your hunches.
4. Thou shalt not assume.
5. Nobody can be completely trusted.
6. If you’re under surveillance, act like you don’t know it.
7. Bore ’em to death.
8. Be professional: stack the deck, but play fair.
9. Seize the initiative: act, don’t react.
10. Never walk into a room you don’t know how to walk out of.
11. Don’t attribute to enemy activity what can be explained by human frailty.
12. Keep your sense of humor. Someone who can’t laugh is never more than five seconds from losing their cool.