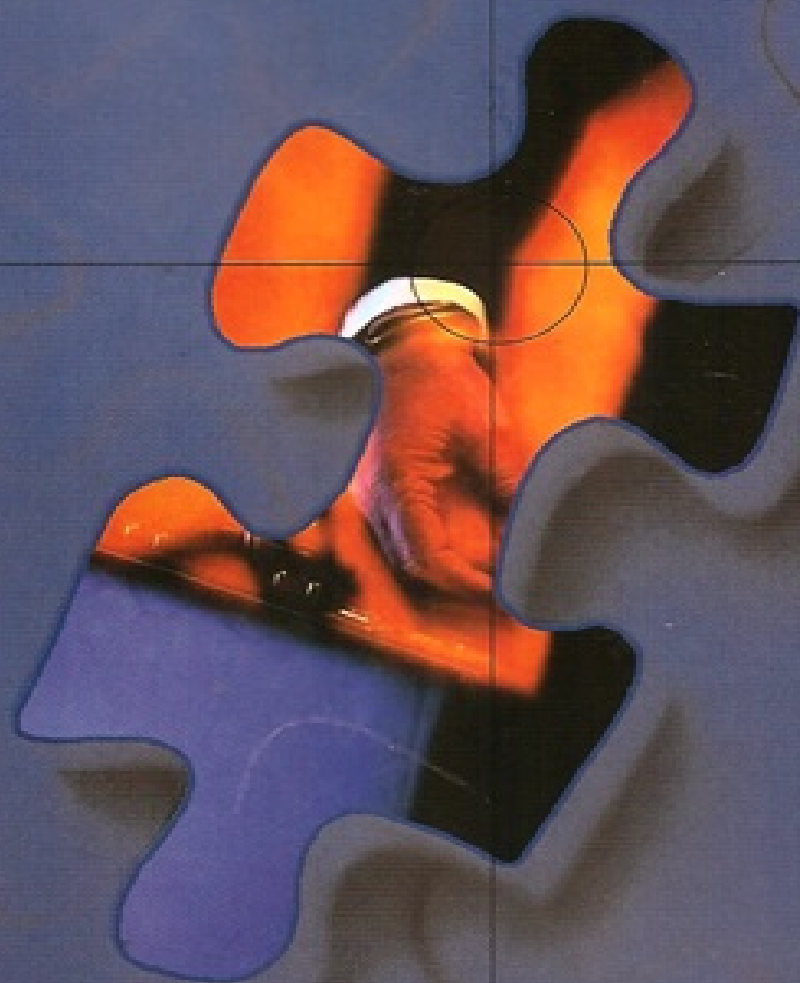


THE DEBRIEFING

A NOVEL OF DECEPTION



ROBERT LITTELL

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE COMPANY*

ALSO BY ROBERT LITTELL

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Walking Back the Cat

The Visiting Professor

An Agent in Place

The Once and Future Spy

The Revolutionist

The Amateur

The Sisters

Mother Russia

The October Circle

Sweet Reason

The Defection of A.J. Lewinter

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For Mel Bernstein, Ernest Finch and
Jim Riouff, who started me out on the not-so-beaten path

“Debrief? That means you will ask me questions. But I have no answers. I don’t know secrets. ... How long will this debriefing take?”

“It’s already started. It will end when we know more about you than God.”

CHAPTER

1

He seems at loose ends, half-hearted, polite but distant, vaguely disreputable with his crosscurrents of thick wavy hair spilling off in several directions, vaguely sinister behind his steel-rimmed eyeglasses that trap the light at odd angles and turn into tarnished mirrors. He stares vacantly over the shoulders of people and tends to become aware of their voices when they stop talking. He has trouble swallowing, digesting, defecating. And remembering; especially remembering. His mind wanders; sometimes he gets where he's going with no memory of the trip. Sleep is out of the question. The few times he has managed to doze off, he woke up screaming—though he was never certain which of the recent events in his life he was screaming about.

“Aksenov broke a leg,” the duty officer is saying. “The report neglected to specify which one.” His upper lip curls into a suggestion of a sneer. “Walked in front of a taxi, so it seems, so it seems. You’re the only warm body on the courier list I could find.”

Oleg Kulakov stares past the pinned-up sleeve of the duty officer’s blouse at the wall calendar with the photograph of the girl driving a shiny new tractor; something in the girl’s smile—its unrestrained quality; she doesn’t stint for the photographer—reminds him of Nadia before she ...

“The calendar’s on the wrong month,” Kulakov says, cutting off the thought before it becomes painful. “We’re not January. What we are is February.”

The duty officer glances at the wall without interest, then turns back to Kulakov. “I’m sorry about you losing the weekend,” he says. “We’ll make it up to you. In any case, you’ll be back by Sunday night. There’s a military flight from Cairo to Moscow. Going, you’ll fly Aeroflot and stop over in Athens for six hours. The embassy people will hold your hand between planes.”

The pulse beats in Kulakov’s ear; he feels suddenly faint and presses his knees against the duty officer’s desk to steady himself. For an instant he is afraid he will black out. *Going, I’ll hold over in Athens for six hours! Going where?* “Going where?” he asks the duty officer, a fussy man who has obviously missed several promotions along the way. He has the same rank as Kulakov—they are both majors—but the duty officer is at least ten years older. Judging from his medals and the missing left arm, he must have been a war hero in his day. Oddly, Kulakov has never set eyes on him before.

“Where is it I’m going?”

“You haven’t been listening,” complains the duty officer, who wears a small plastic plate over his medals, with his name, “Gamov.” He brushes dandruff from his left shoulder with an impatient gesture. “Aksenov has a broken leg. You’re the only one on the courier list I could get hold of on a moment’s notice. Someone has to deliver this pouch to Cairo by tonight. You’re elected. By one vote Mine.”

Kulakov tries to concentrate on the mechanics of the assignment, but his head is spinning; he is dizzy with possibilities. “Of course I’ll go,” he says quickly. “I’m glad to fill in. Aksenov is an old

comrade. He'd do the same for me."

Kulakov is instantly sorry he spoke; to his own ear, he sounds too eager. He is sure his voice will give him away, will prompt the duty officer to look up at him suspiciously, to search out the memorandum he, Kulakov, has seen with his own eyes ordering his name stricken from the courier list. But Gamov is bending over his blotter, stamping and signing Kulakov's orders, which will serve as an exit visa. He deftly folds the single sheet of paper with his one hand and slides it into a brown envelope stamped "Courier Service." For some reason Kulakov focuses on the duty officer's fingers; they are long and thin and graceful, feminine even—the fingers of a woman on the hands of a man.

"Your travel documents," Gamov says, offering Kulakov the envelope. "Your flight leaves Moscow in"—he studies his watch, which he wears on the inside of his wrist—"an hour and a quarter."

Kulakov slips the envelope into the breast pocket of his civilian jacket, starts for the door in a daze.

"Ho, Kulakov, not so fast," the duty officer calls. Kulakov turns back and stares at him, his heart pounding. Any second now he'll wake up screaming!

"The pouch," the duty officer reminds him. "You forgot the pouch."

"Yes, of course, the pouch." Kulakov smiles weakly.

Shaking his head, the duty officer squats before an old office safe. Shielding the dial from Kulakov with his body, he carefully spins the knob. The heavy door clicks open, swings back. Gamov rummages in the shadowy interior and extracts a worn leather diplomatic pouch. Kulakov, who has been a diplomatic courier for twenty-eight years, hefts it, locks the thin linked bracelet around his left wrist, sets the destruct mechanism, then stoops and deposits the key in a compartment sewn into the inside of his shoe. Straightening, he reaches across the desk and signs in triplicate the receipt acknowledging that he, and not Major Gamov, is now in possession of one sealed diplomatic pouch, the contents of which he vows to protect with his life.

As Kulakov leaves, Gamov stares after him in a peculiar way. His upper lip curls into a suggestion of a sneer as he absently turns toward the wall, tears off January and throws it away.

The driver, who doubles as an embassy heavy because of a budget squeeze, keeps glancing at Kulakov in the rear-view mirror to catch his reaction. "So our Soviet adviser tells the Egyptian general staff—"

"I spent two years in Cairo," interrupts the pale second secretary sitting next to the driver. He nervously grinds out his American cigarette in the ashtray, which is already overflowing. "Give me Athens anytime."

They are speeding along the coast road in a Mercedes toward the Athens embassy. Another Mercedes, with two embassy heavies, follows right behind them.

"So our Soviet adviser tells the Egyptian general staff," the driver begins again, casting an annoyed look at the pale second secretary, "The trick is to do as we did with Napoleon. You let the Jews penetrate deep into the country until their supply lines are very long and yours are very short. Then, when they're inside the trap, you sit back and wait for winter!" The driver observes Kulakov's failure to react in the rear-view mirror. "You wait for winter," he explains. "Get it? *There is no winter in Egypt!*"

"It's an old joke," snaps the pale second secretary. "Everyone's heard it. Here—" He twists in his seat belt toward Kulakov, stares at him for an instant before he catches himself staring and finishes what he started to say. "You'll get a glimpse of the Acropolis any second now."

The car turns inland up a broad avenue and Kulakov sees the Acropolis in the distance through the front window. It glistens in the cold sunlight, bleached laundry drying on an ancient skyline. He inch

to his right to get a better look at it, and casually rests his fingertips on the door handle.

“I’ve been here fourteen months,” the pale second secretary remarks—he is uneasy with silence and tries to fill it—“and I never get tired of looking at it.”

“One ruin is the same as the next,” grunts the driver.

Kulakov’s fingers tighten around the door handle. He wonders if he’ll have the nerve to do it.

In a curiously detached way, he has been wondering ever since he walked out of the duty office. The old janitor was in the corridor, standing on a step ladder changing light bulbs in the ceiling. Kulakov didn’t trust himself to look up at him. Instead he gripped his ankle as he passed—his way of saying goodbye. Outside, a Ministry of Defense Moskvich was waiting to take him to Moscow Airport. Kulakov settled into the back seat, expecting at any moment to hear the car radio burst into life and a voice blurt: “The diplomatic courier Kulakov must not be permitted to leave the country.” But there was no voice, only the droning of traffic and the running comments of the driver, a cranky civilian who thought that pedestrians had been put on earth by God to torture the lucky few who found themselves behind steering wheels.

At the airport, Kulakov was ushered into a small lounge set aside for ministry personnel, along with two colonels and an inspector general, all on their way for one reason or another to Cairo. His papers were carefully checked by an unsmiling frontier officer, who studied his passport photograph, and then his face, for a nerve-racking moment. When the flight was finally called, Kulakov mingled with the other passengers and headed for the gate. Trying to breathe normally, suppressing a last-second urge to turn and run, he passed the control point and then the two armed soldiers who stood on either side of the boarding ramp. Inside the plane, Kulakov sucked in a lungful of stale air and sank into a seat in the first-class section on the aisle next to the inspector general, a red-faced bureaucrat who demanded ice and poured himself a stiff vodka from a small flask without offering one to his neighbor. No matter. Kulakov’s stomach was in no condition for vodka.

The plane taxied to the end of the runway—and then abruptly stopped. Through the small, scratched oval window, Kulakov saw several limousines approaching at high speed. He slumped in his seat, breathing with so much difficulty that the stewardess bent over him and asked if anything was wrong. No, nothing was wrong, he muttered, and he turned his head and watched the limousines pull up with squeal of brakes, saw the crew open the plane door and let down a portable ladder. Outside, a tall, immaculately dressed man in his early fifties—Kulakov recognized him as a junior minister whose photograph had recently appeared in *Pravda*—shook hands with half a dozen men. A woman thrust a bouquet of lilacs wrapped in cellophane into his arms as he turned to climb into the plane. Three aides followed. Everyone was very polite, very deferential. The minister himself found places for his aides before he permitted himself to be ushered to a seat across the aisle from Kulakov. *A new breed*, Kulakov thought, taking in the cut of the minister’s suit, the new leather attaché case, the discreet hammer-and-sickle pin in his lapel. *This is how Gregori would have ended up if only he had ...if only ... if ... if ... if ...*

Kulakov was still struggling with the *ifs* when he spotted the embassy heavies who had come to hold his hand between planes. They were waiting just beyond passport control in Athens airport. Their eyes glazed with a kind of passive professionalism, passed over the minister and his aides, the two colonels and the inspector general, and settled on Kulakov and the worn leather diplomatic pouch chained to his left wrist. “You are invited to come with us,” said the one who appeared to be in charge. Then he smiled and thumped Kulakov on the back and added, “There is a hot lunch waiting for you at the embassy.”

The two Mercedeses, moving slowly through heavy traffic, turn into Constitution Square and come to a stop at a red light. Crowds of lunchtime strollers surge across the intersection just ahead. Now, Kulakov tells himself, *now or never*. His fingers tug gently at the handle; the door opens a crack. Up front the heavy is concentrating on the red light, waiting for it to change. The pale second secretary is fumbling for another American cigarette.

The light turns green. The heavy jars the Mercedes into gear. Kulakov pushes the door open and leaps into the crowd just as the car starts to roll. Behind him there is a screeching of brakes, then the sharp sound of doors being flung open against their hinges. Several men jump from the cars after him. “Kulakov,” the pale secretary screams in a hysterical voice. “Do you know what it is you do?”

Kulakov is in full flight now, careening off a kiosk, reeling wildly through the scattering crowd that senses danger but doesn't know what direction it is coming from, tripping over a baby's stroller filled with celery stalks, knocking down an old woman, stumbling over the outstretched metal legs of a beggar. Police whistles sound in the distance.

At an intersection, Kulakov casts a quick glance over his shoulder, sees two of the heavies bullying their way through the crowd behind him. One of the heavies catches sight of Kulakov, calls triumphantly to the others, snatches a large-caliber pistol from his jacket and levels it at him. Dozens of people dive for doorways. Kulakov, riveted, peers down the flight path of the bullet, sways on the balls of his feet, *leans toward the bore of the pistol to meet the bullet*. It is suddenly just another solution. Sound ceases, motion slows; Kulakov has the sensation of being under water. Floating on emotionless currents, he waits. It is with a sense of disappointment that he sees the pale second secretary reach out and knock the heavy's arm up.

“Kulakov,” the pale second secretary pleads in a high-pitched voice. “For the love of God, come back.”

For Kulakov, there is nothing to go back to. He turns almost reluctantly—the game hasn't been played out yet—and runs across the street, bounces blindly off the fenders of a taxi and just misses being run down by a bus. Gasping for air, fighting the nausea mounting in his throat, he rounds a corner, dashes diagonally across the street and ducks into an alleyway. The pavement pitches under his feet like the deck of a ship. Halfway down the alleyway, he finds the open back door of a hotel kitchen, lumbers through it and the restaurant, knocking over a serving table, scattering waiters, and emerges through a revolving door into another boulevard. The sidewalk is drenched with water gushing from an open hydrant; dirt floats on thin currents into sewers. A line of taxis is parked in front of the hotel. Kulakov hikes his trousers, tiptoes through the water, climbs into the first taxi on the line.

“Take me,” he says in heavily accented English—and stops because of the fierce pain deep in his chest. With the back of his sleeve he wipes foam from his lips, sweat from his eyes. “Take me,” he begins again, the driver eyeing him with curiosity, “to the American Embassy.”

Some forty kilometers outside Moscow, near the village of Nikolina Gora, a single-lane macadam road leads off into a forest of snow-covered white birches. An international road sign indicating “No Entrance” is planted at the turnoff, and another marked “50” half a kilometer into the road; it indicates the speed limit for those who decide to ignore the first sign.

The road, which is cleared of snow and sanded daily, leads to a small military compound surrounded by an electrified fence. There are several wooden buildings in the compound. Smoke rises from chimneys. At the center of the compound is a two-story cement structure with a forest of antennas on the roof.

Inside the building, a lieutenant colonel with a thin scar over his left eye is patiently decoding, from

a one-time pad, a message from a Soviet military attaché in Athens. The decoded message, which will be read by the officer who is decoding it and one other person and then destroyed, says:

“The diplomatic courier Kulakov has defected. Implementing Contingency Plan Bravo.”

CHAPTER

2

Stone is trapped on the surface of things: moisture fogging a plate-glass window, paint peeling from storefront, fleeting thoughts clinging like a scab to an idea. “Yes ... sure ... uh huh ... no kidding. ... Speaking English with a vague trace of some foreign accent, he inserts comments in Thro’s pauses as if he is slipping coins into a slot to pay for a recorded announcement. His voice is all undertone, his gestures edgy: he hooks a finger over his shirt collar, constructs a tower with blocks of sugar, demolishes it by adding one too many, fidgets in his chair, glances at his watch again without seeing it, stares off into some middle distance, focusing on nothing; on everything.

“You spray fluorocarbons into the atmosphere,” Thro explains patiently, “where they’re bombarded by sunlight—right?—and what do they do when they’re bombarded by sunlight? They break up, releasing atoms of chlorine, is what they do. Then the chlorine atoms react with the ozone, which is a kind of oxygen whose molecules contain three atoms instead of what’s normal, which is two, converting it. ... You’re sure I never told you this one before?”

“No, no, this is all new to me.” He thinks: *Everything will be riding on the first contact. That’s the moment when it either goes right or it goes wrong. The first contact.*

“... converting it to conventional oxygen, and there goes your ozone shield and in pour the ultraviolet rays, and zingo, everyone comes down with skin cancer.”

“My God!” He thinks: *I’ve got to handle him carefully. Any sudden motion, he’ll take off like a panic-stricken pigeon.*

“That’s one possibility,” continues Thro. She laughs nervously. “Then there’s the possibility we’re moving into a new ice age. Indisputable scientific fact number one: The earth is colder than it was ten years ago. Indisputable scientific fact number two: The icecap over the poles is growing thicker each year. Are you listening, Stone? You sure you’re interested to hear this? If that doesn’t finish us off, there’s always the possibility that we’ll use ourselves up.” Thro is becoming agitated by her own story. “We dig out of the earth 2.7 billion tons of minerals a year. Okay. If you figure on the basis of three percent annual growth rate a year, which figure is modest to say the least, the consumption of minerals in a single year one thousand years from now will be greater than the weight of the earth! Can you imagine that, Stone? *Greater than the weight of the entire earth.*”

“Holy cow!” Stone tries to imagine it, but draws a blank. He thinks: *If I went according to the manual, I wouldn’t be doing this myself. I’d send in Kiick or Mozart. But I’m curious to see him—I’m curious to see the face of the man whose life I plan to ruin.*

Thro bites viciously into a croissant, sucks noisily at her cup of American coffee, takes another bite of croissant. “Then there’s the distinct possibility that the Antarctic ice sheet will slip into the ocean, which would raise the sea level twenty feet and flood every coastal city in the world. And you have to confront the fact that someday the sun is going to burn out. And if all that doesn’t get us”—she breaks

into a slightly hysterical laugh—“we’ve got to live with the very real likelihood that there is less than one atom for every eighty-eight gallons of space, which means the universe is going to expand forever, with the result that the stars will all fizzle out like candles and we’ll be adrift in an endless empty black graveyard of space.”

“That would be a pity.” Stone thinks: *I hope I don’t like him. I hope to God he rubs me the wrong way. I’m ready to go through with it even if I do like him, but it’ll be easier if I don’t.*

“What worries me sick,” Thro sighs, “is that something will happen that we don’t have enough imagination to imagine.” She bangs down her coffee cup. “You haven’t heard a word I said, Stone. The fact is you don’t give a damn how the world will end.”

“You want to do me a favor,” Stone says in an undertone, irritated at the heads starting to turn their way, “stop flashing that goddamn ring of yours when you talk. It makes me nervous.” He thinks: *What if the heavies refuse to let him out of their sight? What if he tumbles to the microphone? Or the camera? What if?*

Thro’s eyes—they look brand-new—suddenly lift and focus on Stone’s face; she looks deathly pale in the cold lilac light sifting through the leafless branches on Boulevard Saint-Germain. “Sometimes she says softly—when she is really hurt, she always talks softly—“I can’t believe how aggressive you are.”

“Everyone’s aggressive,” he says sullenly, “except the dead.”

“My aggressions are less violent than yours, Stone,” she retorts. “They’re physical.”

Stone, embarrassed by her stare, shakes his head, waves a hand—vague gestures of apology for his natural acidity, which is the way he responds to pressure. There is a long silence. *Why is it, he thinks, that my relationships with women start off in poetry, slip into prose and wind up in strained silences?* “I’m sorry, sweetheart.” He is conciliatory now. “It’s just that every time the ring turns black, you have a way of waving it around like a flag.”

An elegant woman at the next table turns quickly away, whispering to her companion in French, and Stone, annoyed at being overheard, switches to what Thro calls his “BBC Russian”; it always manages to get a laugh out of her. “I’ve got an idea for you, Thro. Why don’t you put an ad in the *Tribune*. Or hire yourself a skywriter.” He reaches up and traces a phrase in Cyrillic in the air with the tip of a spoon. “N-y-e-t s-e-x.”

The accent has the desired effect; Thro cannot help but smile. “Love, it’s my way of signaling you,” she answers in a Russian only slightly less fluent than his. “All lovers have signals. I happen to have gold ring that turns black when I get my period.” She tugs playfully at the hairs on the back of his wrist, leans closer until her mouth is next to his ear, switches into what Stone calls her “BBC sexy.” “Remember,” she says playfully, “our first trip to Paris together?”

As if Stone could ever forget it. He had been scouting the Soviet frontier near Hamina, Finland, for crossing points. Thro, five pounds overweight and wandering around with a degree in psychology she wasn’t sure what to do with, was on her way back from the Hermitage in Leningrad. Their paths crossed in Helsinki, in a hotel sauna, to be exact. Stone was flat on his back, being scrubbed down by an old woman he nicknamed “Mama Wash” when Thro turned up, round and pink and bare and unconcerned by five extra pounds or the bareness, carrying it off as if it were the most natural thing in the world to walk into a sauna stark naked and find yourself alone (Mama Wash soon disappeared) with a strange man trying to will away an erection. Unsuccessfully, as things turned out. They made love in the sauna, showered together, made love again in his hotel room, then took their first long look at each other: Stone with his natural acidity and his brooding way of peering out at the world and his permanent fixture of a frown, as if he were pondering the absence of a great scheme of things; Thro

with her run-on sentences describing all the ways the world would end—the list was never-ending. Both of them liked what they saw, and said it, so they teamed up and went on to Paris for what turned out to be a glorious week, with Thro falling in love with an outdoor café in Palais Royal while Stone fell in love with Thro. “Get that company of yours to post you here,” she commanded—it was before she knew what Stone’s company did; before she herself went to work for it—“or at least invent some assignments that will bring us back once in a while.”

Which is why, when Stone got the bright idea to set up a Russian diplomat, he picked one who was based in Paris.

Stone glances at his watch, sees it this time, calls for the check, argues (in BBC French; another smile from Thro) with the waiter attempting to hold them accountable for four croissants instead of three, counts out change. “I’ve got to get going,” he says in English. “I’ll be back at Kiick’s shop around two-thirty, three maybe, to tie up the loose ends. Which should put me back at the hotel around six at the latest. Did you see what Kiick painted on the window of the showroom? ‘Père et Fils depuis 1977’!”

Thro smiles, but there is a tightness to her lips, and lines at the corners of her eyes. “Traditions have to start someplace.” She hesitates. “This isn’t ... dangerous, is it, Stone?” she asks quietly.

Stone shakes his head and smiles, and she smiles back, though the tightness is still there. “I’ll never get used to you with a three-day beard,” she says. “You look like a Polish Jew from the shtetl.”

Stone answers in singsong Yiddish. “A Polish Jew from the shtetl is what I am. Gold rings turned black by your endocrine balance are what I detest. *Sholom aleichem*.”

Thro waves her black ring in his face. “Are you a Hasid,” she taunts him in English—the elegant lady at the next table visibly cringes—“that you’re afraid to have sex during menstruation?”

Stone picks up a *Tribune* at a kiosk, scans the headlines, is mildly surprised to see it is already February. He is all business now, and the first order of business is to tuck the *Tribune* under his arm so that the crossword puzzle is clearly visible.

Stone was trained as a street man, but he has had very little opportunity to put to use what he knows. Now he operates on memories of old textbooks with a very limited distribution, and an instinct for the street that caught the eye of his instructors when he started out twenty years before.

Halfway across the Pont des Arts, he stops to watch an unshaven young man at work on all fours. (He is trying to pass himself off as a poverty-stricken art student, but the Gucci loafers give him away.) He has printed, in large Gothic letters, on the walkway:

LES QUOIQUE SONT DES PARCEQUE MÉCONNUS

M. PROUST

and is illuminating, with bits of colored chalk, the first letter of each word.

Where, Stone wonders, does Kiick find them? Shrugging, he drops a franc onto the chalk drawing of a hat already filled with coins.

“Kiick said you’d be stingy,” the young artist mutters without looking up. His voice is neutral, without tone, without shadings. “In case you’re curious, you’re clean as a whistle.”

“You do that well,” Stone comments, nodding toward the illuminated letters, trying to sound mildly sarcastic.

“I’m a medievalist at heart,” the young man replies seriously.

“Aren’t we all,” moans Stone.

He continues across the bridge, feeling more secure now that he has confirmed he is not being followed. To be on the safe side, he mingles for a while with a large group of German tourists gaping at the Louvre, then doubles back on his tracks, wandering (not so aimlessly) through the park. A church bell is chiming the hour as he enters Palais Royal from the Louvre side.

He spots the two heavies almost immediately; the one he is supposed to notice is sitting on a bench scattering seeds to pigeons that peck around his trousers, which are baggy and have wide frayed cuffs. The other, dressed in clothing he bought in Paris, sits on the edge of a fountain, which has been turned off for the winter, buried in a right-wing French newspaper called *Minute*. The third heavy he learns about from the Gypsy woman (another one of Kiick’s free-lancers) with a baby under her arm (Stone doubts the baby has been thrown in free of charge). “There’s another one in the café,” simpers the Gypsy woman, holding out her hand for a coin. “Crew cut. Blue tie. Also a team photographing from the apartments.”

Stone comes up with a franc for the Gypsy, then strolls across the park toward La Gaudriole, Thro’s hangout when they first came to Paris together. They were drawn to the small café with the white metal tables outside because of the name; Thro was forever telling off-color jokes, which is what *gaudriole* means. Stone, his face tense beneath the mask of beard, approaches the Russian diplomat who is sitting at a table, his feet planted flat, knees apart, a copy of Céline placed conspicuously in front of him. He looks exactly like his passport photograph, Stone thinks: tired, with a grainy complexion; one-dimensional. He is fiftyish, with thick hair brushed straight back without a part, and very ill at ease; he wears black silk stockings that have long since lost their elasticity and sag around his thick ankles. Two tables away, the heavy with the crew cut and the blue tie sizes up Stone; his look is so open, so frank, that Stone has the impression he is soliciting.

“Good day to you,” Stone addresses the diplomat. He speaks French with a slight German accent now. “I invite you to come with me.”

The Russian diplomat, whose name is Boris Gurenko, looks around uncertainly. “I understood the meeting would be here. You specified La Gaudriole. You said nothing about following you elsewhere.”

“The meeting is here,” Stone explains patiently. “The exchange of my documents for your money, if it takes place at all, will take place in an excellent restaurant not very far away.” Stone glances casually at the line of apartment windows overlooking the park. “Here it is too ... observable for my tastes.”

The diplomat hesitates, turns questioningly toward the heavy two tables away, who takes another long slow insolent look at Stone before he makes up his mind. He nods once. “All right,” the diplomat says, collecting his copy of Céline. “But I don’t see what you’ll gain. They’ll follow wherever we go.”

Without a word, Stone starts off with the diplomat in tow. The three heavies fan out behind them; two in their wake, the third (the one Stone isn’t supposed to notice) angled off to one side. With Stone leading, this odd procession makes its way to the entrance of Le Grand Vefour, a three-star restaurant on the far side of Palais Royal, backing onto Rue de Beaujolais.

Inside, Stone—vaguely ill at ease; dining at a three-star restaurant was Mozart’s bright idea of how to ditch the heavies—mumbles a name to the maître d’hôtel, who scans his notebook, confirms the reservation, offers them the last two vacant seats. Behind them at the door, there is a frantic conference as the three heavies (the one in French clothes has dropped all pretense of being there by accident) study the menu posted in a glass case; it is impossible to get out of Le Grand Vefour, a restaurant where the *vin ordinaire* is a reasonably *grand cru*, for less than two hundred francs a head.

After an animated discussion, the Russians pool their resources, dispatch the one with the French suit inside—where he is turned away by the maître d’hôtel; one dines at Le Grand Vefour by reservation only.

“That was neatly done,” the Russian diplomat comments, warming to the ambiance, licking his lips at the thought of the *haute cuisine* that he will soon feast on. Outside, two very worried heavies have taken up positions on either side of the entrance to the restaurant; the third has raced off to find a telephone.

“The Americans have a saying,” remarks Stone. “Two’s company, three’s a crowd.”

The Russian watches intently as the waiter serves lobster in a milky sauce to someone at the next table. “They are only here to protect me,” he explains, “in case you aren’t what you say you are.”

“You have no need of them,” Stone says flatly. “I am what I say I am: Someone who has four single spaced typed sheets of military information to sell if the price is right.”

The maître d’hôtel approaches. “Would you care for a cocktail?”

“We’ll order immediately,” announces the Russian diplomat. “My friend here has a lean and hungry look.” Gurenko studies the menu as Stone squirms uncomfortably; Le Grand Vefour is not his cup of tea. “We’ll begin with some *gravettes*,” the Russian instructs the maître d’hôtel. To Stone, he explains: “*Gravettes* are very small sweet oysters from the Arcachon Basin. I always make it a habit to begin a meal eating something with my fingers. It’s very important to touch food, I think.” To the maître d’hôtel, who is visibly impressed: “Then we’ll attack a plate of your young leeks with truffles in olive oil. After that”—Gurenko purses his lips, as he tries to decide—“ah, after that we’ll try your Rouelle de Langouste Bretonne à la Vapeur de Verveine aux Girolles et Chicorée.” To Stone: “You’ll like that. The transparency of the green chicory leaf complements the translucence of the *langouste*. Now, let me give this some thought. Yes, yes, after that we’ll have a salad of white endives and mushrooms—*canaris, lactaires, girolles, charbonniers* and *trompettes de la mort* would make a superb bouquet. Don’t bother with the cheese platter; only bring us a perfect Reblochon. For wine, you’ll have to put up with my unusual tastes. Bring us a bottle of your Mouton Lafitte, 1964. Ha! I can see the choice astonishes you.” The Russian explains to Stone. “I’m one of the very few people who appreciate the ’64. Most people consider it too tart. But it suits me.”

The maître d’hôtel backs off, still scribbling on his pad. The Russian says conversationally, “I’ve always thought the world was divided into two groups—those who prefer a good year of a bad wine, and those who prefer a bad year of a good wine.”

Stone, out of curiosity, asks, “What made you choose Céline as your recognition signal?”

This is the last thing that the diplomat expects to be asked. “I happened to be reading Céline,” he answers carefully—he’s not sure where the question is leading and feels his way. “Many people consider him a great writer.”

“There are many who consider him a great anti-Semite,” retorts Stone.

The sommelier lets Gurenko inspect the label on the wine bottle before he opens it, lays the cork alongside the bottle, tilts Gurenko’s glass and measures out a small amount, swirls it around with a practiced gesture before he offers it to him. The Russian sips, nods his acceptance. The glasses are half filled. The sommelier withdraws.

“About Céline,” Gurenko says. He thinks he understands why the subject was raised now; the man in front of him with several days’ growth of beard must be a Jew. “There were many great artists who were anti-Semites. That shouldn’t stop us from appreciating the genius beneath—”

“Céline was an anti-Semite at a time when millions were murdered for the crime of being Jewish,” Stone bursts out. There is a passion, a sudden intensity, a sudden bitterness, to the rush of words. The

conversation is like a squall; Gurenko is rubbing him the wrong way. “You look past his anti-Semitism to the genius beneath, assuming there is a genius beneath, because you don’t give a goddamn about the killing of the Jews. Oh, intellectually you recognize it as a crime. But you don’t care.” Stone catches himself, suppresses the intensity, forces himself to look casually around; he spots Kiick and Mozart and a lady friend across the room, notes that the lady’s oversized handbag is planted on the table and pointing their way. “Céline,” Stone continues more quietly, “isn’t a favorite of mine.”

Gurenko notices the waiter heading their way with a tray full of food, tucks the tip of his napkin into his shirt collar. “I was told you would show me some papers with information about NATO bases in Germany. If the information was ... suitable, I was instructed to pay you twenty-five thousand United States dollars.”

“I expected more,” Stone says. “I expected twenty-five thousand.”

Gurenko is confused. “That’s what you’ll get, if the information is worth it.”

The first course—the oysters—is placed before them. Gurenko rubs his palms together in anticipation. Stone studies the assortment of utensils available to him, settles on a small fork.

“No, no, with the fingers,” Gurenko insists.

“I prefer a fork,” says Stone.

They eat in silence, Stone with his head angled down, lifting his eyes quickly every now and then to study the Russian. Gurenko chews noisily, helps himself to more wine, says with his mouth full, “Why me? Why not someone else at the embassy? This is not my line of work. There are others—”

“I wanted you,” Stone tells him, “precisely because it isn’t your line of work. This is a one-shot affair for me. I don’t want to deal with professionals who will try to find out who I am and come back for more. Which is why I prefer your bodyguards outside.”

“Yes, I see the logic of that,” Gurenko says. “Still, you might change your mind; you might decide to do it again. After all, this”—he gestures to the room full of well-dressed people talking in undertones to the bouquets of flowers strewn with impeccable attention around the old restaurant, to the waiters hovering discreetly and silently—“this could become a habit. You might change your mind. You might decide to do it again.”

Stone smiles faintly. “I’m not fool enough to risk this twice.”

The table is cleared and the second course—leeks and truffles in olive oil—is laid before them.

“This time you are permitted to use your fork,” the Russian informs Stone with a straight face.

At the next table, a heavily made up American lady raises her voice in mock horror. “Look what we’ve been reduced to,” she complains dramatically to her companion. “Happiness is an empty parking space.”

Gurenko snorts. “She is speaking American,” he whispers to Stone, showing off his linguistic abilities. “She tells that happiness is when you find a vacant parking space. The Americans are a special race, I think.”

They are finishing the endives and mushrooms—the Reblochon has been judged by Gurenko overripe and sent back—when Stone casually pulls a long envelope from his breast pocket and slides it across the table to the Russian diplomat. Across the room Kiick and Mozart stop talking, and their lady friend opens her handbag to look for something.

“At last,” Gurenko says. He pushes away his plate, wipes his mouth on his napkin, begins to examine the documents. The American lady at the next table explodes in laughter. “Nothing’s sacred,” she tells her table companion.

“If you’ll excuse the intrusion,” Stone addresses the lady directly in slow, accented English, “there are still things that are sacred.”

“Name one,” the American lady challenges.

“The speed of light squared.”

Stone signals for the bill, which is quickly placed before him on a small silver dish. The Russian nods as he reads, then reaches into his breast pocket and extracts a thick brown envelope, which he passes to Stone, who glances at the contents. “Is this all?” he asks, disappointed.

“What did you expect?” the Russian inquires.

“At least twenty-five thousand dollars,” says Stone. “The material I gave you is worth more than ten thousand dollars.”

Gurenko’s eyes narrow. “What ten thousand dollars? There is twenty-five thousand dollars in the envelope. What game are you playing?”

Stone looks again at the contents of the envelope. “I’m a bit confused,” he says vaguely. He pockets the envelope, starts to get up. “Let us hope,” he says, “that we don’t meet again.”

A waiter dashes over to pull back the chair. Stone smiles and gestures with his thumb toward the Russian. “My friend here will take care of the check.”

“You should have seen his face”—Kiick laughs—“when he realized he would have to pay.”

“You should have seen it when he saw the size of the bill,” says Mozart.

Stone comes out of the bathroom, wiping his face with a towel. The three-day growth of beard is gone; clean-shaven, Stone looks younger than his forty-four years, but tired—an accumulation of restless nights full of dreams he remembers only too well; he has the face of someone driven by things he deeply believes in but doesn’t stop to question for fear of wearing away the edges of his commitment. Now he says, “No trouble cleaning up afterwards?”

“No, no,” Kiick replies. He is an overweight, balding, shabby man in his fifties, given to making gestures that are delicate, effeminate almost. “We recovered the bug without anyone knowing it was even there. Carted it off with the flowers. The film looks to be first-class. I don’t think he suspected a thing.”

“Other than the fact that the handbag was pointed our way,” says Stone, “I wouldn’t have either.”

Kiick takes this as a compliment and beams like a schoolboy. “We’ll doctor the tapes before the end of the week. I found a pro who works for the Israelis and free-lances on the side.”

“Make sure he doesn’t get to know more than he has to,” cautions Stone.

“He doesn’t even know my nationality,” boasts Kiick.

“What about the bank account?” asks Mozart, Stone’s lazily efficient second-in-command; he makes everything, including brilliance, seem effortless, something one does with one’s left hand. He is lounging on a couch, his vest and jacket unbuttoned, his Ivy League Phi Beta Kappa key dangling on a gold chain stretched across his generous stomach.

“The bank business will be taken care of when Gurenko makes his next run to Geneva,” Kiick explains, a noticeable tightness to his voice; it makes him uneasy to deal with ambitious people. “The fifteen thousand dollars will be deposited in a numbered account under a phony name. The signature will be in Gurenko’s handwriting, no mistake about it. Christ, the signature alone is costing me two grand, but it’s worth every penny.”

“Everything will depend on how you play him,” Stone says. He throws the towel back into the bathroom and settles into Kiick’s swivel chair. “There’s a tendency in these affairs to rush things, but the secret is to go slow. The slower, the better.”

Kiick nods in eager agreement. “We let him know we’ve arrested a German for selling him NATO documents for ten thousand dollars, and we say we found out he pocketed the other fifteen thousand

dollars and stashed it in a numbered account. We play him the doctored tapes to prove you only got ten thousand dollars.”

“He’ll deny it,” Mozart offers, competing with Stone. “He’ll be angry as hell. Remember it’s an anger that comes from innocence.”

Stone ignores Mozart. “That’ll be the crucial moment,” he tells Kiick. “He could go either way. It’s your business to make him go our way. He’ll be angry, but he’ll be frightened too—frightened to death. You’ve got to play to the fright. The important thing is to ask him for a favor so inconsequential that it’ll seem easier for him to do it than go to his security people and open up the can of worms. In the back of his mind he’ll know that even if they believe he paid over the whole twenty-five thousand dollars, there’ll be that minuscule grain of doubt, and that doubt will ruin his career.”

“Once he does you a small favor,” Mozart chimes in, “you reward him, but the reward has to be small enough so that he’ll accept it. Send him a Sony portable, or better still a kitchen appliance that his wife won’t want to give back.”

“If he keeps the reward,” Stone says, “you’ll have him. The next time you go back at him, you’ll have the original business to hold over his head, plus the fact that he’s already done you a favor—”

“—and accepted a gift,” says Kiick.

“—and accepted a gift; exactly,” agrees Stone. “So then you escalate. You wait a few weeks and ask him for a second favor, hardly more important than the first—the makeup of an economic delegation due to turn up here, or the guest list at one of their receptions. Then you come across with another reward. Not cash; never give cash. A fur coat for his wife. A color TV. Something like that. Something a friend would give to another friend who does him a favor. If you take each phase slow and easy, if you play him like you would a fish, you’ll have the combination to the office safe in six months and copies of the embassy’s coded correspondence in a year.”

“We could use a coup like that,” Mozart says pointedly. “It would put an end to all those rumors about us going out of business.”

“You can get a lot of mileage out of a good coup,” agrees Stone.

Kiick smiles and nods. He knows the story only too well. There are very few professionals who don’t. Back in the early sixties, Stone had put the company on the intelligence map with a coup that was a classic in its time. In those days, the Russians were ahead of the Americans in nuclear missile development, and Washington was worried sick about it. To offset the Soviet advantage and buy time Stone came up with an idea whose beauty was in its utter simplicity. American agents were ordered to monitor Soviet submarine ports, military units, code traffic, deliveries of spare parts to air bases, call up of specialists, for any indication that the Russians were mobilizing for war. When the Russians discovered, as they were meant to, that the Americans were monitoring them for signs of mobilization for war, they asked themselves the question they were supposed to ask: “What are the Americans doing which, if we found out about it, would cause us to mobilize?” The Americans, of course, weren’t doing anything except play catch-up ball, but the ploy kept the Russians off balance and guessing for two full years before they tumbled to this.

“You pulled off some beauties in your day,” Kiick says admiringly.

“Let’s hope my day isn’t over,” Stone says, looking directly at Mozart, who makes no bones about being unhappy acting (in company argot) as Stone’s “deputy dawg.”

“You guys at the top have to make a mistake sometime,” Mozart says quietly. There is a glint in his eye, a hint of mischief. “Then us youngsters will get our turn at the helm. It’s a law of nature in our business. Survival of the youngest.”

The intercom buzzes. Mozart is summoned to the top floor of the town house, which serves as a communications center. As soon as he leaves, Kiick leans toward Stone. “These young guys get on my nerves,” he says. “Listen, Stone, before I forget, I want to thank you again,” he adds earnestly. “If it hadn’t been for you, well ...”

Stone waves away Kiick’s thanks. “The CIA’s loss is my gain. They were dumb to dump you, is how I look at it.”

“I want you to know I’m grateful, is all. And I won’t let you down. If there is ever something I can do for you, well, you get the idea.”

Mozart comes back into the room on the run; he is amazingly light on his feet despite his size, a characteristic that Stone attributes, with no substantiating logic, to the fact that Mozart is a very wealthy young man; work, for him, is indoor sport. “Looks like we have a Soviet defector on our hands in Athens,” he says excitedly. “A diplomatic courier with a pouch full of goodies. The admiral wants us to pick him up at the starting gate. I’ve already checked. I figure I can be there in six hours. I get a move on—”

“If anybody’s going to Athens, it’ll be me,” says Stone. “Rank has its privileges. You head back to Washington and mind the store. I’ll collect the pouch full of goodies and the warm body attached to it.”

“What a very nice guy you are,” sulks Mozart.

Stone, already scribbling a note to Thro, smiles sweetly. “It’s a law of nature in our business: Nobody is nicer than he has to be.”

The antennas on the roof are being whipped about by an icy wind that cuts in from the Moscow River, bending even the birch trees in its path. Inside the cement structure, at a desk behind the double winter windows with the seams stuffed with cotton, the officer in charge puts tiny tick marks next to items on a yellow pad.

- ✓ Recall three embassy security men assigned as escorts (dereliction of duty, 15 years)
- ✓ Recall second secretary (go through motions)
- ✓ Fire general in charge of courier service, order revision of procedures for clearing couriers for foreign assignments
- ✓ Issue general alert to military intelligence agents in Middle East, Europe, United States (use code Americans known to have broken)
- ✓ Get copies of all documents in pouch, advise senders that documents may have fallen into American hands, invite reports on consequences and suggestions for cutting losses
- ✓ Put our team in Geneva on 24-hour alert status
- ✓ Invite minister of defense to order us, and not KGB, to backtrack on defector (family, friends, etc.) to uncover motive

“You’ve left off the duty officer,” points out the lieutenant colonel, looking over his shoulder. “You’ve forgotten about Gamov.”

The officer in charge writes in longhand:

“Duty Officer Gamov to disappear. No trial.”

He studies the item for a moment, then puts a small check mark before it.

CHAPTER

3

The image that leaps to Stone's mind is that of a lap dog in heat—a combat between instinct and decorum. With decorum coming out second best. He spots it first in the taut faces of the Marine guards at the entrance, in their hands making edgy passes over the undone flaps of their Navy-issue holsters. He sees it in the maniacal gleam in the eyes of the ambassador's woman Friday, a near-sighted career officer who speaks seven languages, none of them really well. Muttering under her breath in ancient Greek, she plucks Stone out of a gaggle of journalists being held at bay by the Marines, plows through corridors full of milling staffers as if she is the prow of an icebreaker, barges past the civilian security contingent into the oak-paneled inner sanctum, with the limp American flag at one end, hissing hysterically, "He's come, he's here, I have him in tow."

Stone sees it—shoots of panic breaking through what appears to be an ordered surface—in the person of his holiness the ambassador, a tall, heavy-handed, very rich political appointee whose name appears regularly on someone or other's ten-worst-dressed list. "Welcome aboard—yes, indeed—welcome aboard," gushes the ambassador, wringing Stone's hand as if he is trying to pump up water from a reluctant well, smiling all the while with his facial muscles but not his eyes. "Mighty glad," he mutters, and he repeats it several times without specifying precisely what he is mightily glad about. He takes Stone by the elbow and steers him toward an enormous suede couch, out of earshot of the half dozen or so first and second and third secretaries, clipboards at the ready, parked around the vast room. Stone, worn out from the trip, sinks gratefully into the soft cushions, catches a glimpse of several framed photographs over the couch. One shows the ambassador chatting amiably with a woman Stone takes to be his government-issue wife; others show him chatting amiably with various Presidents or Heads of State or Film Stars. In every photograph his expression is precisely the same: his shoulders are hunched, his head is thoughtfully inclined, frozen in a nod of agreement, his lips are pursed, his eyes are squinting as if he is hard of hearing.

"Let me put you in the picture," the ambassador begins. In keeping with the atmosphere, which has more in common with a library reading room than an ambassador's inner sanctum, his voice is a hoarse whisper. "What I've got is trouble with a capital *T*." He impatiently waves off one of the young second secretaries, who tiptoes over with an outstretched clipboard marked "Incoming—Eyes Only." "I've got this Russki courier, name of Kulakov, holed in upstairs with a diplomatic pouch chained to his wrist which he says will blow up if anybody tries to take it away from him by force. I've got State breathing down my neck to open the pouch and take a look-see what's in it, never mind the guy it's chained to. That's for starters. I've got the Russian ambassador lodging diplomatic protests with anybody dumb enough to return his calls. I've got security people at the airport telling me the Russkies are flying so many warm bodies into town you'd think they booked the Parthenon for a convention of Old Bolsheviks. I've got—"

One of several phones on the large mahogany desk purrs. The woman Friday lifts the receiver, listens, says something in modern Greek, smothers the mouthpiece in her ample bosom. “Mr. Ambassador,” she stage-whispers, “I’m afraid it’s the undersecretary of foreign affairs, Mr. Tsistopoulos, on the line again. He is very insistent. They have him on hold.”

“Hold him on hold,” whines the ambassador. To Stone, he offers this as a potential last straw. “I’ve got the Greek undersecretary of foreign affairs, Mr. Whoosis—”

The woman Friday coughs discreetly to catch the ambassador’s attention. “Mr. Tsis-to-poulos,” she prompts him.

The ambassador’s eyes strain for a moment at the top of their sockets. “I’ve got the Greek government climbing the wall for us to get this guy out of here, with or without his pouch, before the whole diplomatic shebang comes down around our heads. I’ve got the English and French and Germans—our Germans, of course, not theirs—clamoring for a piece of the action. I’ve got a passel of congressmen of Greek ancestry flying in day after tomorrow. I’ve got a reception on some Sixth Fleet aircraft carrier scheduled for five P.M. I’ve got an operation that’s ground to a dead standstill. Did you see them standing around the halls downstairs? You couldn’t get a passport processed here in anything under two months, for love or money. What else I got? I’ve got journalists from countries I never heard of shooting questions I’m not sure I’m supposed to answer even if I knew the answer, which most of the time I don’t. Sweet Jesus! For all I know, the only thing in the damn pouch is Brezhnev’s unpaid laundry bills!”

The catalogue of trials and tribulations has worn the ambassador down; feeling very sorry for himself, he sinks back onto the couch and presses a large palm to his large forehead to calm a migraine he senses is lurking just behind his eyes. “What I need,” he says weakly—for a fleeting instant Stone is actually afraid the ambassador will burst into tears—“is *official guidance*.”

Drained, the ambassador stares hopefully at Stone. The woman Friday and the army of first and second and third secretaries actually take a step or two in his direction.

Stone studies his shoes longer than he has to; he can’t resist. He wonders at what point silences become silly, at what point someone will suddenly see the ridiculousness of it all and burst into laughter. But everyone holds out. When Stone finally looks up, the faces peering at him are still intense. “Mr. Ambassador,” Stone says slowly. The sound of a human voice speaking out loud echoes through the vast office and appears to shock several of the secretaries. “I’m going to do better than give you guidance. In two hours, two and a half on the outside, anybody asks you about the Russian upstairs, you’ll laugh and say, ‘What Russian are you talking about?’”

There are two Marine sergeants posted in the stairwell, and two embassy security men outside the door of the room within a room, constructed by the Seabees so embassy people could talk shop without worrying whether their conversations were being picked up by hidden microphones or delicate sensors that can lift voice vibrations off windowpanes. Inside, the décor is State Department Conference Room, beige, with the only touch of color coming from a bouquet of plastic daffodils in a vase filled with the stale water that nobody has changed for years. Two more civilian security types are playing gin across a corner of the conference table and casting an occasional bored look at their charge, the diplomatic courier Kulakov, who is stretched out on the cot that has been set up for him. His face at first glance seems like a death mask: leaden features that will never change expression, eyes that appear to have closed from the weight of the lids. The diplomatic pouch, still chained to Kulakov’s left wrist, is in full view on his chest.

As Stone enters, Kulakov swings his legs off the bed, sits up, gazes dully at the feet of the new

arrival.

Stone addresses the security men. “Could I trouble you gentlemen to step outside for a few moments?”

They look at one another, then back at Stone. “We got instructions to maintain ourselves here,” one starts to protest.

“It’s all right,” the ambassador’s woman Friday stage-whispers from the doorway. “He’s from Washington.”

Obediently, the two collect their playing cards and cigarettes and leave. Stone scrapes one of their chairs over to the cot, sits down, without a word offers Kulakov a cigarette. The Russian studies the pack as if he is drawing lots and there is a prize to be had for a good guess. Eventually he settles on a cigarette and plucks it from the box. He accepts the book of matches, looks without curiosity at the advertisement on the cover, strikes one. His fingers tremble on the match. Stone looks away so as not to embarrass him.

“What ... are ... you?” Kulakov asks in his slow, accented English.

Stone answers in Russian. “I’m a representative of the American government. I’m here to help you.”

There is a spark of interest in Kulakov’s eyes—the first Stone has seen. “You speak Russian”—Kulakov reverts to his own language—“so you are from the famous CIA.”

Stone isn’t from the CIA, but he doesn’t correct him, not now, not ever. “I’m here to protect you,” he says. “To protect you and to help you. This is the beginning of a new life for you. The first step.”

Stone is careful to use short sentences, to deal with Kulakov as he would deal with a child, but Kulakov’s attention wanders anyhow. “My stockings got wet,” he complains. He takes a deep drag on his cigarette, chokes on the smoke. “I don’t know how they got wet. I must have walked somewhere in water. I must have ...” The thought trails off; Kulakov makes an effort to hang on to the thread, but it slips through his fingers. Suddenly he leaps to his feet and starts pacing agitatedly. “Why is there no window in this room? Where is the window? What month are we, January or February?” He returns to the cot, grips Stone’s wrist. “I must telephone Moscow,” he argues vehemently. “I must explain to them why I ran away. I must convince them I’m not a traitor. ...” This thought slips away too, and Stone is reminded of other defectors he has handled: men going through the motions with an energy that comes mainly from force of habit. Experience kills, Thro told him when all the trouble over his daughter began. It kills whatever you were before you had the experience.

Stone’s eyes drift to the diplomatic pouch. Kulakov follows his gaze, clutches it to him. A cloud passes across his face. Dark suspicions hang there like suits in a closet, cleaned, pressed, ready to wear.

“Would you be willing,” Stone asks quietly, “to let me have the pouch?”

“When I arrive in America, I’ll give it to you,” Kulakov says. “I warn you, don’t try to take it from me. If there is a struggle and I pull on the chain, the contents will be destroyed.”

“Do you have any idea what’s in it?”

Kulakov can’t restrain a sneer. “Papers that are too important to send through the mail.”

The woman Friday suddenly pokes her head in the doorway. “Do you have the pouch?” she stage-whispers in English. Kulakov, startled, clutches the chain in his right hand and prepares to pull on it.

“Get out,” Stone coldly orders her. “Don’t open that door again until I tell you to.” The woman Friday shrinks back in confusion. The door clicks closed.

“Have you eaten?” Stone turns back to Kulakov. “Have you had something to drink?”

The Russian nods. “They gave me a sandwich, a beer.”

“Listen to me carefully,” Stone tells him. “If all we wanted was the goddamn pouch, we could have

slipped you a drug and taken it. All we had to do then was find the key. It will be hidden in a coat lining, or tucked behind a collar. ~~We could have taken the pouch. We could have dumped you back into the hands of the local KGB. But that's not how we operate. We're not like them. You'll see that for yourself, Kulakov. *You'll see we're not like them.* You keep the pouch. I'll take you to America. You can give it to me when we get there. Okay?"~~

"Okay," Kulakov agrees.

"Okay." Stone stands up. "I know this is very difficult for you—not knowing what's going to happen to you, wondering if you did the right thing after all. You have to hang on to two things. You can't undo what you've done. If you go back, they'll kill you. The second thing to hang on to is the belief that it will all work out." He puts a kindly hand on Kulakov's shoulder—the first of many gestures Stone will make to win his confidence. "It will work out, I promise you. It always works out."

The arrangements take longer than Stone thought they would. He has difficulty getting authorization from the Navy to commandeer one of their mail planes parked on the Athens tarmac, and once he gets the authorization he has trouble tracking down the pilot and crew. They are finally run to ground in a Pireaus nest called the Black Cat Inn and brought back to life with pots of black coffee mixed with dire threats about what will happen to them if they don't turn to. Four hours after his conversation with the ambassador, Stone is ready to put the show on the road. All the embassy's Cadillacs, including the ambassador's pride and joy, which is bulletproof, along with several civilian cars belonging to the security people, are pressed into service. The convoy, when it finally pulls down the curved driveway, is very impressive. In the lead are two Greek police cars with flashing blue lights on their roofs. (The Greek government will later deny any of its vehicles participated, and will confiscate photographs that prove the contrary.) Then come nine embassy cars, with the bulletproof Cadillac sandwiched in the middle. Halfway down the first narrow street, the last of the nine cars swerves to a stop across the road, blocking the dozen or so cars full of journalists chasing after the convoy.

Fifteen minutes after the convoy departs, a small Greek van with the faded markings of a laundry company on the panel sides pulls unobtrusively to a side door. Two workmen in white overalls carry in several large straw hampers, and return moments later with the hampers full of dirty linen, which they stow in the back. The van starts off down the side streets in the general direction of the coast. In one of the narrow back alleys in the rat's maze of roads between Athens and Pireaus, a Mercedes suddenly veers in front of it, forcing it to the curb. A second Mercedes jams up behind. While two heavies hold the two frightened workmen at gunpoint, four others pull open the rear doors and rip the straw lids off the hampers. Much to their astonishment, all they come up with are armloads of dirty napkins and tablecloths from official embassy dinners.

At that moment, the ambassador's bulletproof Cadillac, with Kulakov in the back seat and Stone riding shotgun, is pulling through an unmarked gate of the Athens airport straight onto the tarmac. On the far side of the runway, its engines warmed, its takeoff clearance already granted, sits the Navy mail plane that will carry them to Malta, where an Air Force Globemaster will take them, with only a fuel stop in the Azores, to a SAC base in Virginia.

The throbbing of the Globemaster engines makes Stone drowsy, and he has to struggle to keep his eyes open and the conversation, however intermittent, going. Kulakov, in a window seat, seems to be mesmerized by the thin wisp of smoke that spirals up from his cigarette in the ashtray. "I can't remember," he says slowly, troubled by the lack of memory, the failure to come up with names or

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