

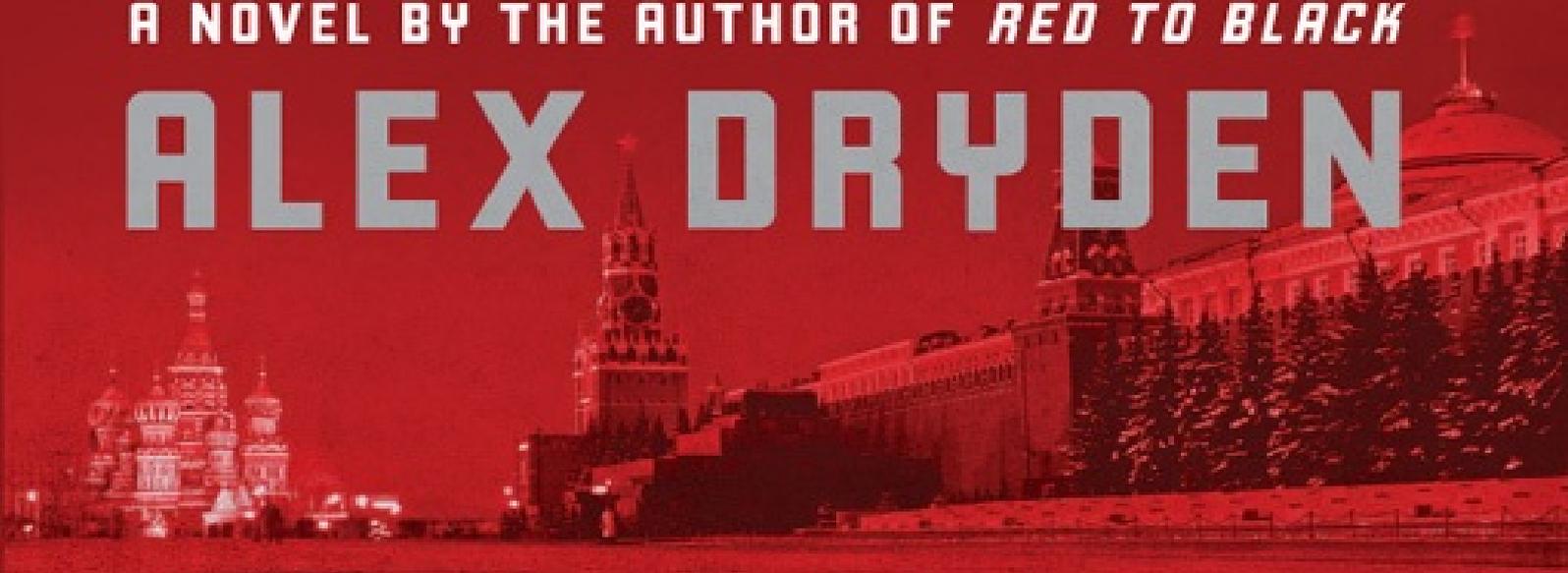
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—*New York Times* bestselling author Phillip Margolin

# MOSCOW STING



A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF *RED TO BLACK*

# ALEX DRYDEN





# MOSCOW STING

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A NOVEL

ALEX DRYDEN





## Dedication

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*To Ginny*

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JANUARY 2008

ADRIAN CAREW GLARED THROUGH the rain-streaked window of a British intelligence pool Vauxhall Carlton as if the application of his undoubtedly impressive willpower could unsnarl the traffic. Cars were bumper to bumper going west out of London, and the weather was only making things worse.

His driver, Ray, with fifteen years of service and an almost Zen calm by comparison with his boss, half turned towards the rear seat.

“We’ll be through this in a minute or two, sir.” His words barely made their way through the noise of the rain drumming on the roof of the car.

With his usual expression of muscular irritation in place—teeth clamped, jaw muscles twitching—Adrian coldly addressed his reply to the side window.

“Never mind.”

At sixty-three years old, the former SAS hero, military intelligence wizard, and later chief of MI6 at Moscow Station, had earlier in the day gleaned from one of his eyes and ears at Joint Intelligence that he had been elevated to the informal short list for the top position at MI6; Spymaster in Chief, the media called it.

He should be out celebrating, he thought, not trotting off abroad like some messenger boy—and not to bloody Finland, of all places. But the Russians had insisted that they would see him, and him alone.

Dimly now through the fogged-up window, Adrian eyed the scene and piled on his choleric distaste for the mass of humanity that was getting in his way. As the car headed westwards, he noted the decline of London’s grandeur into ever greater human shabbiness with every mile they left the centre behind them. The city’s clean cut-stone heart at Whitehall degenerated, first to the redbrick postwar semis of Shepherd’s Bush and then on past the shades-of-grey plastic shop fronts at London’s ragged edges, whose bleakness and grime seemed to leach into the countryside.

Adrian came this way at weekends, but only after dark on a Friday night, when he was going down to the country house in Hampshire where his wife, Penny, now spent most of her time. During the week he remained in London, with its gentleman’s clubs for male ritual and his discreet mistress Hazel from the Far Eastern Desk, for female diversion.

He wiped the window with the back of his hand. The sky was thick with angry black clouds. It would be a bumpy flight, he thought without concern, and a noisy one. The vintage RAF transport plane that had been press-ganged into giving him a last-minute lift on a routine flight to Helsinki was hardly five star.

Adrian listened to the swish of the steady, incessant rain turning to dirty brown spray under the car’s wheels. It was a downpour; the heavens were throwing it at the tarmac so hard the rain was bouncing up again. The wipers cleared gushing waterfalls of rain from the windscreen every few seconds. The violent weather had broken up what was otherwise a typically monotonous January afternoon.

“We’re going to be a few minutes late, I’m afraid, sir,” Ray informed him.

“They’ll wait,” Adrian snapped from the back seat.

The whole affair, this journey to Brize Norton’s military airport included, was suddenly reminding him of the days of the Cold War, and the thought briefly buoyed his spirits.

him on the days of the Cold War, and the thought briefly buoyed his spirits.

Short in stature, with a flop of slightly greasy brown hair over his forehead, Adrian possessed stocky, muscular frame maintained through regular games of squash. His tried and trusted mod operandi, from his days in the jungles of Borneo to the present-day jungles of Whitehall, was to storm through the world sucking the air from everyone in his way. He was the embodiment of preemptive attack, one colleague had observed. Others offered their amateur psychological diagnosis that Adrian behaved as if the planet had done him some grievous disservice.

His physical deportment and mental attitude was one of pugnacious defensiveness. Under the good life flab that now showed signs of mushrooming around his waist, his wired-up muscles were ready to spring, his fists regularly clenched, and the dark eyes in his livid red face rarely rested.

Adrian was never as meticulous about anything as he was in matters of revenge, and that was the purpose of his trip this evening.

It was revenge against a broken home that had driven him to excel in the military, some said, and revenge against his small stature that drove him to graduate from SAS headquarters at Hereford in the 1960s ahead of all his contemporaries. Others pointed to a sort of muddled revenge against the Establishment while all the time wanting to be deep inside it. This, they said, was what had propelled him upwards in MI6, now almost to the top. But it was a particular revenge that had brought him out of his lair today.

It had taken Adrian fourteen months just to get to this point, but at last here he was, at first base. He was now in possession of an identity; the identity of an assassin, with a name, address, phone number, and probably an inside length measurement, given the heightened efforts of the office researchers on this particular assignment.

For this assassin, a Russian hood by the name of Grigory Bykov, had terminated the life of one of the Secret Intelligence Service's own officers; and one of a select few Adrian liked to call his "best boys."

Diligent researchers on the third floor had gladly embraced overtime without pay. Finn had been a family, popular too—even loved. Interdepartmental cooperation had been unusually fluid, and the focused urgency of revenge for Finn's murder had driven everyone on, Adrian included, until the task was done.

Drip-fed leads from sources as diverse as a disaffected KGB officer in Azerbaijan, to the owner of a steam bath and brothel in the Siberian city of Irkutsk, had led conclusively to Grigory Bykov.

Finally the researchers had drawn up Bykov's biography with meticulous care. In short, Bykov was a petty criminal and south Moscow mafioso, coached to KGB standards and then inducted into the Russian foreign intelligence service east of Moscow, known as the Forest. There they had primed him for this single murder. After all this expert training, Grigory Bykov had finally tracked down Finn in Paris, then killed him with a deadly nerve agent—type unknown—that he'd smeared on the steering wheel of Finn's rental car.

That was the Russian side of things.

The British side was more complex. Finn had once been one of Adrian's "best boys"—that was the truth of it. Adrian had recruited Finn personally at Cambridge, back in 1985, back in Gorbachev's time. And no matter that Finn had turned his back on the Secret Intelligence Service in later years, Finn was still Adrian's property, in death as well as in life. Nobody—Vladimir Putin included—was going to get away with ordering the death of one of Adrian's best boys.

In his grey silk suit and expensive Oxford blue cashmere overcoat, both of which were courtesy Penny's private fortune rather than his SIS pay, Adrian might look like a toothless catwalk panther, but underneath it all the animal core was still the same one that had driven him through Far East

but underneath it all the animal core was still the same one that had driven him through far Eastern jungles forty years before, where he'd shot or cut the throats of Commie insurgents, and saved the world from Putin's KGB predecessors.

Adrian began to stoke his own righteous anger now, in preparation for the meeting with Sergei Limov, Putin's go-between for this evening. More than three days it had taken Finn to die, thanks to Bykov, in the trunk of a car somewhere in Germany, it was said, though Finn's body had been delivered anonymously to the British embassy in Berlin.

There'd been a note attached to Finn's body, laid out respectfully on the back seat of a Cherokee Jeep, which was abandoned outside the embassy. The note was addressed to Adrian personally. "You betrayed him in life," it said. "Honour him in death."

Who would deliver a body, let alone one as hot as that one? And who was it, with Finn's corpse on their hands, who dared express such anger—and such accuracy—at the steps of the British embassy? The note pointed him towards two people.

Adrian's mind turned once again to Finn's woman, Colonel Anna Resnikov. Was it she, Anna, formerly the youngest female colonel in the KGB, who had first betrayed her country, then run away with Finn and married him? Had she in cold fury delivered the dead body of her lover and, later, his husband? Trained to the highest degree you could reach in Russia's foreign intelligence service, the SVR, she was more than capable of it—she possessed all the cunning and subterfuge needed to pull off a feat like that.

Or, more interestingly perhaps, Adrian wondered, was it Mikhail who had slyly delivered Finn's body?

Over the previous Friday afternoon, before he went down to Penny's country house for the weekend, for another boring Saturday-night dinner party with her friends, Adrian had read through Mikhail's file once again, even though he knew it almost by heart.

Code name Mikhail had approached Finn in February 1995 in Moscow, where Finn was using the cover of the British second secretary for trade and investment at the embassy. Right from the start Mikhail would talk only to Finn. That was the deal. From day one, code name Mikhail was adamant that he would communicate with—and be known to—nobody else, and so Finn's strategic importance had rocketed.

For the next five years, Mikhail had fed the highest quality intelligence to the British, via Finn. It was so good that it had kept the British right up there, sitting at the high table with the Americans, for a while.

And then, in 2000, Vladimir Putin ascended to power in a well-planned KGB coup. Mikhail was so close to Putin that—as Finn put it—"he practically shits in Putin's bathroom." Mikhail was one of the tiny group of so-called Patriots deep within Putin's innermost circle. The quality, the importance, of his information was greater than ever.

But at that moment, politics back home intervened. The prime minister insisted that Vladimir Putin was a man he could do business with. The American president George W. Bush added the honorarium that he had "looked into Putin's soul" and liked what he saw.

Suddenly Mikhail's warnings about Putin's Russia were off-message. The politicians didn't want to hear what he had to say. Under orders from Downing Street, the SIS was told that Mikhail must be dropped—exposed as a fraud, was the method the politicians suggested. And so Adrian—promotion and a knighthood at the front of his mind—followed orders. Mikhail was excised.

But Finn hadn't followed orders. He left the SIS, rather than see his priceless source trashed for reasons of political expediency. And Anna defected from Russia, just for him, not for some cause, and they married. A love story, Adrian supposed, if such a thing existed.

they married. A love story, Adrian supposed, if such a thing existed.

For the next six years, the two of them and a team Finn put together, financed from Russian exile money, independently pursued Mikhail's leads, which the British refused to touch. And Mikhail's material was as good as it had ever been. It was so hot, in fact, that Finn had been murdered for it.

The British government's craving to be on friendly terms with Vladimir Putin had cost Britain and the West five years of high-level intelligence. But it had cost Finn his life.

Now, there was a new twist. The wheel had turned full circle. At the dawn of 2008 politics intervened for a second time, and the attitude to Putin's regime had gone into reverse. It turned out you couldn't do business with Putin, after all, and there was apparently nothing very nice to be seen in his soul, if indeed he had one. Orders went out that Mikhail was to be rehabilitated. "Find Mikhail" was the cry.

But with Finn dead, and former colonel Anna Resnikov disappeared, nobody knew how to contact Mikhail.

One of the many reasons for the new policy towards Russia was Finn's assassination and its aftermath. Grigory Bykov's reward for the murder of a British intelligence officer was the title of Hero of the Russian Federation—Russia's highest award—and a seat in Russia's parliament, the Duma. These days, the Russians made their killers MPs.

Adrian looked at the road ahead and broke away from his thoughts for a moment.

"Foot down, Ray," he demanded. They were on the motorway, and the traffic had stretched itself apart.

"There's a weather speed limit, sir," Ray objected.

"Never mind the bloody speed limit."

Adrian settled back in his seat. Something else—now it was the damn speed limit—was getting in his way.

Adrian was not planning to be as generous to Grigory Bykov as the Kremlin had been. He hadn't spent fourteen months finding Bykov, in order to have a British diplomatic rap over the knuckles administered to the Russian ambassador.

At a claret-fuelled encounter with the Perrier-drinking Teddy Parkinson, the Joint Intelligence chief, at the Special Forces Club in Knightsbridge, Adrian had demanded Bykov's life. "An eye for an eye . . . just as it should be, always has been, and always shall be, Teddy."

To return murder for murder was, after all, the standard procedure. An intelligence officer had been the victim, and MI6, Adrian's Secret Intelligence Service, was not to be viewed as a patsy. That would be tantamount to inviting future acts of murder against SIS officers, not to mention a savage blow to the morale of Finn's colleagues.

Nevertheless Adrian had known that he would need to lobby Teddy Parkinson hard and cleverly to obtain this natural justice. A British government that could blithely march its armies to slaughter in Iraq—against an abstract enemy and on the basis of false information, to boot—was surprising squeamish when it came to dealing death to an actual person; a person with a name and an identity. No matter that the evidence against Bykov was overwhelmingly clear. Without a doubt, the state-sponsored, state-trained, and state-armed Russian hood had murdered Finn, a British intelligence officer.

And so Adrian had entertained Teddy on his own ground at the Special Forces Club, where the beneficial results of force were everywhere in evidence; in the photographs of heroes on its walls, in the letters written in the blood of Gestapo torture victims who had died rather than give up British secrets. The club was a place where bureaucrats like Teddy were viewed with, at best, suspicion.

Adrian, flustered of face and with a suspicious tendency to match, wanted to show his superior, who

Adrian, ironed of face and with a pugnacious tenacity to match, wanted to show his superior will. Intelligence work at the sharp end was really about. Unlike himself, Teddy had never been in the armed forces, and dealing with Grigory Bykov was going to be brute work. In his own take-no-prisoners diplomatic style, Adrian had wanted to remind Teddy of both of these facts.

“But he’s a Russian MP, Adrian,” Teddy had pointed out with exasperation, when Adrian, displeased at not getting his demands immediately met, was rounding off lunch with a serviceable cognac. “It makes things complicated,” Parkinson reasoned.

“That’s why they made him an MP, isn’t it? So we would back off,” Adrian insisted, leaning right in across the table so that Parkinson almost flinched. “Are we going to let rogue states go around assassinating our officers just because the KGB turns its murderers into MPs?”

“Russia is not a rogue state, Adrian,” Parkinson said mildly.

“It just smells like one, looks like one, and acts like one,” Adrian said. “What if it had been Syria? Intelligence who had murdered Finn? Would we be pussyfooting off to the Middle East requesting a fair trial?”

Parkinson had dutifully delivered to Adrian the message from the prime minister’s office. First, before extreme measures were even contemplated, they were to demand Bykov’s extradition at an intelligence level, away from the media. That way the Russians had the opportunity to ditch Bykov without losing face.

But Adrian was well aware that these new Russians were never going to give Bykov up. Putin and Russia had made it clear a dozen times in the past eight years that they would flaunt their old-style power and arrogance with complete immunity.

And so, sitting in the car now, he knew this was first base only; a winter evening flight to Helsinki, a meeting with one of Putin’s stooges, followed by the Russians’ inevitable rejection of the prime minister’s ponderous and deliberately indecisive plan.

Make a reasonable request for the hood Grigory Bykov’s extradition? There was nobody reasonable left in power in Russia.

Outside the window of the car, the rain was backing off a little. The day was heading into night without ever having put in a real appearance. The SIS car turned off the main road and ran the few miles to the airport along country lanes clogged with mud and excrement left by a herd of cows being moved to a new field.

High winds battered and shoved the twin-engine converted reconnaissance plane across the North Sea as the temperature outside plummeted. Adrian rubbed his hands, more from nostalgia for the old days than from the cold. It was good to feel he was on a mission, even a mission he had little respect for, rather than sitting behind a desk. As they descended onto Helsinki’s military airfield, the snow was driving down hard, and he spotted the lights of the snowploughs at the end of the runway. An embassy car met him, and he sped away without formalities.

The meeting was to take place in a rooftop conference room at the Heikinen Hotel. The high windows in the long room framed a fine view of Helsinki’s marketplace and the twinkling lights of the waterfront beyond, through the driving snow. Distant sounds of splashing and shouts from a hot tub permeated the otherwise silent venue. A party of loud, naked Finns were disporting themselves, the rolling in the rooftop snow, exiting to a sauna, and finally coming back for more—all lubricated with several bottles of vodka.

The Russian, Sergei Limov, had refused to come to the British embassy, and Adrian had rejected the Russian offer of “hospitality,” for obvious reasons. The Heikinen conference room was hastily swept for bugs by both sides.

Now Adrian sat opposite the huge figure of Sergei Limov. The heavy-lipped, freem-

Now Adrian sat opposite the huge figure of Sergei Limov. The heavy-tipped, brown-haired, multibillionaire owner of oil transportation and shipping companies was a trusted servant of Vladimir Putin from the old days, and KGB to the core. In the Soviet 1980s, Adrian recalled, Limov had been the chief Soviet trade representative in western Europe. But he had morphed since those days as Russia's atrophied economic policies to become one of the world's richest men, due partly to his own cunning, but mainly to his KGB and Mafia sponsors.

There were two bottles of Finnish mineral water and a bottle of Finnish vodka, neither of which they had touched so far, on the table.

Briefly, Adrian presented the case against Bykov and thrust a file of backup documents across the table, which Limov ignored and looked as if he planned to continue ignoring. Now Adrian waited for the ritual slap in the face, but his anger was directed more at Teddy Parkinson than at the Russian. The request itself, his own presence, and the cap-in-hand nature of British policy in general toward the Russians seemed designed to humiliate him.

"What have you got for us in return for Bykov?" Limov said at last, leaning back in the seat that was too small for him, and fiddling with the diamond-encrusted gold Rolex watch on his right wrist as if he had more important things to do. Adrian noted all this with growing fury.

So they wanted a trade. What did Limov—or Putin—want? Adrian wondered. Did they expect the Russian assets of British Petroleum to be handed over to the Kremlin on a plate? The Houses of bloody Parliament, perhaps?

"It's not a deal, Sergei," Adrian replied smoothly. "It's a matter of international law. The one you're signed up to. A Russian citizen has murdered a British citizen."

"Ah, justice," Limov said, as if it were something stuck to the sole of his shoe.

"Call it what you like," Adrian said generously. "As I say, it's a matter of international law. Either Russia obeys what it's signed up for, or it doesn't."

He could see Limov blanch at the word *obey*, just as he'd intended.

Limov leaned across the table and picked up the bottle of vodka and two glasses with one huge hand. He poured Adrian a glass and then one for himself.

But Adrian withdrew a silver flask from the inside pocket of his silk suit and poured himself a nip of Scotch into the silver cup that served as a lid. He raised it towards Limov.

"You can't be too careful these days," he said, and drank it.

"What are we drinking to?" Limov said, as Adrian helped himself to another shot.

"Why don't you choose, Sergei?" he said.

"To justice," Limov replied, and roared with laughter. He drank the vodka in one gulp, placed the glass on the table as if making a winning chess move, and leaned in.

"What we want is Resnikov," he said. "That's the deal."

So. That was the quid pro quo, Adrian thought. They wanted Finn's woman, Colonel Anna, the beautiful but vanished KGB defector who had given the Russians, the British, and all the rest of the world the slip.

"As far as I know," Adrian said with icy calmness, "she hasn't murdered anyone."

"Worse. A lot worse," Limov replied.

"So this is a refusal to give us Bykov to face a trial," Adrian stated, and he realised that this was what he'd hoped for all along. He wanted Bykov dead, on his orders, not in court.

"We want her," Limov replied simply, without being drawn into Adrian's refusal scenario. "The woman you can have your justice."

"I'll convey the Kremlin's thoughts to London, in that case."

"When we have the woman, we can give you Bykov," the Russian said. "With pleasure," he added.

when we have the woman, we can give you Bykov," the Russian said. "With pleasure," he added.

In the car that drove him through the now softly falling snow back to the embassy where he was staying overnight, Adrian thought of two things. The first was that the Kremlin would happily give up a Hero of Russia in return for what they wanted. Their cynicism was boundless. It outstripped even his own.

But the second, unexpected piece of information was that the Russians didn't have her. Colonel Anna was still free; she was still out there somewhere, an asset to be won by whoever got there first. And with her would surely come the main prize itself, the source he had been instructed to reinstate: code name Mikhail.



# Part One

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AUGUST 2008

LOGAN HALLORAN IDLED ALONG the narrow pavement in the Marais district of Paris, glancing in the shop windows. Stopping in a shaded doorway, he noticed in the reflection that he had shaved. He didn't shave regularly. He did nothing, in fact, with regularity. He was, it occurred to him, a "irregular" in every way and had always been, even when he'd had what people called a proper job.

At thirty-six years old, he'd been described as having a face with a "lived-in quality," a little more than his age justified. But his reflection in the windows ironed out these details, showing an athletic rangy figure, encased loosely in an old off-white linen suit. The reflection didn't show his rich tan, his intense deep blue eyes, or the faded scar on his forehead. Neither did it show his natural expression of amused interest in the world around him.

Logan checked his watch. He was early.

He looked into the shop with a kind of admiration that never decreased, no matter how many times he visited Paris. The French knew about commerce; small, specialised commerce, quality, not quantity. Finely complex chocolate sculptures seduced his eyes through the window of the *chocolaterie*. As he walked farther along, the rich smell of tobacco filled his nostrils from a *tabac* next door. There were foxhunting clothes on mannequins in the shop after that; its windows looked as if they hadn't been cleaned since Louis XVI hunted the fields of Versailles.

It was a street of variegated delights, he observed, not a mall, not a grey mush of globalised names. Each had its own identity.

He stepped off the narrow pavement to allow two laughing women to pass. They were in their early twenties, Logan guessed; his own kind, Americans—and tourists, a rarer sight in Europe in the past few years. Logan recognised the accent of his home state of Pennsylvania.

The women's eyes lingered slightly longer than necessary on the man who'd moved aside for them. Logan was smiling easily at them, apparently to encourage their laughter.

They returned his smile with a lack of constraint that, if he hadn't been on his way somewhere else, might have encouraged him to say something that backed up the invitation of his smile.

But he walked on.

The street was full of tourists. Paris was emptied of Parisians now that it was August, and replenished with visitors. The older, established restaurants were closed for the French vacation, and the waiters left behind to serve the visitors in pavement cafés—as a punishment, they seemed to think—were surlier than usual, the heavy heat sweating out tempers that were short enough at the best of times.

Identity hung for a moment in Logan's thoughts. Perhaps it was triggered by the individual nature of the shops he was passing. But introspection never troubled Logan for long. He was a watcher, a listener, a man who looked outwards rather than in; a highly trained expert in visual observation who could spot the faintest movement of an enemy on a distant hillside.

Logan could also analyse the mood and even the intentions of friend or enemy in seconds. He possessed the knack of ruthlessly forming in his mind a usually accurate critique of others. He knew how to elicit the responses he wanted from people—like the women he'd just passed.

Logan's start in life born into a wealthy family who'd lived three generations in southern

Logan's start in life—born into a wealthy family who'd lived three generations in southern Pennsylvania—and his own natural talents had promised great things. If anything, his many advantages—on the sports field, in the classroom, in social circles, and particularly with women—had threatened to be so diverse and successful that they could have led, as his father had warned, to his being spoiled for choice. But he had somehow kept all the balls in the air and progressed smoothly to Harvard, where, in the course of earning a summa cum laude law degree, he had been approached by the CIA, in the person of his recruiter, Burt Miller.

For Logan, it was an offer he couldn't refuse. Everything had come so easily for him that all that intrigued his interest were new challenges. Burt Miller's huge personality and Logan's own lack of direction had made the decision for him.

Was that his identity? he wondered now on this Paris street in this late, bright August afternoon. One that was laid over him by Burt Miller and the many other gurulike figures in his childhood—not to mention the numerous women of his adult years? Other people thought Logan had a superb mind—and they were right—but they didn't see this unwillingness to look inside himself. There was an unexplored place there.

He continued up the street, weaving past the carefree tourists.

For nearly ten years now he'd been walking streets like this. They may not have had the style, the panache, of this one, but still the weariness of the footpad, the watcher, now welled up in Logan. In his old haunts in Bratislava, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Zagreb, Podgorica, with occasional visits to London, Paris, or New York, he had paced and apparently idled while what he was really doing was waiting and observing; the man on the outside looking in, the man who went to others, not they to him.

Since his disgrace—and subsequent exit from CIA employment—Logan's lot had been that of the freelancer, but not to create newspaper stories. Logan was a freelancer of secrets.

For a moment he looked up at the faded red shop front of a fabrics atelier and imagined, in gothic lettering, the words "Logan Halloran—Purveyor of Secrets" written on the cross beam. It would be a perfect fit in this street of specialists.

He turned off the rue du Temple toward the place where he would meet his contact, deciding to walk rather than take a taxi. It was hot, the sun still blazing at six in the evening, but in the narrow streets he could pick the shady side when the heat became oppressive.

The man he was to meet in half an hour was a former and potential source for him and, like him, a denizen of the secret world.

Thomas Plismy had spent most of his working life inside the French foreign intelligence service, the DGSE. Plismy had been a contact of Logan's ever since the glory days when Logan was an agent under the guiding hand of the CIA station in Belgrade, the days when he was known by colleagues as "Lucky Logan." But that had all gone wrong, and now, unlike Logan, Thomas still had the security of a government job. Logan's thoughts were at once pricked by the long bitterness that memory contained.

Some once called Logan the best intelligence officer the CIA had in Europe's southeastern sector, the "Balkan beat," as the British called it. But then a deskman somewhere in Washington or Virginia had saved his own skin by flaying Logan's, and he became the fall guy for someone else's mistake in the Serbian war.

And so, at thirty-six years old, Logan had nearly a decade behind him doing what he was doing this evening, meeting contacts like Plismy, looking for a niche, an entry point, like a lone mountaineer on a sheer rock face. Logan was searching for a handhold of a different sort—some piece of information he could develop and add value to. And then sell.

Since his fall from grace, he'd sold secrets to anyone, to his former masters in America first of all

Since his fall from grace, he'd sold secrets to anyone, to his former masters in America first of all, then to anyone else who had the cash. He often sold the same secrets more than once, to opposing sides in the world's many secret intelligence wars.

Logan wondered, as he often did these days, how much longer he could go on chasing shadows. As so often, when this loneliness began to take him over, he thought of the life that he might have had, of his daughter Angelica and her mother, who he'd married when he was twenty-two years old. She had gone on to marry another man, a lawyer as it happened, and he hadn't seen his daughter in six years.

But this evening was going to be different. Plismy was a kind of friend, he supposed. Logan vaguely thought he liked him better than most he dealt with. They would drink first, then dinner somewhere Plismy knew that soared in quality above the tourist miasma—such places could be found even in the dog days of August. Then they would go to a club, looking for paid girls. Plismy knew a lot of good places for that, Logan remembered.

But even though the meeting was more social than usual, Logan was working just the same. He was always working, he thought. That was the lot of the freelancer. No hours, no boss, no routine—it all sounded good until “no hours” turned into “all hours” and “no boss” into “no structure” and “no routine” into “chaos”; until work became life and vice versa.

The basic skill he deployed in all his meetings was to delude his contacts into believing that he was there simply to enjoy their company. Quite simply, he fielded what was perhaps his greatest skill and curse—his charm. Logan was everybody's friend, and nobody's. By this artifice Logan made people like Plismy freer in their speech, more indiscreet with him than they would otherwise be. Plismy, in particular, was always good for gossip.

Logan loped up past the Pompidou Centre and down the rue de Rivoli, into an office district a way away from the Tuileries. The tourists were absent here; there were no shops, just hidden courtyards with ancient paving behind huge old wooden doors that abutted the modern office fronts slapped on the same old stone.

Down one of these silent streets, he saw the bar sign, L'Algérien, a hundred yards away.

He stepped into the gloom of the small, neat establishment, which sold beer and wine. Simple wooden chairs and round tables with plastic cloths dotted a chipped Islamic tiled floor in faded green. The bar counter was made of polished, gleaming zinc, in the old-fashioned French style.

He saw Plismy sitting at the far end of the counter, sipping a *coupe de vin*.

It was an odd choice of Plismy's, this bar, Logan thought. Forty years before, Plismy had been yanking out the fingernails of Algerians like the one who served behind the zinc counter. He'd fought France's secret war on the ground and in the torture chambers of Algiers against the country's independence. Yet this was his favourite bar in Paris, he'd once told Logan.

Did he come to gloat? France had lost the war. No, he thought. Plismy took a sadistic glee being in such close proximity to a man like those he'd tormented and who now had to serve him.

But it was a good bar too, he thought, an old bar of the type you could find everywhere back in the days of the Fourth Republic. Maybe a more decent nostalgia for those days played a part too, who knew?

Plismy was a large man with a pitted face like a cactus with the thorns extracted. That was his nickname at the DGSE. Cactus. The Frenchman's oily face gleamed, and his thinned hair was flattened to his skull by sweat. His dark southern eyes bored into you. The vinous paunch that took decades to create, unlike a beer drinker's, rested comfortably—naturally, Logan thought—on a black leather briefcase worn bare in numerous places, trapping it in its fold. With his thick neck, thick hands, and thick thighs that filled ample light grey trousers, Plismy was like a French rugby prop who'd seen better days.

better days.

Logan watched the Frenchman look to his right, toward a wall mirror with a lime green frame, so that he could see Logan approaching from his left. When he was sure it was Logan, Plismy turned to face him.

“Good. Now we can get a bottle,” Plismy said, grateful for his companion’s arrival. “You’re still allowed to drink in America, I suppose?”

He grinned and showed a set of smoker’s teeth that turned darker brown the closer they approached the gums.

“In the privacy of your own Dumpster,” Logan replied.

Plismy laughed. It was a staccato noise that contained no humour. Then, as he nodded abruptly to the Algerian, his smile evaporated, replaced by a scowl. The stooped Algerian barman didn’t need to be told, Logan noticed. He was used to Plismy treating him like a dumb animal, knew what he wanted and didn’t expect any courtesy.

“I didn’t expect to find you,” Logan said. “What are you doing in Paris, Thomas?” He took the high stool next to Plismy. “Why aren’t you on the Côte d’Azur? Getting a tan.”

“The Anglo-Saxons destroyed it years ago, that’s why. And now the Slavs are scoffing up the leftovers like the dogs they are.”

“Jews and blacks are off the hook this time, then,” Logan replied.

“This time.” Plismy laughed. “I’m an uncomplicated man, Logan.”

“Some might call it ‘Neanderthal.’ ”

Plismy’s face darkened, then broke into a smile. Logan knew how to play Plismy. Plismy was another sadistic bully who fell for the masochism of being bullied himself.

A bottle was set on the counter, and the Algerian opened it swiftly and poured a measure into two glasses, a new glass for Plismy.

“A good burgundy,” Plismy said, raising his glass. “You’ll see. Santé.”

“Santé,” Logan responded. It was a very good burgundy indeed, he thought, and Plismy saw his reaction.

“I’ve been promoted!” the Frenchman said, unable to contain the good news. “My superior died in an air crash in the Côte d’Ivoire.”

“Congratulations, Thomas,” Logan replied, and raised his glass again. “To dead men’s shoes,” he toasted him.

Plismy laughed again, the short, staccato sound. “You have a tasteless humour I find so sad. Lacking in your compatriots,” he said, and drank thirstily.

They drank the bottle steadily, like two professional drinkers rather than connoisseurs. The talk ranged from the forthcoming presidential elections in America—who did Logan think was going to win?—to the Russian invasion of Georgia; from the stock markets to the Olympic Games in Beijing. By the time they’d finished the bottle, like true drinkers they were beginning to comprehend the state of the world in all its futility. But unlike Plismy, Logan remained clearheaded, as he usually did unless he’d decided to drink alone, for a lonely reason. He saw that Plismy had already been drinking, probably celebrating at the office before they met.

Good, he thought. A loose tongue in a euphoric head was a most reliable recipe for the one-way exchange of confidences.

When they’d finished the bottle, they took a taxi to a place Plismy knew—and that knew him. Located near the Gare de Lyon, it was a small, family-run restaurant, with excellent Alsatian cuisine. Plismy talked all the way through the depleted August traffic about his new responsibilities, his new salary, and the new perks that came with the job.

salary, and the new perks that came with the job.

Logan might have been more envious of Plismy's secure employment position had he not been entirely focused on how, this evening, he could exploit Plismy's garrulous desire to impress him. Leave him on, Logan, he told himself. That's all it takes.

The waitress, a daughter, Logan assumed, brought two plates of something concealed beneath a rich-looking cream-coloured sauce. Plismy had insisted on ordering for both of them. He knew everything tonight; he was completely full of himself, Logan was pleased to see.

"Surely you must have been thinking about retirement?" Logan inquired. "Before the promotion, I mean. Haven't you had your fill of the world's secrets?" Plismy was twenty-five years older than him, at least.

"Before my promotion? Maybe, yes. A little." Plismy beamed with pleasure. "But now, why should I retire? I have even greater power, Logan. Access. The secrets behind the lies, the lies behind the secrets. Something you and I know all about. And also I have bigger allowances, a higher pension, and a new car," he boasted.

A fat pension sounded nice. But it was an equation that had never quite convinced him. The longer you worked, the bigger the pension, the less life you had to freely spend it. Illogically, having a cut-price pension suddenly made him feel better.

Logan wasn't sure whether Plismy knew about his fall from grace back in the 1990s. They'd both worked out in the East, Plismy in Russia, Logan in the Balkans. They'd met during the western standoff with Russia over the Serbian war. But if Plismy did know, he'd never mentioned it. Plismy didn't think a great deal about other people, however. Whether he knew or not, Logan wasn't going to supply the information.

"Don't you get trapped by it, though?" Logan persisted. "I sometimes feel I do. There are so few people to talk to about what the world isn't supposed to know. You've been at this game for—"

"Thirty-three years," Plismy said expansively. "And counting. I've seen a lot, believe me. Are you now? Now things are just getting more interesting."

Get him onto Russia, Logan told himself. That's his speciality. That's where the game has squared shifted once again.

"What happens to your old desk, then?" Logan said. "Some young Russian expert taking it on?"

"Nobody has my experience," Plismy said grandly. "I've been there through it all. Before the Wall when the Wall came down, and after the Wall. You know I was in Moscow through the whole period almost. And when I wasn't, I was running agents from here." He paused. "No, I'll keep my interest in the Russian desk. In fact, I've recently returned from a very interesting trip out East."

"Chasing hookers round the nightclubs of Samara?" Logan asked. "Isn't that where you tell me the real beauties come from?"

Plismy looked torn between telling Logan some hooker story for a laugh, or demonstrating his own importance in the thick of things, at the centre of power. He chose the latter.

Leaning across the table to indicate a confidence was about to take place, he said, "Do you know that we are going to take all the lovely Russian oil from the British and the Americans?"

"What? You and me, Thomas?"

Plismy pulled away sharply, cross that Logan wasn't taking his confidential leak more seriously. He poked his fork across the table at the young American.

"I was there," he said, mysteriously, and then filled the fork and put it decisively in his mouth. For a while he chewed his food thoughtfully, and Logan made no attempt to prompt him.

"The French have always known how to handle the Russians. With subtlety," Plismy explained when there was room in his mouth to speak.

when there was room in his mouth to speak.

“Like when they burned Moscow to the ground?” Logan said.

“Particularly then.” Plismy smiled. “Napoleon knew how to deal with the Russians.”

“And the Russians, I seem to remember, subsequently knew how to deal with him,” Logan said with too much acidity in his voice.

But Plismy just laughed. He glowed at the memory of Napoleon’s two-hundred-year-old victories and forgot the defeats.

“So the French are taking lots of Russian oil?” Logan prompted this time. “Good luck to you.”

“Oil fields. New ones. The biggest. I tell you, I was there. In Sochi, down on the Black Sea, three weeks ago. Then in Moscow. Putin, Medvedev, Ivanov—we met them all. I was one of the team over there with ‘one of France’s major oil companies.’ ” Plismy winked coyly at the anonymity. “And we all sat around the same table with the men of power, the *siloviki*. Cover name, of course, cover position in the company. Usual rules.”

Plismy threw his head back like a horse and then dipped in towards Logan again.

“The Russians are going to hand us—France—the big Siberian oil fields, take them away from the Americans and anybody else. The biggest fields, Logan. The Sakhalin fields in particular, the biggest prize of all.”

“Sounds like a good day’s work,” Logan replied.

“It was a couple of days, actually,” Plismy said, blithely unaware of the foolishness of his own self-importance.

Logan now saw that Plismy didn’t know about his fall from grace. He was taunting him with what French aplomb and acumen could do, as opposed to American ham-fistedness—as Plismy saw it anyway. Plismy thought he was still CIA.

“Look, Thomas, dinner’s on me,” Logan said suddenly, and smiled openly. “I want to be the first outside your office to congratulate you on the new job.”

“Well. That’s good of you,” the newly enriched Plismy replied. It was this sort of respect that a man like him, in his new position, could only expect.

They took a taxi back into the centre when they’d finished dinner. Plismy knew a place, which he and similarly ranked Parisians from different professions attended for what he called “late evening delights.” It was off the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, at the smart end, Plismy noted.

“It is where the French elite from the *grandes écoles* go for discretion,” Plismy said—though he was not, Logan knew, one of them. He’d come up from the rough *banlieues* of Marseille, where he learned his hatred of other, “lesser” races.

In the taxi Plismy returned to the Russian theme. Russia had been on everybody’s minds since the Kremlin’s show of aggression in Georgia. Putin had been photographed with the invading troops openly displaying his power over the nominal president, Dmitry Medvedev.

“Top secret,” Plismy said. “The Russians captured some American special forces troops fighting with the Georgians. They told me that in Moscow. Very embarrassing for your people, I’d have thought.”

“I know nothing about it.” Logan grinned, in order to give the impression he knew exactly what Plismy was referring to.

But Plismy went off on another self-congratulatory tack, around the role he’d played in Moscow for many years, which now seemed to be bearing such rich fruit.

“The Americans, the British, they took the early, easy pickings in Russia,” Plismy said pompously, as if he were giving a lecture at the Hautes Etudes Commerciales. “But the French are the ones the Russians trust now. Perhaps for that reason. We weren’t in there like you, stripping the place in the

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