

ANDREW V. KUDIN

A HANDFUL OF SOIL



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Chapter 1

Tony genuinely believed that life was nothing but a performance staged exclusively for him. It was obvious. The sun rose in the east purely for Tony's pleasure. Grass grew obediently beneath his feet. Women walked down Manhattan's avenues only to attract his gaze. Even beer bottles seemed arranged neatly on supermarket shelves solely to satisfy his whims. He was absolutely convinced that America was the epicenter of the universe and that he himself occupied the very heart of America. Any criticism from abroad aimed at his country felt suspiciously personal, like a subtle insult directed specifically at him.

That morning, Tony's alarm clock ripped through his dreams without mercy. At the exact same moment, his phone started buzzing angrily, as if it had plotted together with the clock to ruin his peace. Tony forced open one eye, cursed quietly, and fumbled around blindly, searching for the intrusive gadget. His fingers brushed against the remote, knocking it onto the wooden floor with a harsh clatter.

"Where the hell did I put the damned phone?" Tony muttered, finally pushing himself up and rubbing his tired eyes.

Beside him, the blanket stirred gently, revealing the warm skin of a woman's shoulder. Tony paused, watching with growing curiosity as the figure beneath the covers moved with lazy grace. She slowly lifted herself, allowing the thin white sheet to slide sensually down her back. Tony felt a sudden tightness in his chest as he admired her smooth curves, golden skin glowing softly in the morning sun, and thick black hair cascading carelessly across her slender neck.

The woman stood up without any hesitation, indifferent to Tony's attentive gaze, and moved effortlessly toward the bathroom. Each step she took was deliberate and hypnotic, her bare feet making almost no sound on the polished floor. As she reached the doorway, she paused for a moment, stretching her

arms upward, arching her back in a way that ignited a surge of desire deep within him. Tony's breathing quickened. He'd always had a weakness for women like her—confident, graceful, mysterious—especially those with beautiful black hair.

But the relentless vibration of his phone drew him harshly back into reality. Irritation flared within him as he finally located it buried beneath yesterday's discarded shirt.

"What now?" he snapped into the receiver, barely restraining his frustration.

"Tony!" came Nancy's sharp, familiar voice, immediately erasing any trace of pleasant anticipation. Nancy was eight years older than Tony, his cousin, and mutual dislike had long become their family tradition. They spoke rarely, mostly under extreme circumstances, and each time was predictably unpleasant.

"Would it kill you to answer your damn phone?" she demanded angrily.

Tony yawned dramatically, holding the phone away from his ear. "Why are you yelling so early? How am I supposed to know it's you?"

"Early?" Nancy replied incredulously. "You mean you're still asleep?"

"What if I am?" Tony muttered irritably. He considered adding a few cutting remarks but restrained himself, knowing it was pointless. Arguing with Nancy was about as productive as shouting at passing clouds.

From the bathroom came the soft, seductive sound of water. Tony glanced toward the door, picturing Sofia—he vaguely remembered she had introduced herself with that name—under the warm streams. He briefly wondered whether she'd stay a while or quietly disappear as others before she had done, leaving behind only a faint, teasing scent and a few scattered memories.

"Honestly, Tony," Nancy said in her practiced tone of disdain, "I couldn't care less what you're doing—or who you're doing it with."

Tony clenched his jaw. He found it unbearable that Nancy's grating voice intruded upon this perfect morning moment, pulling him away from the enticing vision behind the bathroom door.

Nancy's voice lost its edge, now carrying weariness rather than anger. "You know, Tony, you were selfish as a kid, and clearly nothing's changed. Did you at least remember that today is Grandpa's funeral? Everyone's already at our house."

Tony froze momentarily, rubbing his forehead. Of course, now he remembered. Two days earlier, just before a critical business presentation, his mother had called him, her voice choked with tears. Tony had barely paid attention, promising hastily to call her back. Predictably, he never did.

His business presentation had turned into an enormous success, followed by champagne toasts, approving handshakes, and Sofia—or whatever her real name might have been. After that hurried call from his mother, Tony hadn't thought about his grandfather even once. He felt no grief now, only mild irritation at having to pretend sadness in front of relatives he barely recognized.

"Nancy," he finally replied, adopting a firm, confident tone, "just so you know, I haven't forgotten anything. Funeral at noon, church service afterward, and then that thing you do... What's it called again? A wake?"

"Whatever," Nancy snapped impatiently. "Just don't mess this up. Noon sharp—we're taking Grandpa's body from the funeral home to the cemetery. Try not to embarrass your mother again."

Nancy hung up abruptly without another word—as always.

Tony tossed the phone carelessly onto the crumpled pile of clothes, annoyed by Nancy's nagging and by the faint, unfamiliar sense of guilt creeping into his chest. His eyes lingered briefly on Sofia's pale dress, discarded carelessly next to his phone, before turning again toward the bathroom door, where steam now drifted lazily outward, inviting him closer.

He stood motionless for a few seconds, lost in the uncomfortable memory of the grandfather he'd barely known. Had it been two years, or maybe five, since he'd last seen him? God, how quickly time flew!

Shaking his head to banish the unwelcome thoughts, Tony decided that the only sensible thing left to do was to step into the shower. He'd join Sofia under the hot water, wash away any unpleasant residue of useless guilt, and reclaim this day as entirely his own.

Chapter 2

The funeral procession slowly passed through the heavy iron gates of the funeral home. Tony watched silently as the casket, completely covered by wreaths and bouquets, moved solemnly toward the waiting hearse. A long line of black cars followed behind, their headlights glowing softly in the gray autumn air.

As they drove toward the cemetery, Tony's thoughts circled anxiously around the strange power death held over life. It didn't matter how a person lived—rich or poor, famous or anonymous—death always had the final say. It transformed everything, painting life's familiar colors in darker, unknown shades. *Life is like a brightly lit stage*, Tony thought bitterly, *but death always waits in the shadows behind the curtain*.

When someone dies, Tony suddenly realizes that people always judge their life through the prism of death. First, they ask how a person died, and only afterward do they wonder how that person

lived. It seemed absurd, almost unfair, yet deeply human. Death reshaped every story, turning ordinary people into mysteries and nobodies into heroes. Tony glanced again at the long line of cars trailing the hearse, genuinely puzzled by the sheer number of mourners.

He had never thought much of his grandfather—just a quiet old man living a dull existence in his modest suburban home. Yet here were dozens of people, respectfully dressed in black suits and formal dresses, their faces solemn, some openly grieving. It was unexpected and unsettling.

“Did I miss something important?” Tony asked himself, feeling suddenly uneasy. *“Or is this just tradition—people gathering out of habit?”*

Only when they arrived at the cemetery did Tony fully grasp what he had overlooked. They weren’t burying his grandfather in some humble suburban graveyard but at Graceland Cemetery, in the heart of Chicago—a place reserved for the prominent and respected. Tony stood silently at the edge of the gathered mourners, feeling distinctly out of place.

His mother stood slightly ahead, shoulders trembling, her face pale and etched with grief. Tony knew he should stand beside her, comfort her somehow, but he couldn’t bring himself to move any closer. The shame was too strong, the guilt too real. He hadn’t even called her back when she’d needed him most. A sudden pang of remorse shot through him, sharp and heavy, as he watched her silent suffering.

The air grew colder, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of autumn—damp leaves, cold earth, and the metallic tang of rain. Tony shivered and tightened his coat, growing increasingly restless. Death hung over them like a heavy, oppressive fog, smothering them with its harsh truth. Low, heavy clouds pressed down upon the city as if Chicago itself mourned silently alongside them.

“How much longer can this possibly take?” Tony wondered impatiently, glancing around as the priest continued solemnly reading from the Bible.

Then, slowly, the coffin began its descent into the earth. People stepped forward one by one, tossing handfuls of soil into the grave. Each clump landed on the coffin with a dull, final sound, echoing sharply in Tony’s ears like muffled gunshots. The dark earth symbolized everything Tony had tried to avoid—finality, loss, regret. He stood frozen, unable to join them, unwilling to pretend grief for a man who was essentially a stranger despite their shared blood. The wind grew stronger, slicing through his coat, carrying the scent of wet earth and decay.

Without consciously deciding, Tony quietly stepped away from the crowd, unnoticed by anyone. He slipped past the mourners, past the line of cars, past rows of gravestones bearing carved names. By the time the others had returned to their cars, ready to drive to the church for the wake, Tony was already walking quickly in the opposite direction. He didn’t say goodbye; he didn’t even glance back at his mother or relatives.

He just kept walking, unwilling—to look back.

Chapter 3

The next morning, Tony's mother called and asked him to come over. Tony immediately felt awkward, remembering how abruptly he'd left the funeral without even saying goodbye. A wave of guilt washed over him; he hadn't considered his mother's feelings at all when he quietly slipped away from the cemetery. At that moment, he'd wanted only one thing—to escape the ceremony that depressed him and forget it as quickly as possible.

Despite his discomfort, Tony knew he couldn't refuse. After a brief hesitation, he got into his car and drove south.

Tony's mother lived several miles south of Chicago in a quiet neighborhood where life felt simpler and property taxes weren't as high. Her house was the third one on the left after the intersection.

It was the only home in the neighborhood surrounded by flowers. Tony paused in front of the porch, inhaling deeply. The fragrance was rich and familiar, bringing back memories he'd nearly forgotten. Everything here was unchanged: the wooden steps with their faded paint, the slightly crooked railing he'd once swung from as a child. He felt as if he'd stepped into a different time, into a world he'd long left behind.

His eyes wandered to the small garden overflowing with asters, blooming brightly despite the early September chill. Gardening had been his mother's quiet refuge, a solitary passion she had lovingly cultivated for decades. As a boy, he often watched her from the porch, noticing the joy in her eyes as she bent over the flowerbeds. The asters seemed magical to him then—vivid splashes of yellow, pink, purple, and blue, colors so intense they appeared to glow.

One particular afternoon came sharply back to him. He must have been five or six, angry over something trivial, when he'd torn off dozens of blossoms, scattering petals and leaves across the living room floor. His mother had discovered the damage almost immediately, and Tony could never forget the silent anguish on her face. She'd covered her eyes briefly as if shielding herself from physical pain, whispering only, "What have you done?"

She hadn't shouted, hadn't punished him—yet that quiet, wounded look haunted him for years. Tony wondered now if she felt the same quiet disappointment over him missing the wake.

His mother sat on the porch, wrapped in a knitted shawl. She looked small and fragile, seated in a worn black lawn chair he

recognized from his childhood. When she saw him, a gentle smile lit her tired face, though her eyes remained deeply sad.

“I’m so happy you came,” she said softly. “I always worry you’ll forget me altogether.”

Tony shifted uneasily, guilt rising in his chest. He hadn’t realized just how long it had been since his last visit.

“I wish you had joined us at the church,” she continued gently, looking away. Her voice carried no anger, only a quiet sorrow that stung Tony more sharply than any harsh words could. “Afterward, everyone came back here. We read your grandfather’s will.”

Tony tried to hide his boredom behind a yawn, but his mother noticed and frowned slightly.

“Tony, I know this doesn’t interest you,” she said, a note of gentle reproach in her voice, “but your grandfather mentioned you specifically.”

“If you mean that ancient Buick or the decrepit shack you call a ranch—I don’t want them,” Tony snapped, immediately regretting his harshness.

She shook her head, patiently ignoring his tone. “The house didn’t go to you. But the rest of his estate did. Everyone was shocked when the lawyer read that part of the will.”

Tony raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Estate? Grandpa had something besides debts?”

His mother gave him a quiet, almost apologetic look. “He left you over two million dollars, Tony. Two million eighty thousand, to be exact, plus accumulated interest.”

Tony felt his heart skip a beat, disbelief flooding through him. He stood abruptly, nearly stumbling backward.

“Two million dollars?” he repeated, incredulous. “Where did he get that kind of money? He wasn’t exactly a gangster. Grandpa was just an ordinary old man who barely stepped out of his—” He stopped abruptly, suddenly aware of the harshness of his words. “...His house,” he finished awkwardly.

His mother sighed quietly, her gaze distant. “He was a complicated man, Tony. Someday, you might understand him better—when it’s your turn to face him again. For now, just know the money is yours. What you do with it isn’t my business, but I think it would be fair if you shared some with Nancy.”

Tony scoffed softly. “Why should I? Nancy never did anything for me.”

His mother clasped her hands tightly in her lap, the lines in her face deepening. “Tony, Nancy is the only relative who still speaks to you, even if you rarely answer her. She has a husband and two kids to raise, their college tuition looming ahead. They love you, even if you hardly know them.”

A pang of guilt shot through Tony again, sharper than before. He hadn’t seen Nancy’s family in years. Memories of missed birthdays, unanswered invitations, and ignored phone calls suddenly crowded his mind. He sat back down heavily, dropping onto the porch next to his mother and resting his head lightly on her shoulder, something he hadn’t done since childhood.

“Two million dollars...” he murmured, more to himself than to her. “It’s absurd.”

She placed her hand gently over his. “Your grandfather was deeply private. Even I barely understood him.”

The silence grew heavy between them. Tony desperately wanted to ask her more—about his grandfather, about her, about everything he had ignored for so long—but the questions stayed painfully trapped in his throat.

Sitting there beside his mother, Tony felt a deep emptiness inside him, an uncomfortable awareness that something crucial had passed him by unnoticed. His entire life had been a race without purpose. Expensive clothes, fast cars, luxurious watches—things he collected mindlessly, without ever pausing to question why he needed them. Now, facing his mother’s quiet grief and his grandfather’s strange generosity, his carefully built confidence wavered, leaving him feeling suddenly lost and exposed.

Chapter 4

Tony and his mother stepped into the house together from the front porch. Inside, just like outside, nothing had changed. Tony slowly glanced around the familiar living room, feeling that any careless movement might shatter the fragile illusion of his childhood.

His mother gently leaned toward him and kissed him softly on the cheek.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered.

Tony tensed involuntarily but quickly forced a smile. “I missed you too,” he replied.

The words felt empty, rehearsed, and awkward. He remembered clearly that last year, he hadn’t even bothered to call her on her birthday.

A heaviness settled in Tony’s chest, and he suddenly found it difficult to breathe. Feeling suffocated, he stood up abruptly and walked toward the window, avoiding his mother’s calm, searching eyes. He imagined silent reproach in her gaze, though she said nothing to accuse him. His throat tightened with frustration, guilt, and confusion. His eyes drifted to his grandfather’s photograph and then to the paintings depicting scenes of Ukraine—a distant and foreign country he’d never

paid attention to before. Unable to contain his emotions, Tony turned abruptly, his voice sharper than intended.

“Mom, why didn't you ever talk about our family's past? About Ukraine, for example? Why didn't you ever tell me that's where we came from? Does it even matter?”

His mother took a deep breath, her shoulders slumping under the invisible weight of unspoken memories.

“It just happened that way,” she finally answered. “Maybe because the past was too painful. I've never been to Ukraine; we were all born here in America. Our lives have always been here. When you work all the time—from morning till night—you don't have room for memories.”

She paused, looking at Tony with tired eyes. “You're a college graduate; you have a steady job in aviation. When I was young, I couldn't even dream about college. Life was different then. Even though your grandfather made sure we had enough food, we never really forgot what poverty felt like.”

Tony frowned, struggling with something he couldn't clearly identify. “What about Grandma?” he asked quietly.

“She died when I was three,” his mother answered softly. “Your grandfather always blamed himself because he couldn't provide me with a proper education. He promised himself that his grandson would attend the best schools. He was proud when you got in, but he was disappointed you never truly appreciated it.”

“I didn't know,” Tony whispered helplessly, his voice trembling slightly.

“It's not your fault,” she replied softly. “Like so many other immigrant families, we spent so much time working for our children's future that we forgot to spend time with them.” She looked away briefly, tears quietly filling her eyes. “That was our mistake, Tony.”

Tony shook his head stubbornly. “But I'm not an immigrant. I'm not Ukrainian. I'm completely American. You were born here too—we're Americans, Mom.”

His mother smiled sadly. “I used to think exactly the same way. But America was built by immigrants. Some came long ago, others just yesterday. Whether you accept it or not, Ukrainian blood runs through your veins.”

A tense silence filled the room. The candle beside his grandfather's photograph hissed softly, casting flickering shadows on the wall. Tony stared at the old photograph and finally broke the silence.

“Mom, why did Grandpa leave Ukraine?”

She took another deep breath, carefully choosing her words. “Life was unbearable then. Grandpa was the oldest child. His father first went to Argentina to earn money. When he finally sent money home, there wasn't enough for everyone's tickets. Your great-grandmother had to make a terrible choice. One of the children had to be left behind. Grandpa stayed in Ukraine because he was the oldest. He was about eleven at the time. After two years, the family finally saved enough money to send for him, and Grandpa joined them in Argentina.”

“How did he survive those two years alone?” Tony asked, amazed.

“Grandpa never shared details. He only mentioned once that monks from the Kiev-Pechersk Monastery took care of him. After that, he became deeply religious. He often said, ‘You can't escape your fate.’ When life was difficult, he always repeated, ‘Never mourn what you lose. Life is about losing and gaining, and what truly belongs to you can never be lost.’”

She paused, wiping away a tear. Tony felt an unfamiliar ache in his chest.

“Later, the family moved from Argentina to the United States. I was born in New York, and then we moved here. We avoided talking about Ukraine—there was too much pain, too many tears. But now your grandfather made it clear in his will that he wanted you to go there. Honestly, I'm glad he did.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Why?”

“It means he cared about you. That he believed in you.”

Tony stood silently, troubled, staring again at his grandfather's photograph.

“Mom, who else might know about the two years Grandpa spent alone?”

“No one,” she replied sadly. “Everyone who might have known is already gone. He left something behind in Ukraine, something he searched for his entire life, something that haunted him until his last breath. Maybe you'll find the answer there, at the monastery.”

A chill ran through Tony. “Mom, what are you talking about?”

She flinched slightly and looked away. “I'm afraid, Tony. It sounds foolish, perhaps—but I have a bad feeling. It's almost as if you won't be going to Ukraine. Instead, it will be your grandfather returning, using your body.”

Tony stared at her, confused. Pushing away his unease, he forced himself to speak rationally.

“What do two million dollars have to do with Ukraine? Is the money buried there or something? What exactly am I supposed to find?”

His mother laughed softly. “No, the money isn't buried anywhere. It's in Grandpa's bank account. The lawyer will explain everything. As for what you'll find in Ukraine, I don't know. Maybe you'll understand when you get there.”

She quietly left the room and returned, holding a cardboard box.

“This is everything I have left from Grandpa—photos, letters, bits and pieces of his life. Maybe this will help you.” She hesitated. “Did you ever wonder why we named you Tony?”

“No,” Tony admitted. “I assumed it was because we lived among Italians.”

“No,” she smiled gently. “Your grandfather insisted on it. Tony comes from Antonius, a Latin name meaning ‘one who enters into battle.’ Grandpa used to say that Kiev was the heart of Ukraine, and that the Kiev-Pechersk Monastery, founded by Saint Anthony, was the heart of Kiev. He wanted you to carry that strength.” She paused, hopeful. “Will you stay for dinner?”

Tony shook his head softly. “Not tonight, Mom. Maybe next time.”

They stepped outside together—a frail, aging woman and a strong young man holding a box filled with memories.

“Tony,” she whispered, almost inaudibly, touching his sleeve. “Think carefully before you decide. I’m scared. No one knows what’s waiting for you there.”

Tony smiled reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk to the lawyer first; maybe I won’t have to go anywhere. Besides, work won’t wait.”

When his car disappeared around the corner, she stood alone on the empty street, finally letting the tears flow freely.

“You think you’re the one making the decision about going,” she whispered into the darkness. “But you’re wrong. It’s already been decided for you. You can’t hide from what’s waiting.”

Chapter 5

On his way home from his mother's house, Tony stopped by a bookstore and bought a world map. He wasn't entirely sure why since he could easily find everything he needed online. Still, Tony wanted a physical map—something he could hold in his hands, unfold, and touch—not just an image on a cellphone screen. It was a strange, inexplicable impulse.

Back at his apartment, Tony carefully unfolded the map and spread it across the coffee table next to the cardboard box his mother had given him.

He paused, uncertain of what to do next. The shrill ringing of his phone jolted him from his thoughts.

“Hello? Sophia? Hi, sweetie. Listen, I'm a bit busy today,” Tony said, immediately regretting turning her down. “I'll call you tomorrow, okay?”

After hanging up, Tony felt a pang of regret. Sophia's long, beautiful black hair and smooth, warm skin always made him feel better. Perhaps her company could have calmed the strange unease that was now settling over him.

His eyes drifted back to the cardboard box. On impulse, he tore off the tape, opened the lid, and emptied the contents onto the table.

Sitting down, Tony absently sorted through the old, yellowed photographs of strangers who'd probably been gone for decades, faded postcards depicting pre-revolutionary Kiev, a worn bus schedule, and a broken button.

Just as his mother had said, these were fragments of a past life—useless to others, yet priceless to the one who'd kept them, filled with stories Tony would never fully know.

His intuition told him that somewhere in this clutter lay the key to understanding what his grandfather had wanted to tell him.

There were no letters or clear records left behind; his death from a heart attack had taken everyone by surprise.

Beneath the photos lay an old map Tony hadn't noticed at first—a small, neatly folded sheet of sun-bleached paper. He opened it eagerly, hoping it held some clue, but was disappointed. It was merely an ordinary tourist map of the Kiev-Pechersk Monastery from the early twentieth century. He examined it carefully, turning it over several times, but found nothing unusual—no marks, notes, or hints.

As Tony sorted through the contents of the box, a thunderstorm rolled in. Distant peals of thunder rumbled through the house. For a moment, he thought he heard footsteps, but it was just the pounding of heavy rain on the roof. A shadow moved swiftly across the room, and suddenly, a strong gust of wind hurled a tree branch against the kitchen window. Glass shattered loudly, followed by the faint clink of shards hitting the floor.

Tony jumped to his feet and hurried into the kitchen. The small window was completely broken, shards of glass glittering across the floor. Carefully picking them up, he tossed them into the trash and returned to the living room. As he wiped his hands on a towel, Tony noticed a small cut on his finger. Droplets of blood had fallen directly onto the world map—right onto Ukraine.

Chapter 6

Grandpa's lawyer turned out to be an exceptionally smug gentleman with high-waisted pants and a triple chin. Tony had never realized lawyers could be so irritating.

The lawyer cheerfully paced around his desk, occasionally handing Tony documents to sign. Every now and then, he would pause to mention how wonderful it was to have such a charming, handsome young man among his clients and how close he'd

been with Tony's late grandfather. Then he'd promptly remind Tony how fortunate he was to have such a remarkable lawyer as himself.

If it weren't for the money, Tony would've shown the lawyer and his stack of endless papers straight to the door. Instead, he patiently signed every sheet and nodded at all the appropriate moments.

The paperwork seemed endless. When the lawyer finally handed him the last document, Tony signed it with visible relief. The lawyer gave him a self-satisfied smile and neatly placed the papers into a folder. Tony felt as if he had just awakened from a long, exhausting dream.

"Congratulations!" The lawyer shook Tony's hand eagerly. "It was such a pleasure to meet you. I never doubted your grandfather would have a grandson worthy of handling his affairs. You remind me so much of him, God rest his soul."

"Yeah, nice meeting you too," Tony replied skeptically. "Can I have my money now?"

The lawyer's smile widened. "No doubt about it—the money is yours! Well... after you put a handful of earth on your grandfather's grave."

"For that kind of money, I'd put a whole bucket of earth on his grave," Tony remarked sarcastically. Yet the thought of anything standing between him and three million dollars was unsettling, even if it was just a handful of earth. Suddenly, he remembered that at the funeral, unlike the rest of his family, he hadn't thrown any earth onto his grandfather's coffin.

The lawyer stopped twirling his pen and gave Tony a strange look. "My job as your grandfather's lawyer is simply to inform you of what's written in the will. You must bring back a handful of earth from your ancestral homeland. Only then can you claim your inheritance."

“So, let me get this straight,” Tony said. “I have to go to Ukraine, bring back a handful of dirt, put it on my grandfather’s grave, and only then can I have the money?”

“That’s exactly right.”

Tony shifted uneasily, suddenly feeling embarrassed. “Okay, but how will you even know if I actually brought the earth from Ukraine—or from anywhere else, for that matter?”

“I don’t need to know exactly where it came from. Honestly, I don’t particularly care whether you really bring back any earth at all. All I require is a copy of your passport with a Ukrainian border stamp. How long you stay there doesn’t matter. Just the stamp—nothing more.”

Tony paused thoughtfully. “Is there any way I could claim the inheritance without traveling halfway across the world?”

The lawyer firmly shook his head. “I’m afraid not. You should also know that if you fail to bring back the earth within one year, the entire sum automatically goes to charity. I have the documents here if you’d like to look them over.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Tony sighed, realizing the conversation had ended.

The lawyer rose from his seat, politely escorting Tony to the door.

“Think of it this way,” he added cheerfully, patting Tony on the shoulder. “Take a short vacation. Soak up the atmosphere and relax a little. Personally, I’d love to travel somewhere myself—it’s been far too long since I’ve had a proper break.”

Tony nodded automatically in response, already drifting into his own thoughts.

END OF EXCERPT

This preview contains pages 1–20 of the complete volume.

The complete edition comprises 184 pages.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Andrew V. Kudin is a Ukrainian-born American writer, essayist, and scholar, widely recognized for his insightful explorations into history, law, and the complexities of the human condition. Holding doctoral degrees in Philosophy and Religious Studies (1995) and Law (2020), Dr. Kudin has dedicated his life to uncovering historical truths, analyzing moral dilemmas, and advocating for

justice.

Dr. Kudin is the author of numerous articles and novels, including *How to Survive in Prison*, *A Game of Blind*, *The Black Suit*, and *Verdict*, which have earned him wide recognition. His works, deeply grounded in historical scholarship and psychological analysis, illuminate the intricate nature of human relationships, power dynamics, and faith.

In recognition of his contributions to historical research and literature, as well as his active involvement in ethical and spiritual discourse, Dr. Kudin was honored by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with the prestigious Order of Saint Prince Vladimir, 3rd degree. This award underscores the profound impact of his work in preserving historical memory and exploring society's moral foundations.

Through his writing, Dr. Kudin continues to challenge conventional narratives, illuminating the past with clarity and depth, and inspiring readers to seek truth and justice in an ever-changing world.