

Palace of Treason: A Novel (The Red Sparrow Trilogy Book 2)

By Jason Matthews

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The thrilling sequel to *Red Sparrow*—CIA insider Jason Matthews's compulsively readable *New York Times* bestseller and Edgar Award winner—featuring Russian spy Dominika Egorova and CIA agent Nate Nash "shimmers with authenticity. The villains are richly drawn...the scenes of them on the job are beyond chilling" (*The New York Times Book Review*).

Captain Dominika Egorova of the Russian Intelligence Service despises the oligarchs, crooks, and thugs of Putin's Russia—but what no one knows is that she is also working for the CIA. Her "sparrow" training in the art of sexual espionage further complicates the mortal risks she must take, as does her love for her handler Nate Nash—a shared lust that is as dangerous as treason.

As Dominika expertly dodges exposure, she deals with a murderously psychotic boss, survives an Iranian assassination attempt and attempts to rescue an arrested double agent—and thwart Putin's threatening flirtations. A grand, wildly entertaining ride through the steel-trap mind of a CIA insider, *Palace of Treason* is a story "as suspenseful and cinematic as the best spy movies" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*)—one that feels fresh and so possible, in fact, that it's doubtful this novel can ever be published in Russia.

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Editorial Review

Review
Of the 13 sister princesses who jointly rule Suala, Desmia believes that she alone wears the true crown. She knows that Lord Throckmorton cannot be trusted, but would he intentionally set the palace on fire? In the third book in the Palace Chronicles series, Haddix focuses this saga with urgency and suspicion; cunning schemes and switched identities; a spirited adventure with a nod to Cinderella (yes, there is a prince, and his name is Charming); and sundry tales. Desmia is indeed a commoner, but she has been raised as royalty and leads her princess sisters and willing impostors to help to right wrongs and save the bond between their land of Suala and neighboring Fridesia. While Haddix seemingly complicates Desmia’s determination with vague memories, a meeting with Janelia, a genuine sister, illuminates her visions and provides a compass for her bold and strategic calculations. Readers enchanted with princesses and palace life will enjoy a hearty dish of royal conspiracy with a healthy side of sibling loyalty that should keep them satisfied until the next installment.

HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Haddix is no stranger to best-seller lists, and she has another hit on her hands with the Palace Chronicles. Buy multiple copies, and expect eager, advance requests for them. (Booklist January 1, 2015)

Haddix continues the series that began with the alternate "Cinderella" Just Ella (1999) with a story about a different princess.Princess Desmia, raised as the true princess of Suala, now rules with 12 other princesses, each raised similarly and separately. When a fire destroys their palace, apparently killing most of the other princesses, Desmia finds herself in the clutches of the evil Madame Bisset. Escaping, she finds her true sister, Janelia, along with a troupe of ragged boys who look to Janelia as their Mam. Desmia decides she must somehow travel to neighboring Fridesia to find friends Ella and Jeb, so with Janelia and two boys, Herk and Tog, she sets out surreptitiously across an open landscape that terrifies the sheltered young woman. Desmia strives to conquer her fears and to quell the princess training that constantly tells her she's superior, gradually coming to see her new friends as equals. Finally arriving at the Fridesian palace, she meets the terminally handsome but reputedly stupid Prince Charming, whom she must convince of the truth of her tale. Haddix keeps the plot suspenseful even as she delves into Desmia's new insights, providing plenty of entertainment along with some advice for life. Readers who enjoyed the earlier books will find plenty to like here, as the book even adds a hint of romance for Desmia. A welcome return to the Just Ella universe. (Kirkus Reviews February 1, 2015)

Raised in the palace of Suala to believe she is the true princess, Desmia is still adjusting to having twelve sisters who were each also raised to believe they are the true princess. Because they were all raised in secret, however, they do not have Desmia’s experience with court intrigue, treachery, and manipulation, and before she can coach them in navigating her world, a shocking fire destroys the palace and possibly everyone Desmia has grown to care about.

The third of Haddix’s *The Palace Chronicles* is burdened with a weak plot and the frequently whiny narrative voice of Desmia, a difficult heroine to root for. Her repeated ruminations about how untrustworthy everyone may be and her treatment of the new family she discovers after she has been kidnapped make her seem selfish and paranoid, even when the reader takes into account her years of being sheltered and manipulated by the palace advisors. An injury that requires her to be carried for most of her rescue mission and a full-fledged panic attack once she is out under open skies could have made her seem more sympathetic

but instead do the opposite. When Desmia and her entourage finally arrive at the neighboring kingdom, the plot against them is unraveled so quickly and so neatly it seems like an afterthought. Fans of the series may be interested in continuing the saga, but they will find little of the charm of the previous two books.—Vikki Terrile. (VOYA April 2015)

Desmia was raised to be the one true princess. She soon discovers that 12 other girls were raised to believe the same. Just as she’s coming to care for her sister-princesses, a fire destroys everything. The pampered former princess finds herself on the run without the luxuries she’s come to know. Though this title can stand alone independent of the previous two novels, only die-hard fans will clamor for it. An additional purchase. (School Library Journal June 2015)

"Haddix is no stranger to best-seller lists, and she has another hit on her hands with the Palace Chronicles. Buy multiple copies, and expect eager, advance requests for them." (Booklist)

"A welcome return to the *Just Ella* universe." (Kirkus Reviews)

About the Author
Jason Matthews is a retired officer of the CIA’s Operations Directorate. Over a thirty three year career he served in multiple overseas locations and engaged in clandestine collection of national security intelligence, specializing in denied area operations. Matthews conducted recruitment operations against Soviet–East European, East Asian, Middle Eastern, and Caribbean targets. As Chief in various CIA Stations, he collaborated with foreign partners in counterproliferation and counterterrorism operations. He is the author of *Red Sparrow*, *Palace of Treason*, and the forthcoming *The Kremlin's Candidate*. He lives in Southern California.

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Palace of Treason

1

Captain Dominika Egorova of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR, pulled the hem of her little black dress down as she weaved through the crowds of pedestrians in the red neon, pranging chaos of Boulevard de Clichy in the Pigalle. Her black heels clicked on the Parisian sidewalk as she held her chin up, keeping the gray head of the rabbit in sight ahead of her—solo trailing surveillance on a moving foot target, one of the more difficult skills in offensive streetcraft. Dominika covered him loosely, alternately paralleling on the dividing island in the center of the boulevard and drafting behind the early evening pedestrians to screen her profile.

The man stopped to buy a charred kebab skewer—typically pork in this Christian quarter—from a vendor who fanned the charcoal of a small brazier with a folded piece of cardboard, sending an occasional spark into the passing crowd and enveloping the street corner in clouds of smoke fragrant with coriander and chili. Dominika eased back behind a street pole: it was unlikely that the rabbit was using the snack stop as a way to check his six—for the last three days he had shown himself to be oblivious on the street—but she wanted to avoid his noticing her too soon. Plenty of other street creatures already had watched her passing through the crowd—dancer’s legs, regal bust, arc-light-blue eyes—cutting her scent, sniffing for strength or frailty.

In two practiced glances, Dominika checked the zoo of faces but did not get that tingle on the back of her

neck that meant the start of trouble. The rabbit, a Persian, finished tearing the strips of meat with his teeth and tossed the short skewer into the gutter. Apparently this Shia Muslim had no compunctions about eating pork—or slathering his face between the legs of hookers, for that matter. He started moving again, Dominika keeping pace.

An unshaven and swarthy young man left his friends leaning against the steam-weeping window of a noodle shop, slid in beside Dominika, and put an arm around her shoulder. “Je bande pour toi,” he said in the crooked French of the Maghreb—he had a hard-on for her. Jesus. She had no time for this, and felt the smoldering surge in her stomach running into her arms. No. Become ice. She shook his arm off, pushed his face away, and kept walking. “Va voir ailleurs si j’y suis”—go somewhere else, see if I’m there—she said over her shoulder. The young man stopped short, made an obscene gesture, and spat on the sidewalk.

Dominika reacquired the Persian’s gray head just as the man entered La Diva, passing through the scrolling lights framing the dance hall’s entrance. She drifted toward the door, noted the heavy velvet curtain, and gave him a beat to get inside, this diminutive man who held the nuclear secrets of the Islamic Republic of Iran in his head. He was her prey, a human intelligence target. Dominika ran the edge of her will rasping across the whetstone of her mind. It was to be a hostile recruitment attempt, an ambush, coercive, a cold pitch, and she thought she had an even chance to flip him in the next half hour.

Tonight Dominika wore her brown hair down around her shoulders, bangs covering one eye, like an Apache dancer from the 1920s. She wore square-framed tortoiseshell eyeglasses with clear lenses, a Parisian Lois Lane out for the night. But the typing-pool effect was spoiled by the low-cut black sheath dress and Louboutin pumps. She was a former ballerina, her legs shapely and knotted in the calves, though she walked with a nearly imperceptible limp from a right foot shattered by a ballet-academy rival when Dominika was twenty years old.

Paris. She hadn’t breathed the air of the West since she returned to Moscow after being exchanged in a spy swap on a bridge in Estonia months ago. The images of the exchange were fading, the sound of her long-ago steps on the silver-wet bridge increasingly muffled, draped in the fog of that night. Returned home, she had inhaled the Russian air deeply; it was her country, Rodina, the Motherland, but the clean bite of pine forest and loamy black earth was tainted by a hint of liquid corruption, like a dead animal beneath the floorboards. Of course, she had been greeted back home enthusiastically, with florid kudos and good wishes from lumpy officials. She had reported for work at SVR Headquarters—referred to as the Center—immediately, but seeing her colleagues in the Service once again, the milling herd of the siloviki, the anointed inner circle, had collapsed her spirit. What did you expect? she thought.

Things were different with her now. Exquisitely, massively, dangerously different. She had been recruited by a CIA case officer—with whom she had fallen in love—then vetted, trained, and directed to return to Moscow as a penetration of the Center. She was learning to wait, to listen, to appear to be a wholly quiescent creature of the mephitic atmosphere of her Service. To that end, she had demurred when several idiotic headquarters positions were offered to her—she would wait for a job with the kind of access CIA really wanted. She feigned interest in the process and otherwise took the time to attend a short course in operational psychology, and another in counterintelligence: It might be useful in the future to know how mole hunters in her Service would be hunting, how the footsteps in the stairwell would sound when they came for her.

She bided her time by looking into their souls, for Dominika was born a synesthete, with a brain wired to see colored auras around people and thereby read passion, treachery, fear, or deception. When she was five years

old, Dominika's synesthesia shocked and worried her professor father and musician mother. They made their little girl promise never to reveal this soaring precocity to anyone, even as she grew accustomed to it. At twenty, Dominika was lifted on maroon waves of music at the ballet academy. At twenty-five, she calibrated a man's lust by his scarlet halo. Now just past thirty, being able to divine men's and women's spirits just possibly would save her life.

There was something else. Since her recruitment, Dominika had been visited by images of her late mother, a benign chimera that would appear by her side to offer encouragement and support. Russians are spiritual and emotional, so fondly remembering ancestors was not at all creepy or demented. At least Dominika didn't worry about it, and besides, her mother's spirit fortified her as she resumed her double life, a shimmering hand on her shoulder as she stood at the mouth of the dark cave, smelling the beast inside, willing herself to get on with it.

On her return to the Center from the West, there had been two clearance sessions with an oily little man from counterespionage and a saturnine female stenographer. He asked about the ubiytsa, the Spetsnaz assassin who had almost killed her in Athens, and then about being in CIA custody: what the CIA men had been like, what the Americans asked her, what she told them; Dominika had stared down the stenographer, who was swaddled in a yellow haze—deceit and avarice—and replied that she told them nothing. The bear sniffed at her shoes and nodded, apparently satisfied. But the bear was never satisfied, she thought. It never was.

Her exploits, and near escapes, and contact with the Americans cast suspicion on her—as it was with anyone returning from active service in the West—and she knew the liver-eyed lizards of the FSB, the Federal Security Service, were observing her, waiting for a ripple, watching for an email or postcard from abroad, or an inexplicable, cryptic telephone call from a Moscow suburb, or an observed contact with a foreigner. But there were no ripples. Dominika was normal in her patterns; there was nothing for them to see.

So they placed a handsome physical trainer to bump her during the "mandatory" self-defense course run in an old mansion in Domodedovo, on Varshavskaya Ulitsa off the MKAD ring road. The moldy, spavined house with creaky staircases and a green-streaked copper roof was nestled in an unkempt botanical garden hidden behind a wall with a crooked sign reading VILAR INSTITUTE OF OFFICINAL PLANTS. A few bored class participants—a florid Customs Service woman and two overage border guards—sat and smoked on benches along the walls of the glassed-in winter garden that served as the practice area.

Daniil, the trainer, was a tall, blond Great Russian, about thirty-five years old and imperially slim, with sturdy wrists and pianist's hands. His features were delicate: Jawline, cheek, and brow were finely formed, and the impossibly long lashes above the sleepy blue eyes could stir the potted palm fronds in the winter garden from across the room. Dominika knew there was no such thing as a mandatory self-defense class in SVR, and that Daniil most likely was a ringer dispatched to casually ask questions and eventually elicit from an unwary Dominika that she had colluded with a foreign intelligence service, or passed state secrets, or seduced multiple debauched partners in hot upper berths of swaying midnight trains. It didn't matter what transgressions they harvested. The counterintelligence hounds couldn't define treason, but they'd know it when they saw it.

She certainly was not expecting to be taught anything along the lines of close-quarters fighting techniques. On the first day, with dappled sunlight coming through the grimy glass ceiling of the winter garden, Dominika was intrigued to see a pale-blue aura of artful thought and soul swirling around Daniil's head and from the tips of his fingers. She was additionally surprised when Daniil began instructing her in Sistema Rukopashnogo Boya, the Russian hand-to-hand combat system, medieval, brutal, rooted in tenth-century Cossack tradition with mystical connections to the Orthodox Church. It was normally taught only to Russian

military personnel.

She had seen the Spetsnaz assassin use the same moves in the blood-splattered Athens hotel room, not recognizing them for what they were, but horrified at their buttery efficiency. Daniil spared her nothing in training, and she found she enjoyed physically working her body again, remembering the long-ago discipline of her cherished dancing career, the career They had taken away from her. Sistema put a premium on flexibility, ballistic speed, and knowledge of vulnerable points on the human body. As Daniil demonstrated joint locks and submission holds, his face close to Dominika's, he saw something in her fifty-fathom eyes he wouldn't want to stir up unnecessarily.

After two weeks, Dominika was mastering strikes and throws that would have taken other students months to learn. She had initially covered her mouth and laughed at the bent-leg monkey walk used to close with an opponent in combat, and the swirling shoulder shrug that preceded a devastating hand strike. Now, she was knocking Daniil down on the mat as often as he dumped her. In the dusty afternoon light of the room, Dominika watched Daniil's back muscles flex as he demonstrated a new technique and she idly wondered about him. The way he moved, he could have been a ballet dancer, or a gymnast. How had he gotten into the killing martial arts? Was he Spetsnaz, from a Vympel group? She had noticed, with the eye of a Sparrow—a trained seductress of the state—that his ring finger was significantly longer than his index finger. The likelihood existed therefore, according to the warty matrons at Sparrow School, of above-average-sized courting tackle.

Estimating the size of a man was not the only thing Dominika had learned at State School Four, Sparrow School, the secret sexpionage academy that trained women in the art of seduction. The classrooms and auditoria in the walled, peeling mansion in the pine forest outside the city of Kazan on the banks of the Volga were in her mind still. She could hear the droning clinical lectures on human sexuality and love. She could see the jumpy, roiling films of coitus and perversion. The lists of sexual techniques, numbered in the hundreds, endlessly memorized and practiced—No. 88, "Butterfly wings"; No. 42, "String of pearls"; No. 32, "The carpet tack"—would come back to her, uninvited thoughts of the numb days and evil nights, and everything sprinkled with rose water to cloak the musk of rampant male and lathered female, and the dirty-nailed hands squeezing her thighs, and the drops of sweat that hung from the fleshy noses that inevitably, unavoidably, would drip onto her face. She had endured it to spite the svini, the pigs, all of them, who thought she would lie on her back and open her legs. And she would now show them how wrong they were.

Calm down, she told herself. She was fighting the building stress of being back in Russia's service, in the embrace of the Motherland, the start of an impossibly risky existence. There was additional anguish: She didn't know whether the man she loved was still alive. And if he was still breathing, her love was a secret she would have to guard to her core, because there was the small detail that he was an American case officer of CIA. She waited for the overdue start of Daniil's sly elicitation, plausible after the earned familiarity of fourteen days of physical training. She would have to be exceedingly careful—no baiting, no sarcasm—but it was also an opening for a well-timed bit of dezinformatsiya, deception, perhaps a sly hint about her admiration for President Putin. Everything she told Daniil would go back to the FSB, and then the Center, and be compiled with all the other pieces of the "welcome home" investigation, and ultimately determine whether she would retain her status as an operupolnomochenny, an operations officer. But my, those eyelashes.

Dominika held her head erect, elegant on a long neck, as she pushed through the musky velvet curtain into the La Diva club. The bouncer at the inner door looked with professional approval at her little black dress,

then glanced briefly into her tiny black satin clutch, barely large enough to hold a lipstick and wafer-thin smartphone. He pulled the heavy curtain aside and motioned her to enter. No weapons, he thought. Mademoiselle Doudounes, Miss Big Chest, is clean.

Captain Egorova was in fact more than able to dispense lethal force. The lipstick tube in her purse was an elektricheskiy pistolet, a single-shot electric gun, a recent update from SVR technical—Line T—laboratories, a new version of a venerable Cold War weapon. The disposable lipstick gun fired a murderously explosive 9mm Makarov cartridge accurately out to two meters—the bullet had a compressed metal dust core that expanded massively on contact. The only sound at discharge was a single loud click.

Dominika scanned the black-lit interior of the club, a large semicircular room filled with chipped tables in the center and tired leatherette booths along the walls. A low stage with old-timey footlights stood dark and empty. Her target, Parvis Jamshidi, sat alone in a center booth pensively looking up at the ceiling. Dominika did a second quick scan, quartering the room, focusing on the far corners: No obvious countersurveillance or lounging bodyguard. She weaved between the tables toward Jamshidi's booth, ignoring the snapped fingers of a fat man at a table, signaling her to come over, either to order another petit jaune or to suggest they go together for thirty minutes to the Chat Noir Design Hotel down the block.

She was keyed up as the familiar feel of the hunt, of contact with the opposition, rose in her throat, tightened across her chest, and switched on the glow-plugs in her stomach. Dominika eased into the booth and put the little clutch down in front of her. Jamshidi continued looking up at the ceiling, as if in prayer. He was short and slight, with a forked goatee. His El Greco hands were folded on the table, long-fingered and still. He wore the requisite pearl-gray suit with white collarless shirt buttoned at the neck. A small man, a physicist, an expert in centrifugal separation, the lead scientist in Iran's uranium-enrichment program. Dominika said nothing, waiting for him to speak.

Jamshidi felt her presence and his eyes lowered, appraising Dominika's figure—the slim arms, the plain, square-cut nails. She stared at his face until he stopped looking at the blue-veined cleft between her breasts.

"How much for one hour?" he said casually. He had a reedy voice and spoke in French. In the club's musk-cat air his words came out milky yellow and weak, all deceit and greed. Dominika noted with interest that the ultraviolet light in the club did not affect her ability to read his fetid colors. She continued to look at him mildly.

"Did you hear me?" Jamshidi said, raising his voice. "Do you understand French, or are you a putain from Kiev?" He looked up again at the ceiling, as if in dismissal. Dominika followed his gaze. A Plexiglas catwalk hung suspended from the rafters and a naked woman in heels was dancing directly above Jamshidi's head. Dominika looked back at his preposterous goatee.

"What makes you think I'm a working girl?" said Dominika in unaccented French.

Jamshidi looked back down, met her eyes, and laughed. It was at this point that he should have heard the rustling in the long grass, the instant before grip of fang and claw.

"I asked you how much for an hour," he said.

"Five hundred," said Dominika, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. Jamshidi leaned forward and made a further obscene suggestion.

“Three hundred more,” said Dominika, looking at him over the tops of her eyeglasses. She smiled at him and pushed her glasses back up. As if on cue the stage footlights came on and a dozen women trooped out wearing nothing but thigh-high vinyl boots and white peaked caps. Filtered spotlights dappled their bodies with pink and white stripes as they gyrated in formation to blaring Europop.



Jamshidi originally had been spotted in Vienna by the Russian Rostekhnadzor representative in the International Atomic Energy Agency, who noted the Iranian’s after-hours predilection for the leggy escorts who sipped sherry in the bars of the Gurtel district. The IAEA lead was passed to the Vienna rezident who in turn reported it to Moscow Center, SVR Headquarters in Yasenevo, in southwest Moscow.

A vigorous debate in the Center ensued regarding whether Jamshidi was a valid recruitment target. Pursuing an official from a client state was unwise, some said. The old techniques of blackmail and coercion would not work, others said. The risk of blowback and damage to bilateral relations was too great, still others said. A single department head wondered out loud whether this was a too-convenient opportunity. Perhaps this was a provocation, a disinformation trap somehow hatched by the Western services—CIA, Mossad, MI6—to discredit Moscow.

This zagovoritsya, this dithering, was not uncommon in SVR. The modern Foreign Intelligence Service was as riven by fear of the president of the Federation—of the blue-eyed X-ray stares and back-alley reprisals—as the NKVD was of Stalin’s rages in the 1930s. No one wanted to validate a bad operation and commit the ultimate transgression: embarrassing Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin on the world stage.

Alexei Ivanovich Zyuganov, chief of the Counterintelligence Department of the Service—Line KR—was first among many who declared Jamshidi’s recruitment too risky (chiefly because the case was not his). But the president, a former KGB officer himself (his service record, including a torpid foreign posting to Communist Dresden in the late 1980s, was never discussed, ever), overruled the too-timorous voices in SVR.

“Find out what this scientist knows,” Putin ordered the SVR director in Yasenevo over the secure vysokochastoty high-frequency line from the Kremlin. “I want to know how far along these Iranian fanatics are with their uranium. The Zionists and the Americans are losing patience.” Putin paused, then said, “Give this to Egorova, let her run with it.”

It normally could be considered a towering compliment when the president of the Federation specifically designated an officer in the Service to manage a high-profile recruitment operation—it had happened occasionally in the past with old KGB favorites of Putin’s—but Dominika was under no illusion about why she had been selected. She had not even met the president. “It’s a great honor,” said the director, when he summoned her to his office to inform her that the Kremlin had given instructions. Khuinya, bollocks, thought Dominika. They want a former Sparrow to run this pussy snare. Very well, boys, she thought, mind your fingers.

Her selection did accomplish one thing. The palpable weight of the FSB counterintelligence reinvestigation was lifted. All the games stopped: The tinted-window Peugeot was no longer parked outside her apartment on Kastanaevskaya Ulitsa in the mornings and evenings; the periodic jovial interviews with the counterespionage staff trailed off; and Sistema workouts with the toothsome Daniil ended. Dominika now knew she had been cleared—certainly Putin’s impatient orders had hastened the process, but she was through. She savored the irony that President Putin himself had just put her, the fox, in the henhouse. But the savored irony soon turned into a thin white line of anger in her stomach.

Things moved rather quickly after that, including her assignment to Line KR, the counterintelligence staff. Alexei Zyuganov summoned her and without emotion informed her that the decision had come down from the fourth floor that she was to manage the operation against Jamshidi from Line KR. His demeanor was sour, his voice contemptuous, his gaze indirect. And beneath the façade, in the few seconds of direct eye contact, she saw demented paranoia. He sat in a swirl of black as he spoke. He droned that the resources of his department were to be used to ensure that her planning was sound, and that there would be no flaps—none whatsoever would be tolerated. Zyuganov's deputy, Yevgeny, in his thirties, scowling, stout, and broad, dour as an Orthodox deacon and impossibly dark, from thatched hair to woolly eyebrows to orangutan forearms, leaned against the office doorjamb behind Dominika, listening, while appraising the curve of her buttocks under her smooth skirt.

The truth was that Zyuganov was furious at being publically overruled regarding the recruitment of the Persian. The poisonous and diminutive Zyuganov—he was just over five feet tall—was doubly stung by the case being handed to Dominika Egorova and not to him, was trebly stung by the fact that the president of the Russian Federation knew of and had an eye on a mere captain, his new subordinate. Zyuganov appraised this shlyukha, this trained whore, from the sodden duck blind of his mind.

She was the rare, ridiculous female operupolnomochenny, operations officer, in the Service, but with a pedigree and an unassailable reputation. He had heard the stories, read the restricted reports. Among other accomplishments in her young career, she acquired the information that led to the arrest of one of the most damaging penetrations of SVR, veteran Lieutenant General Vladimir Korchnoi—a traitor run for a decade and a half by the Americans—ending a mole hunt that had lasted years. Zyuganov had managed part of the search to unmask Korchnoi, and had not succeeded where this bint had. Then she had been wounded, captured, and held briefly by CIA, returned from the West in triumph to Yasenevo, given a meritorious promotion to junior captain, and now, peremptorily, was assigned to Line KR to work a director's dossier case.

Zyuganov, who started his own venomous career during the precursor KGB years as an interrogator in the Lubyanka cellars, could not oppose her personnel assignment. He dismissed Egorova and watched her go—she was forced to squeeze by an unmoving, smirking Yevgeny in the doorway. The operation against the Persian was too important to scuttle, but Zyuganov's Lubyanka instincts stirred in another direction. He could take control and earn high-profile credit for bagging the Persian if Captain Egorova were out of the picture. He sat back in his swivel chair thinking, his little feet dangling, and looked at the dark-browed Yevgeny, daring him with a gassy stare to say anything. Vilami na vode pisano, the future is written with a pitchfork on flowing water. No one knows what's going to happen.

Outside the club, Dominika led Jamshidi by a clammy hand through the thick haze of nighttime traffic, dashing across Place Blanche and then more slowly downhill a half block to the little Hotel Belgique with its blue-striped canopy over the door. A bored ubiytsa behind the counter, a bruiser with big arms in a dirty T-shirt, threw Dominika a key and a towel.

The door opened a foot before it hit the metal frame of the bed as Dominika pushed into the room. They had to squeeze past the cracked dresser. The screened toilet in the corner of the room was ringed in rust stains, and a large mirror, spotted and smoky, hung over the headboard by a dangerously frayed velvet rope. Jamshidi walked to the toilet to relieve himself. "Take off your clothes," he said over his shoulder, splashing liberally outside the porcelain. Dominika sat at the foot of the bed with her legs crossed, bouncing her foot. For five kopeks she would put her lipstick tube against his forehead and push the plunger. Jamshidi zipped

and turned toward her.

“What are you waiting for? Strip and get on your stomach,” he said, slipping out of his suit coat. He hung it on a nail on the back of the door. “Don’t worry, I have your money. You can send it to your momma in Kiev—that is if she’s not working next door.”

Dominika leaned back and chuckled. “Good evening, Dr. Jamshidi,” she said. “I am not from Ukraine.”

Jamshidi’s head came up at the mention of his name and he scanned her face. Any Iranian nuclear scientist violating sharia and furtively tomcatting in Montmartre quickly sniffs danger. He didn’t ask her how she knew him.

“I don’t care where you’re from,” he said.

So educated, thought Dominika, and still so stupid. “I need a few minutes of your time,” said Dominika. “I assure you it will be of interest to you.”

Jamshidi searched her face. Who was this tart with the Mona Lisa smile? “I told you to get undressed,” he said, stepping toward her, but unsure about what was happening. His ardor was running out of him like the sand in a broken hourglass. He snatched at her wrist and pulled her to her feet. He stuck his face close to hers, drinking in the scent of Vent Vert, searching her eyes behind those incongruous glasses. “A poil,” strip, he said. He squeezed her wrist and watched her face. He got nothing. Dominika looked him in the eyes as she put a thumbnail between his first and second knuckle and pressed. Jamshidi jumped with the pain and jerked his hand away.

“Just a few minutes,” Dominika said, with a little lead in her voice, to give him a hint, a taste. She spoke casually, as if she had not just lit up the median nerve of his right hand.

“Who are you?” said Jamshidi sliding away from her. “What do you want?”

Dominika put her hand on his sleeve, pushing the limits, the man-woman Islam thing. Not so big a problem with this educated Persian who lived in Europe, this whoreson with a taste for redheads.

“I want to propose an arrangement,” said Dominika. “A mutually beneficial arrangement.” She left her hand where it was. Jamshidi threw it off and turned for the door. Whatever this was, he wanted out. Dominika stepped smoothly in front of him and Jamshidi put his hand on her chest to push her aside. Slowly, almost tenderly, she trapped his hand tight against her breast with her elegant fingers, feeling his moist palm on her skin. She applied light downward pressure and stepped into him—Jamshidi’s face contorted in pain—forcing him nose-first onto the ratty bedspread. “I insist you let me tell you,” Dominika said, releasing his hand.

Jamshidi sat up on the bed with wide eyes. He knew all he needed to know. “You are from French Intelligence?” he asked, rubbing his wrist. When Dominika did not react he said, “CIA, the British?” Dominika stayed silent and Jamshidi shuddered at the worst thought, “You are Mossad?”

Dominika shook her head slightly.

“Then who are you?”

“We are your ally and friend. We alone stand with Iran against a global vendetta, sanctions, military threats.

We support your work, Doctor, in every way."

"Moscow?" said Jamshidi, laughing under his breath. "The KGB?"

"No longer KGB, Doctor, now Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki, the SVR."

Jamshidi shook his head and breathed easy; no Zionist action team, praise Allah. "And what do you want? What is this nonsense about a proposal?" he said, confidence back now, his yellow stronger.

Zhaba, you toad, thought Dominika. "Moscow would like to consult with you; we would like you to advise us on your program." Dominika braced for the indignation.

"Consult? Advise? You want me to spy on my own country, on my program, to compromise our security?" Jamshidi the righteous, Jamshidi the patriot.

"There is no threat to Iran's security," said Dominika evenly. "Keeping Moscow informed will protect your country against its enemies."

Jamshidi snorted. "You are ridiculous," he said. "Let me up now; get out of my way." Dominika did not move.

"I mentioned that my proposal would be mutually beneficial, Doctor. Wouldn't you like to hear how?"

Jamshidi snorted again but stayed still.

"You live and work in Vienna, accredited to the International Atomic Energy Agency. You travel frequently to Tehran. You are the leading expert in your country on centrifugal isotope separation, and for the last several years have directed the assembly of centrifuge cascades at the Fuel Enrichment Plant at Natanz. Correct so far?"

Jamshidi did not respond but looked at her as he kneaded his hand.

"A brilliant career, steady success in the program, in the favor of the Supreme Leader, and with allies in the Security Council. A wife and children in Tehran. But as a man of exceptional needs, a man who has earned the right to do as he pleases, you have made acquaintances—both in Vienna and during these occasional furtive and unauthorized weekends in Paris. You appreciate beautiful women, and they appreciate you."

"May Shaitan take you," said Jamshidi. "You are a liar."

"How disappointed your friends would be to hear you disavow them," said Dominika, reaching for her clutch. She took out the phone and held it loosely in her hand. Jamshidi stared at her. "Especially your friend Udranka. She has an apartment in Vienna on Langobardenstrasse, very near your IAEA office. You know it well."

"You fucking Russians," said Jamshidi.

"No, actually, you are fucking a Serb. A quite innocent girl, I might add. Udranka is from Belgrade. You've seen quite a lot of her."

“Lies,” stuttered Jamshidi. “No proof.”

Dominika swiped a slim finger across the screen of her phone to start the streaming video and tilted it toward Jamshidi so he could see.

“Your most recent visit, August twenty-third,” narrated Dominika. “You brought candy—Sissi-Kugeln chocolates—and a bottle of Nussberg Sauvignon. She broiled a beefsteak. You sodomized her at twenty-one forty-five hours, and left fifteen minutes later.” Dominika tossed the phone onto the bedspread, watching the brutality of her words work on him as the tinny video continued. “Keep it, if you wish.” He looked once again at the screen and slid it away from him.

“No,” he said. The color around his head and shoulders was bleached out, barely visible. Dominika knew he had already calculated the unspoken threat. The mullahs would execute him if his twisted little habits were exposed, if his prurient misuse of official funds was revealed, but especially if his stupidity at being blackmailed was brought to light. “No,” he repeated.

Ran’she syadyesh, ran’she vydyesh, thought Dominika, the sooner you get in, the sooner you get out. She sat beside him and started talking softly, concealing her contempt. He was a beetle in a matchbox, with nowhere to move—Dominika didn’t let him protest or feign ignorance. Instead she firmly told him the rules: He would answer her questions, they would meet discreetly, she would give him “expense money,” she would protect him, and (with a subtle nod) he could continue taking his pleasure with Udranka. They would meet in Vienna, at Udranka’s apartment, in seven days’ time. He should reserve the entire evening. Dominika asked whether that was convenient, but got up before he could answer. He had no choice. She walked to the door, opened it a crack, and turned to look at him sitting small and quiet on the stained bedspread.

“I will take care of you, Doctor,” she said, “in all things. Are you coming?”

They left the room and descended the narrow staircase with peeling paper and creaking treads. The ubiytsa came from around the counter and stood at the bottom of the stairs. “Fifty euros,” he said, arms across his chest. “Entertainment tax.” A brown haze floated around his head: cruelty, violence, stupidity. Uncomprehending, Jamshidi tried to squeeze by him, but the man pinned him to the wall with a meaty forearm under the chin. His other hand brought up a cutthroat razor. “One hundred euros,” said the man, looking up at Dominika. “Prostitution tax.” Pinned by the neck, Jamshidi could only goggle as she stepped off the last stair and drew close.

Dominika was partially conscious of a faint annoyance at being interrupted, nettled at an outside interference. Her vision was acute and ice clear in the center, but hazy around the margins. She smelled the thug through his shirt, smelled the brown animal essence of him. Without a break in stride, Dominika pushed right up to him, through his brown cloud, and grasped the back of his greasy head softly, lovingly. Her other hand clamped onto the side of his face, her thumb at the hinge of his jaw. She pressed violently in and up—she felt the temporomandibular joint click under her thumb pad—and the brute’s head came up and he howled in pain, the razor falling from his fingers. In a cloud of funk and perfume, Dominika pulled his smelly hair and yanked his head back. An instant flashing thought: What would Bratok, big brother Gable, one of her CIA handlers, think about this temper of hers? Then, electrically, a second thought: What would all her Americans feel as they watched her in this reeking stairwell doing this— Her focus snapped back and she struck the bruiser once with the open web of her hand, very fast, in the windpipe. The man grunted once as Dominika pulled him violently backward, hitting his head against the wall to the sound of crunching plaster. He lay on the floor and didn’t move.

Dominika bent, picked up the straight razor, and folded it closed, stilling an impulse to reach over and drag the edge heavily across the unconscious thug's throat. Jamshidi had slid slowly to the floor, gasping. She squatted beside him, her dress riding halfway up her thighs and revealing the lacy black triangle of her underwear, but Jamshidi was staring only at her luminous face, a strand of hair bedroom-sexy over one eye. Slightly out of breath, she spoke softly, straightening her eyeglasses. "I told you we support our friends. I will protect you always. You're my agent now."

PORK SATAY

Marinate thin strips of pork in a thick paste of sesame oil, cardamom, turmeric, pureed garlic, pureed ginger, fish sauce, brown sugar, and lime juice. Grill over cherry-red coals until pork is caramelized and crispy.

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