

LEN DEIGHTON

NEW EXCITED SET

The grand master of
the espionage thriller



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CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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Len Deighton was born in 1929. He worked as a railway clerk before doing his National Service in the RAF as a photographer attached to the Special Investigation Branch.

After his discharge in 1949, he went to art school – first to the St Martin’s School of Art, and then to the Royal College of Art on a scholarship. His mother was a professional cook and he grew up with a keen interest in cookery – a subject he was later to make his own in an animated strip for the *Observer* and in two cookery books. He worked for a while as an illustrator in New York and as art director of an advertising agency in London.

Deciding it was time to settle down, Deighton moved to the Dordogne where he started work on his first book, *The Ipcress File*. Published in 1962, the book was an immediate success.

Since then his work has gone from strength to strength, varying from espionage novels to war, general fiction and non-fiction. The BBC made *Bomber* into a day-long radio drama in ‘real time’. Deighton’s history of World War Two, *Blood, Tears and Folly*, was published to wide acclaim – Jack Higgins called it ‘an absolute landmark’.

As Max Hastings observed, Deighton captured a time and a mood – ‘To those of us who were in our twenties in the 1960s, his books seemed the coolest, funkiest, most sophisticated things we’d ever read – and his books have now deservedly become classics.’

By Len Deighton

FICTION

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Funeral in Berlin

Billion-Dollar Brain

An Expensive Place

to Die

Only When I Larf

Bomber

Declarations of War

Close-Up

Spy Story

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Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Spy

SS-GB

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Goodbye Mickey Mouse

MAMista

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Mexico Set





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Introduction

During the First World War the neutral Netherlands had been the arena in which the rival spy services brawled. In the Second World War it was Portugal that served that purpose. In the Cold War the arena eventually became Mexico. It was in safe houses in Mexico City where the officers of the GRU and those of the KGB clashed, reasoned or sometimes socialized with their Allied opposite numbers. For Moscow, Washington and London these contacts were vital, but for the personnel stationed there the job was a consignment to the promotional rubbish heap. No interesting memoirs were written by the men who spent the Cold War years in Mexico. No indiscreet revelations were spilled into the well-paid serializations that sold the newspapers of that time. Mexico City only came into the headlines as a stopover for Lee Harvey Oswald when the assassination of President John Kennedy was being investigated.

The very first time I visited Mexico I was staying at the YMCA in Los Angeles. I was a penniless art student; well, perhaps that overstates it: let's say I was living from hand to mouth and being saved from starvation by the care and consideration given me by the mother of an American artist I knew in London. Left to my own devices on my last day I ate supper from a hot-dog stand. Los Angeles was not the gourmet's paradise that it later became, and street food was America's answer to the fugu fish. I spent the night groaning in the toilets and when daylight finally arrived I was feeling very ill. In my pocket I had a Greyhound Bus ticket that would take me a few hundred miles into a country I knew nothing about and, with that physical stamina and grim determination that is the currency of the young and foolish, I dragged myself down to the bus depot, threw myself across the back seat and closed my eyes. You may wish to note that the back seat of a Greyhound Bus is not the best place to be if you are alternately praying for help and wishing to die. The sort of buses that are built for Mexico are fitted with robust and unyielding suspensions. The rearmost part of the chassis takes an undue proportion of the punishment that comes with loose surface roads and pot-holes. I recall every jolt of that journey but towards the end of it I was sitting upright and looking out of the window trying to see through the grime and the dust. As always, the Greyhound Bus got me there. During the nineteen fifties I did so many thousands of miles on Grey Buses that they used me in their advertising.

I survived the journey. I climbed down from the bus into the sweaty noon of Mexico's west coast, spotted a bench and a Coca Cola stand and I started writing some notes for my diary. I'm told that nowadays this region of Mexico is packed with luxury hotels, motor-yachts and marinas but back in the nineteen fifties it was just a succession of small villages punctuating empty stretches of bleached cactus strewn landscape. But the traveller counting the pennies gets a far more authentic impression of a country than any luxury tour can provide. The Mexicans were kind and generous to me and, if the steady diet of beans and tortillas I ate became monotonous, I knew that was only because I wasn't as hungry as those around me. I felt at home. From that time I have always enjoyed being with Mexicans and nowadays I am delighted to have become a part of a kind and joyful Mexican family.

I have always contrived to visit places at their least attractive time. Ski resorts in high summer, Asia when the monsoons come, Algeria in the annual rainstorms and the French Riviera when the restaurants are shuttered and the casinos being renovated. It may sound perverse but I can only get under the skin of foreign destinations when the lipstick and powder has been set aside and the spots and pimples are there for all to see. So, when I researched *Mexico Set* I saw it in the stormy season when the steely thunderclouds reach down lower and lower upon the thirsty earth until torrential rain

arrives to lash the streets with fury.

Mexico Set opens with Bernard Samson and Dicky Cruyer in Mexico City. For Bernard the problems are piling higher and higher. While *Berlin Game* saw Bernard battered by professional dilemmas we now see the complex uncertainties of his private life. In this book I am able to do a few of the things that made the whole nine-book project so worthwhile for me. Instead of going back and start all over again with a new story I could take my characters deeper and deeper into the lives that while being so weird and wonderful, are burdened with the domestic everyday events that we all endure.

Every writer wants to maximize everything: intriguing characters, labyrinthine plot, humorous asides, unfolding landscape, crisp dialogue. But now I didn't have to cram all that tightly together. Having the space granted by the planned future books gave me a freedom to do something better than I had ever done before. Of course every story worth reading has all of the above. *Berlin Game* with its dénouement set the scene. After that *Mexico Set* used arguments, anger and confidences to reveal new sides of the characters and their shifting attitudes to each other. Many important characters arrive in subsequent volumes but by the end of this book all the stars are on the stage. Yet in this book – and I know this is going to sound corny – Mexico is the star. It is a wonderful country, its cruel landscape tormented by its amazing weather patterns. With the ever-present danger of ending up writing a travel guide dominated by weather reports, I have kept Mexico as a persistent backdrop to the story of Bernard Samson.

Are the stories based on real people? Scott Fitzgerald argued with Ernest Hemingway about the nature of fiction. Writing to a friend who was deeply offended by the way she was depicted in his book, Fitzgerald said: '*In my theory, utterly opposite to Ernest's, about fiction i.e. that it takes half a dozen people to make a synthesis strong enough to create a fiction character – in that theory, I rather in despite of it, I used you again and again in Tender [is the Night].*' And so it is that most writers take manners and gestures and other bits and pieces from the people they meet, they steal slices from the landscape, relive the pain and joy of their experience. In this way the writer pushes beyond reality in pursuit of some sort of truth.

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‘Some of these people *want* to get killed,’ said Dicky Cruyer, as he jabbed the brake pedal to avoid hitting a newsboy. The kid grinned as he slid between the slowly moving cars, flourishing his newspapers with the controlled abandon of a fan dancer. ‘Six Face Firing Squad’; the headlines were huge and shiny black. ‘Hurricane Threatens Veracruz.’ A smudgy photo of street fighting in San Salvador covered the whole front of a tabloid.

It was late afternoon. The streets shone with that curiously bright shadowless light that precedes a storm. All six lanes of traffic crawling along the Insurgentes halted, and more newsboys danced in the road, together with a woman selling flowers and a kid with lottery tickets trailing from a roll like toilet paper.

Picking his way between the cars came a handsome man in old jeans and checked shirt. He was accompanied by a small child. The man had a Coca Cola bottle in his fist. He swigged at it and then tilted his head back again, looking up into the heavens. He stood erect and immobile, like a bronze statue, before igniting his breath so that a great ball of fire burst from his mouth.

‘Bloody hell!’ said Dicky. ‘That’s dangerous.’

‘It’s a living,’ I said. I’d seen the fire-eaters before. There was always one of them performing somewhere in the big traffic jams. I switched on the car radio but electricity in the air blotted out the music with the sounds of static. It was very hot. I opened the window but the sudden stink of diesel fumes made me close it again. I held my hand against the air-conditioning outlet but the air was warm.

Again the fire-eater blew a huge orange balloon of flame into the air.

‘For us,’ explained Dicky. ‘Dangerous for people in the cars. Flames like that, with all these petrol fumes . . . can you imagine?’ There was a slow roll of thunder. ‘If only it would rain,’ said Dicky. I looked at the sky, the low black clouds trimmed with gold. The huge sun was coloured bright red behind the city’s ever-present blanket of smog, and squeezed tight between the glass buildings that dripped with its light.

‘Who got this car for us?’ I said. A motorcycle, its pillion piled high with cases of beer, weaved precariously between the cars, narrowly missing the flower seller.

‘One of the embassy people,’ said Dicky. He released the brake and the big blue Chevrolet rolled forward a few feet and then all the traffic stopped again. In any town north of the border this factory-fresh car would not have drawn a second glance. But Mexico City is the place old cars go to die. Most of those around us were dented and rusty, or they were crudely repainted in bright primary colours. ‘My friend of mine lent it to us.’

‘I might have guessed,’ I said.

‘It was short notice. They didn’t know we were coming until the day before yesterday. Henry Tiptree – the one who met us at the airport – let us have it. It was a special favour because I knew him at Oxford.’

‘I wish you hadn’t known him at Oxford; then we could have rented one from Hertz – with air-conditioning that worked.’

‘So what can we do . . .’ said Dicky irritably ‘. . . take it back and tell him it’s not good enough for us?’

We watched the fire-eater blow another balloon of flame while the small boy hurried from driver to driver, collecting a peso here and there for his father's performance.

Dicky took some Mexican coins from the slash pocket of his denim jacket and gave them to the child. It was Dicky's faded work suit, his cowboy boots and curly hair that had attracted the attention of the tough-looking woman immigration officer at Mexico City airport. It was only the first-class labels on his expensive baggage, and the fast talking of Dicky's Counsellor friend from the embassy that saved him from the indignity of a body search.

Dicky Cruyer was a curious mixture of scholarship and ruthless ambition, but he was insensitive and this was often his undoing. His insensitivity to people, place and atmosphere could make him seem a clown instead of the cool sophisticate that was his own image of himself. But that didn't make him any less terrifying as friend or foe.

The flower seller bent down, tapped on the window glass and waved at Dicky. He shouted '*Vamos*!' It was almost impossible to see her face behind the unwieldy armful of flowers. Here were blossoms of all colours, shapes and sizes. Flowers for weddings and flowers for dinner hostesses, flowers for mistresses and flowers for suspicious wives.

The traffic began moving again. Dicky shouted '*Vamos!*' much louder.

The woman saw me reaching into my pocket for money and separated a dozen long-stemmed pink roses from the less expensive marigolds and asters. 'Maybe some flowers would be something to give to Werner's wife,' I said.

Dicky ignored my suggestion. 'Get out of the way,' he shouted at the old woman, and the car leaped forward. The old woman jumped clear.

'Take it easy, Dicky, you nearly knocked her over.'

'*Vamos!* I told her; *vamos*. They shouldn't be in the road. Are they all crazy? She heard me and she's right.'

'*Vamos* means "Okay, let's go",' I said. 'She thought you wanted to buy some.'

'In Mexico it also means scam,' said Dicky driving up close to a white VW bus in front of us. It was full of people and boxes of tomatoes, and its dented bodywork was caked with mud in the way that cars become when they venture on to country roads at this rainy time of year. Its exhaust-pipe was newly bound up with wire, and the rear panel had been removed to help cool the engine. The sound of its fan made a very loud whine so that Dicky had to speak loudly to make himself heard. '*Vamos!* scam. They say it in cowboy films.'

'Maybe she doesn't go to cowboy films,' I said.

'Just keep looking at the street map.'

'It's not a street map; it's just a map. It only shows the main streets.'

'We'll find it all right. It's off Insurgentes.'

'Do you know how big Mexico City is? Insurgentes is about thirty-five miles long,' I said.

'You look on your side and I'll look this side. Volkmann said it's in the centre of town.' He sniffed. 'Mexico, they call it. No one here says "Mexico City". They call the town Mexico.'

I didn't answer; I put away the little coloured town plan and stared out at the crowded streets. I was quite happy to be driven round the town for an hour or two if that's what Dicky wanted.

Dicky said, 'Somewhere in the centre of town' would mean the Paseo de la Reforma near the main column with the golden angel. At least that's what it would mean to any tourist coming here for the

first time. And Werner Volkmann and his wife Zena are here for the first time. Right?’

‘Werner said it was going to be a second honeymoon.’

‘With Zena I would have thought one honeymoon would be enough,’ said Dicky.

‘More than enough,’ I said.

Dicky said, ‘I’ll kill your bloody Werner if he’s brought us out from London on a wild-goose chase.’

‘It’s a break from the office,’ I said. Werner had become my Werner I noticed and would remain so if things went wrong.

‘For you it is,’ said Dicky. ‘You’ve got nothing to lose. Your desk will be waiting for you when you get back. But there’s a dozen people in that building scrambling round for my job. This will give Bret just the chance he needs to take over my work. You realize that, don’t you?’

‘How could Bret want to take your job, Dicky? Bret is senior to you.’

The traffic was moving at about five miles an hour. A small dirty-faced child in the back of the VW bus was staring at Dicky with great interest. The insolent stare seemed to disconcert him. Dicky turned to look at me. ‘Bret is looking for a job that would suit him; and my job would suit him. Bret will have nothing to do now that his committee is being wound up. There’s already an argument about who will have his office space. And about who will have that tall blonde typist who wears the white sweaters.’

‘Gloria?’ I said.

‘Oh? Don’t say you’ve been there?’

‘Us workers stick together, Dicky,’ I said.

‘Very funny,’ said Dicky. ‘If Bret takes over my job, he’ll chase your arse. Working for me will seem like a holiday. I hope you realize that, old pal.’

I didn’t know that the brilliant career of Bret was taking a downturn to the point where Dicky was running scared. But Dicky had taken a PhD in office politics so I was prepared to believe him. ‘This is the Pink Zone,’ I said. ‘Why don’t you park in one of these hotels and get a cab?’

Dicky seemed relieved at the idea of letting a cab driver find Werner Volkmann’s apartment but being Dicky, he had to argue against it for a couple of minutes. As he pulled into the slow lane the dirty child in the VW smiled and then made a terrible face at us. Dicky glanced at me and said, ‘Are you pulling faces at that child? For God’s sake, act your age, Bernard.’ Dicky was in a bad mood, and talking about his job had made him more touchy.

He turned off Insurgentes on to a side-street and cruised eastwards until we found a car-park under one of the big hotels. As we went down the ramp into the darkness he switched the headlights on. There was a different world. This was where the Mercedes, Cadillacs and Porsches lived in comfort, shiny with health, smelling of new leather and guarded by two armed security men. One of them pushed a ticket under a wiper and lifted the barrier so that we could drive through.

‘So your school chum Werner spots a KGB heavy here in town. Why did Controller (Europe) insist that I come out here at this stinking time of year?’ Dicky was cruising very slowly round the dark garage, looking for a place to park.

‘Werner didn’t spot Erich Stinnes,’ I said. ‘Werner’s wife spotted him. And there’s a departmental alert for him. There’s a space.’

‘Too small; this is a big car. Alert? You don’t have to tell me that, old boy. I signed the alert. Remember me? Controller of German Stations? But I’ve never seen Erich Stinnes. I wouldn’t know

Erich Stinnes from the man in the moon. You're the one who can identify him. Why do I have to come?'

'You're here to decide what we do. I'm not senior enough or reliable enough to make decisions. What about there, next to the white Mercedes?'

'Ummmmm,' said Dicky. He had trouble parking the car in the space marked out by the white lines. One of the security guards – a big poker-faced man in starched khakis and carefully polished high-top boots – came to watch us. He stood arms akimbo, staring, while Dicky went backwards and forwards, trying to squeeze between the white convertible and a concrete stanchion that bore brightly coloured patches of enamel from other cars. 'Did you really make out with that blonde in Bret's office?' said Dicky as he abandoned his task and reversed into another space marked 'reserved'.

'Gloria? I thought everyone knew about me and Gloria,' I said. In fact I knew her no better than Dicky did but I couldn't resist the chance to needle him. 'My wife's left me. I'm a free man again.'

'Your wife defected,' said Dicky spitefully. 'Your wife is working for the bloody Russkies.'

'That's over and done with,' I said. I didn't want to talk about my wife or my children or any other problems. And if I did want to talk about them Dicky would be the last person I'd choose to confide in.

'You and Fiona were very close,' said Dicky accusingly.

'It's not a crime to be in love with your wife,' I said.

'Taboo subject, eh?' It pleased Dicky to touch a nerve and get a reaction. I should have known better than to respond to his taunts. I was guilty by association. I'd become a probationer once more and I'd remain one until I proved my loyalty all over again. Nothing had been said to me officially but Dicky's little flash of temper was not the first indication of what the department really felt.

'I didn't come on this trip to discuss Fiona,' I said.

'Don't keep bickering,' said Dicky. 'Let's go and talk to your friend Werner and get it finished. I can't wait to be out of this filthy hell-hole. January or February; that's the time when people who know what's what go to Mexico. Not in the middle of the rainy season.'

Dicky opened the door of the car and I slid across the seat to get out his side. '*Prohibido aparcar*' said the security guard, and with arms folded he planted himself in our path.

'What's that?' said Dicky, and the man said it again. Dicky smiled and explained, in his schoolboy Spanish, that we were residents of the hotel, we would only be leaving the car there for half an hour and we were engaged on very important business.

'*Prohibido aparcar*,' said the guard stolidly.

'Give him some money, Dicky,' I said. 'That's all he wants.'

The security guard looked from Dicky to me and stroked his large black moustache with the ball of his thumb. He was a big man, as tall as Dicky and twice as wide.

'I'm not going to give him anything,' said Dicky. 'I'm not going to pay twice.'

'Let me do it,' I said. 'I've got small money here.'

'Stay out of this,' said Dicky. 'You've got to know how to handle these people.' He stared at the guard. '*Nada! Nada! Nada! Entiende?*'

The guard looked down at our Chevrolet and then plucked the wiper between finger and thumb and let it fall back against the glass with a thump. 'He'll wreck the car,' I said. 'This is not the time to get into a hassle you can't win.'

‘I’m not frightened of him,’ said Dicky.

‘I know you’re not, but I am.’ I got in front of him before he took a swing at the guard. There was a hard, almost vicious, streak under Dicky’s superficial charm, and he was a keen member of the Foreign Office judo club. Dicky wasn’t frightened of anything; that’s why I didn’t like working with him. I folded some paper money into the guard’s ready hand and pushed Dicky towards the sign that said ‘Elevator to hotel lobby’. The guard watched us go, his face still without emotion. Dicky wasn’t pleased either. He thought I’d tried to protect him against the guard and he felt belittled by my interference.

The hotel lobby was that same ubiquitous combination of tinted mirror, plastic marble and sponge carpet underlay that international travellers are reputed to admire. We sat down under a huge display of plastic flowers and looked at the fountain.

‘Machismo,’ said Dicky sadly. We were waiting for the top-hatted hotel doorman to find a taxi driver who would take us to Werner’s apartment. ‘Machismo,’ he said again reflectively. ‘Every last one of them is obsessed by it. It’s why you can’t get anything done here. I’m going to report that bastard downstairs to the manager.’

‘Wait until after we’ve collected the car,’ I advised.

‘At least the embassy sent a Counsellor to meet us. That means that London has told them to give me full diplomatic back-up.’

‘Or it means Mexico City embassy staff – including your pal Tiptree – have a lot of time on their hands.’

Dicky looked up from counting his traveller’s cheques. ‘What do I have to do, Bernard, to make you remember it’s Mexico? Not Mexico City; Mexico.’

This was a new Werner Volkmann. This was not the introverted Jewish orphan I'd been at school with nor the lugubrious teenager I'd grown up with in Berlin, nor the affluent, overweight banker who was welcome on both sides of the Wall. This new Werner was a tough, muscular figure in short-sleeved cotton shirt and well-fitting Madras trousers. His big droopy moustache had been trimmed and so had his bushy black hair. Being on holiday with his twenty-two-year-old wife had rejuvenated him.

He was standing on the sixth-floor balcony of a small block of luxury apartments in downtown Mexico City. From here was a view across this immense city, with the mountains a dark backdrop. The dying sun was turning the world pink, now that the stormclouds had passed over. Long ragged strips of orange and gold cloud were torn across the sky, like a poster advertising a smog-reddened sun ripped by a passing vandal.

The balcony was large enough to hold a lot of expensive white garden furniture as well as big pots of tropical flowers. Green leafy plants climbed overhead to provide shade, while a collection of cacti were arrayed on shelves like books. Werner poured a pink concoction from a glass jug. It was like a watery fruit salad, the sort of thing they pressed on you at parties where no one got drunk. It didn't look tempting, but I was hot and I took one gratefully.

Dicky Cruyer was flushed; his cowboy shirt bore dark patches of sweat. He had his blue-denim jacket slung over his shoulder. He tossed it on to a chair and reached out to take a drink from Werner's glass.

Werner's wife Zena held out her glass for a refill. She was full-length on a reclining chair. She was wearing a sheer, rainbow-striped dress through which her suntanned limbs shone darkly. As she moved to sip her drink, German fashion magazines, balanced on her belly, slid to the ground and flapped open. Zena cursed softly. It was the strange, flat-accented speech of eastern lands that were no longer German. It was probably the only thing she'd inherited from her impoverished parents, and she had the feeling she would sometimes have been happier without it.

'What's in this drink?' I said.

Werner recovered the magazines from the floor and gave them to his wife. In business he could be tough, in friendships outspoken, but to Zena he was always indulgent.

Werner raised money from Western banks to pay exporters to East Germany, and then eventually collected the money from the East German government, taking a tiny percentage on every deal. 'Avalizing' it was called. But it wasn't a banker's business; it was a free-for-all in which many got their fingers burned. Werner had to be tough to survive.

'In the drink? Fruit juices,' said Werner. 'It's too early for alcohol in this sort of climate.'

'Not for me it isn't,' I said. Werner smiled but he didn't go anywhere to get me a proper drink. He was my oldest and closest friend; the sort of close friend who gives you the excoriating criticism that new enemies hesitate about. Zena didn't look up; she was still pretending to read her magazines.

Dicky had stepped into the jungle of flowers to get a clearer view of the city. I looked over his shoulder to see the traffic still moving sluggishly. In the street below there were flashing red lights and sirens as two police cars mounted the pavement to get around the traffic. In a city of fifteen million people there is said to be a crime committed every two minutes. The noise of the streets never ceased. As the flow of homegoing office workers ended, the influx of people to the Zona Rosa

restaurants and cinemas began. 'What a madhouse,' said Dicky.

A malevolent-looking black cat awoke and jumped softly down from its position on the footstool. It went over to Dicky and sank a claw into his leg and looked up at him to see how he'd take it. 'Hell,' shouted Dicky. 'Get away, you brute.' Dicky aimed a blow at the cat but missed. The cat moved very fast as if it had done the same thing before to other gringos.

Wincing with pain and rubbing his leg, Dicky moved well away from the cat and went to the other end of the balcony to look inside the large lounge with its locally made tiles, old masks and Mexican textiles. It looked like an arts and crafts shop, but obviously a lot of money had been spent getting that way. 'Nice place you've got here,' said Dicky. There was more than a hint of sarcasm in his remark. It was not Dicky's style. Anything that departed much from Harrod's furniture department was too foreign for him.

'It belongs to Zena's uncle and aunt,' explained Werner. 'We're taking care of it while they're in Europe.' That explained the notebook I'd seen near the telephone. Zena had neatly entered 'wine glass', 'tumbler', 'wine glass', 'small china bowl with blue flowers'. It was a list of breakages, an example of Zena's sense of order and rectitude.

'You chose a bad time of year,' complained Dicky. 'Or rather Zena's uncle chose a good one.' He drained the glass, tipping it up until the ice cubes, cucumber and pieces of lemon slid down the glass and rested against his lips.

'Zena doesn't mind it,' said Werner, as if his own opinions were of no importance.

Zena, still concentrating on her magazine, said, 'I love the sun.' She said it twice and continued to read without losing her place.

'If only it would rain,' said Werner. 'It's this build-up to the storms that makes it so unbearable.'

'So you saw this chap Stinnes?' said Dicky very casually, as if that wasn't the reason that the two of us had dragged ourselves four thousand miles to talk to them.

'At the Kronprinz,' said Werner.

'What's the Kronprinz?' said Dicky. He put down his glass and used a paper napkin to dry his lips.

'A club.'

'What sort of club?' Dicky stuck his thumbs into the back of his leather belt and looked down at the toes of his cowboy boots reflectively. The cat had followed Dicky and looked as if it was about to reach up above his boot to put a claw into his thin calf again. Dicky aimed a vicious little kick at it but the cat was too quick for him. 'Get away,' said Dicky, more loudly this time.

'I'm sorry about the cat,' said Werner. 'But I think Zena's aunt only let us use the place because we'd be company for Cherubino. It's your jeans. Cats like to claw at denim.'

'It bloody hurts,' said Dicky, rubbing his leg. 'You should get its claws clipped or something. In this part of the world cats carry all kinds of diseases.'

'What's it matter what sort of club?' said Zena suddenly. She closed the magazine and pushed her hair back. She looked different with her hair loose; no longer the tough little career girl, more the lady of leisure. Her hair was long and jet black and held with a silver Mexican comb which she brandished before tossing her hair back and fixing it again.

'A club for German businessmen. It's been going since 1902,' said Werner. 'Zena likes the buffet and dance they have on Friday nights. There's a big German colony here in the city. There always has been.'

‘Werner said there would be a cash payment for finding Stinnes,’ said Zena.

‘There usually is,’ said Dicky slyly, although he knew there would be no chance of a cash payment for such a routine report. It must have been Werner’s way of encouraging Zena to cooperate with us. I looked at Werner and he looked back at me without changing his expression.

‘How do you know it really is Stinnes?’ said Dicky.

‘It’s Stinnes all right,’ said Werner stoically. ‘His name is on his membership card and his credit card at the bar is in that name.’

‘And his cheque book,’ said Zena. ‘His name is printed on his cheques.’

‘What bank?’ I asked.

‘Bank of America,’ said Zena. ‘A branch in San Diego, California.’

‘Names mean nothing,’ said Dicky. ‘How do you know this fellow is a KGB man? And, even if he is, what makes you so sure that this is the Johnny who interrogated Bernard in East Berlin?’ A brief movement of the hand in my direction. ‘It might be someone using the same cover name. We’ve known KGB people do that. Right, Bernard?’

‘It has been known,’ I said, although I was damned if I could recall any examples of such sloppy tactics by the plodding but thorough bureaucrats of the KGB.

‘How much?’ said Zena. And, when Dicky looked at her and raised his eyebrows, she said, ‘How much are you going to give us for reporting Stinnes? Werner said you want him badly. Werner said he was very important.’

‘Steady on,’ said Dicky. ‘We don’t have him yet. We haven’t even positively identified him.’

‘Erich Stinnes,’ said Zena as if repeating a prepared lesson. ‘Fortyish, thinning hair, cheap spec, smokes like a chimney. Berlin accent.’

‘Beard?’

‘No beard,’ said Zena. Hastily she added, ‘He must have shaved it off.’ She did not readily abandon her claims.

‘So you’ve spoken with him,’ I said.

‘He’s there every Friday,’ said Werner. ‘He’s a regular. He works at the Soviet Embassy, he told Zena that. He says he’s just a driver.’

‘They’re always drivers,’ I said. ‘That’s how they account for their nice big cars and going wherever they want to go.’ I poured myself some more of Werner’s fruit punch. There was not much of it left, and the bottom of the jug was a tangle of greenery and soggy bits of lemon. ‘Did he talk about books or American films, Zena?’

She swung her legs out of the reclining chair with a display of tanned thigh. I saw the look in Dick Cruyer’s face as she smoothed her dress. She had that sexy appeal that goes with youth and health and boundless energy. And now she knew she had the right Stinnes her pearly grey eyes sparkled. ‘That’s right. He loves old Hollywood musicals and English detective stories . . .’

‘Then that’s him,’ I said, without much enthusiasm. Secretly I’d hoped it would all come to nothing and I’d be able to go straight back to London and my home and my children. ‘Yes, that’s “Lenin” that’s the one who took me down to Checkpoint Charlie when they released me.’

‘What will happen now?’ said Zena. She was short; she only came up to Dicky’s shoulder. Some say short people are aggressive to compensate for their small stature, but look at Zena Volkmann and you might start thinking that aggressive people are made short lest they take over the whole world. Either

way Zena was short and the aggression inside her was always bubbling along the edges of the pan like milk before it boils over. 'What will you do about him?'

'Don't ask,' Werner told her.

But Dicky answered her, 'We want to talk to him, Mrs Volkmann. No rough stuff, if that's what you are afraid of.'

I swallowed my fruit punch and got a mouthful of tiny pieces of ice and some lemon pips.

Zena smiled. She wasn't frightened of any rough stuff; she was frightened of not getting the money for arranging it. She stood up and twisted her shoulders, slowly stretching her arms above her head, one after the other in a lazy display of overt sexuality. 'Do you want my help?' she said.

Dicky didn't answer directly. He looked from Zena to Werner and back again and said, 'Stinnes is a KGB major. That's too low a rank for the computer to offer much on him. Most of what we know about him came from Bernard, who was interrogated by him.' A glance at me to stress the unreliability of uncorroborated intelligence from any source. 'But he's senior staff in Berlin. So what is he doing in Mexico? Must be a Russian national. What's his game? What's he doing in this German club of yours?'

Zena laughed. 'You think he should have joined Perovsky's?' She laughed again.

Werner said, 'Zena knows this town very well, Dicky. She has aunts and uncles, cousins and a nephew here. She lived here for six months when she first left school.'

'Where, what, how or why is Perovsky's?' said Dicky. He was German Stations Controller. He didn't like being laughed at, and I could see he was taking a little time getting used to Werner calling him Dicky.

'Zena is joking,' explained Werner. 'Perovsky's is a big, rather run-down club for Russians near the National Palace. The ground floor is a restaurant open to anyone. It was started after the revolution. The members used to be dukes and counts and people who'd escaped from the Bolsheviks. Now it's a pretty mixed crowd but the anti-communist line is still *de rigueur*. The people from the Soviet Embassy give it a wide berth. If a man such as Stinnes went in there and spoke out of turn he might never get out.'

'Really never get out?' I said.

Werner turned to look at me. 'It's a rough town, Bernie. It's not all *margaritas* and *mariachis* like the travel posters.'

'But the Kronprinz Club is not so particular about its membership?' persisted Dicky.

'No one goes there to talk politics. It's the only place in town where you can get real German draught beer and good German food,' explained Werner. 'It's very popular. It's a social club; you get a very mixed crowd there. A lot of them are transients: airline pilots, salesmen, ships' engineers, businessmen, priests even.'

'And KGB men?'

'You Englishmen avoid each other when you are abroad,' said Werner. 'We Germans like to be together. East Germans, West Germans, exiles, expatriates, men avoiding tax, men avoiding the wives, men avoiding their creditors, men avoiding the police. Nazis, monarchists, communists, even Jews like me. We like to be together because we are Germans.'

'Such Germans as Stinnes?' said Dicky sarcastically.

'He must have lived in Berlin. His German is as good as Bernie's,' said Werner, looking at me.

‘Even more convincing in a way, because he has the sort of strong Berlin accent you seldom hear except in some workers’ bar in the city. It was only when I began to listen to him really carefully that I could detect something that was not quite right in the background of his voice. I’ll bet everyone at the club thinks he’s German.’

‘He’s not here to get a tan,’ said Dicky. ‘A man like that is sent here only for something special. What’s your guess, Bernard?’

‘Stinnes was in Cuba,’ I said. ‘He told me that when we talked together. Security police. I went back to the continuity files and began to guess he was there to give the Cubans some advice when they purged some of the bigwigs in 1970. It was a big shake-up. Stinnes must have been some kind of Latin America expert even then.’

‘Never mind old history,’ said Dicky. ‘What’s he doing now?’

‘Running agents, I suppose. Guatemala is a KGB priority, and it’s not so far from here. Anyone can walk through; the border is just jungle.’

‘I don’t think that’s it,’ said Werner.

I said, ‘The East Germans backed the Sandinista National Liberation Front long before it looked like winning and forming a government.’

‘The East Germans back anybody who might be a thorn in the flesh of the Americans,’ said Werner.

‘But what do you really think he’s doing?’ Dicky asked me.

I was stalling because I didn’t know how much Dicky would want me to say in front of Zena and Werner. I kept stalling. I said, ‘Stinnes speaks good English. Unless the cheque book is a deliberate way of throwing us off the scent, he might be running agents into California. Handling data stolen from electronics and software research firms perhaps.’ I was improvising. I didn’t have the slightest idea of what Stinnes might be doing.

‘Why would London give a damn about that sort of caper?’ said Werner, who knew me well enough to guess that I was bluffing. ‘Don’t tell me London Central put out an urgent call for Stinnes because he’s stealing computer secrets from the Americans.’

‘It’s the only reason I can think of,’ I said.

‘Don’t treat me like a child, Bernard,’ said Werner. ‘If you don’t want to tell me, just say so.’

As if in response to Werner’s acrimony, Zena went across to the fireplace and pressed a hidden bellpush. From somewhere in the labyrinth of the apartment there came the sound of footsteps, and an Indian woman appeared. She had that chin-up stance that makes so many Mexicans look as if they are ready to balance a water jug on their heads, and her eyes were half closed. ‘I knew you’d want to sample some Mexican food,’ said Zena. Personally it was the last thing I’d ever want to sample, but without waiting to hear our response she told the woman we would sit down immediately. Zena used her poor Spanish with a fluent confidence that made it sound better. Zena did everything like that.

‘She can understand German perfectly and a certain amount of English too,’ said Zena after the woman had gone. It was a warning to guard our tongues. ‘Maria has worked for my aunt for over twenty years.’

‘But you don’t talk to her in German,’ said Dicky.

Zena smiled at him. ‘By the time you’ve said tortillas, tacos, guacamole and quesadillas, and so on, you might as well add *por favor* and get it over with.’

It was an elegant table, shining with solid-silver cutlery, hand-embroidered linen and fine cut-glass

The meal had obviously been planned and prepared as part of Zena's pitch for a cash payment. It was a good meal, and not too damned ethnic, thank God. I have a very limited capacity for the primitive permutations of tortillas, bean-mush and chillies that numb the palate and sear the insides from Dally to Cape Horn. But we started with grilled lobster and cold white wine, and not a refried bean in sight.

The curtains were drawn back so that air could come in through the open windows, but the air was not cool. The cyclone out in the Gulf had not moved nearer the coast, so the threatened storms had not come but neither had much drop in temperature. By now the sun had gone down behind the mountains that surround the city on every side, and the sky was mauve. Pin-pointed like stars in a planetarium were the lights of the city, which stretched all the way to the foothills of the distant mountains until like a galaxy they became a milky blur. The dining room was dark; the only light came from tall candles that burned brightly in the still air.

'Sometimes London Central can get in ahead of our American friends,' said Dicky, suddenly spearing another grilled lobster tail. Had he really spent so long thinking up a reply for Werner? 'It would give us negotiating power in Washington if we had some good material about KGB penetration of anywhere in Uncle Sam's backyard.'

Werner reached across the table to pour more wine for his wife. 'This is Chilean wine,' said Werner. He poured some for Dicky and for me and then refilled his own glass. It was Werner's way of telling Dicky he didn't believe a word of it, but I'm not sure Dicky understood that.

'It's not bad,' said Dicky, sipping, closing his eyes and tilting his head back to concentrate all his attention on the taste. Dicky fancied his wine expertise. He'd already made a great show of sniffing the cork. 'I suppose, with the peso collapsing, it will be more and more difficult to get any sort of imported wine. And Mexican wine is a bit of an acquired taste.'

'Stinnes only arrived here two or three weeks ago,' said Werner doggedly. 'If London Central is interested in Stinnes, it won't be on account of anything he might be planning to do in Silicon Valley or in the Guatemala rain forest; it will be on account of all the things he did in Berlin during the last two years.'

'Do you think so?' said Dicky, looking at Werner with friendly and respectful interest, like a man who wanted to learn something. But Werner could see through him.

'I'm not an idiot,' said Werner, using the unemotional tone but exaggerated clarity with which a man might specify decaffeinated coffee to an inattentive waiter. 'I was dodging KGB men when I was ten years old. Bernie and I were working for the department when the Wall was built in 1961 and you were still at school.'

'Point taken, old boy,' said Dicky with a smile. He could afford to smile; he was two years younger than either of us, with years' less time in the department, but he'd got the coveted job of German Stations Controller against tough competition. And – despite rumours about an imminent reshuffle of London Central – he was still holding on to it. 'But the fact is that the people in London don't tell me every last thing they have in mind. I'm just the chap chipping away at the coal-face, right? They don't consult me about building new nuclear power stations.' He poured some warm butter over his last piece of lobster with a care that suggested he had no other concern in his mind.

'Tell me about Stinnes,' I said to Werner. 'Does he come along to the Kronprinz Club trailing a string of KGB zombies? Or does he come on his own? Does he sit in the corner with his big glass of *Berliner Weisse mit Schuss*, or does he sniff round to see what he can ferret out? How does he behave, Werner?'

‘He’s a loner,’ said Werner. ‘He probably would never have spoken to us in the first place except that he mistook Zena for one of the Biedermann girls.’

‘Who are the Biedermann girls?’ said Dicky. After the remains of the lobster course had been removed, the Indian servant brought an elaborate array of Mexican dishes: refried beans, whole chillies and the tortilla in its various disguises: enchiladas, tacos, tostadas and quesadillas. Dicky paused for long enough to have each one identified and described but he took only a tiny portion from his plate.

‘Here in Mexico the chilli has sexual significance,’ said Zena, directing the remark to Dicky. ‘The man who eats hot chillies is thought to be virile and strong.’

‘Oh, I love chillies,’ said Dicky, his tone of voice picking up the hint of mockery that was to be detected in Zena’s remark. ‘Always have had a weakness for chillies,’ he said, as he reached for the plate on which many different ones were arranged. I glanced at Werner who was watching Dicky with interest. Dicky looked up to see Werner’s face. ‘It’s the tiny, dark-coloured ones that blow your head off,’ Dicky explained. He took a large, pale-green cayenne and smiled at our doubting faces before biting a section from it.

There was a silence after Dicky’s mouth closed upon the chilli. Everyone except Dicky knew he had mistaken the cayenne for one of the very mild *aji* chillies from the eastern provinces. And soon Dicky knew it too. His face went red, his mouth half opened, and tears shone in his eyes. He fought against the pain but he had to take it from his mouth. Then he fed himself lots and lots of plain rice.

‘The Biedermanns are a wealthy Berlin family,’ said Zena, carrying on as if she’d not noticed Dicky’s desperate discomfort. ‘They are well known in Germany. They have interests in German travel companies. The newspapers said the company had borrowed millions of dollars to build a holiday village in the Yucatan peninsula. It’s never been finished. Erich Stinnes thought I looked just like the younger sister Poppy who’s always in the newspaper gossip columns.’

There was a silence as we all waited for Dicky to recover. Finally he leaned back in his chair and managed a rueful smile. There was perspiration on his forehead and he was breathing with his mouth open. ‘Do you know these Biedermann people, Bernard?’ said Dicky. He sounded hoarse.

‘Have an avocado,’ said Werner. ‘They are very soothing.’ Dicky took an avocado pear from the bowl and began to eat some.

I said, ‘When my father was attached to the military government in Berlin he gave old Biedermann a licence to start up his bus service again. It was one of the first after the war; it started the family fortune, I suppose. Yes, I know them. Poppy Biedermann was having dinner at Frank Harrington’s the last time I was in Berlin.’

Dicky was eating the avocado quickly with his teaspoon, using it to heal the burning in his mouth. ‘That was bloody hot,’ he confessed finally.

‘There’s no way you can be sure which are hot and which are mild,’ said Zena in a gentle tone that surprised me. ‘They cross-pollinate; even on the same plant you can get fiery ones and mild ones.’ She smiled.

‘Could these Biedermann people be interesting to Stinnes?’ said Dicky. ‘For instance, might they own a factory that’s making computer software in California? Or something like that? What do you know about that, Bernard?’

‘Even if that was the case, no point in making contact with the boss,’ I said. I could see that Dicky had focused on the idea of Silicon Valley and it was not going to be easy to shake him off it. ‘The

approach would be made to someone in the microchip laboratory. Or someone doing the programs for the software.'

'We need to know the current situation from the California end,' said Dicky with a sigh. I knew the sigh. Dicky was just getting me prepared for a sweaty week in Mexico City while he went to swing around in southern California.

'Talk to the Biedermanns,' I said. 'It's easier.'

'Stinnes asked about the Biedermanns,' said Werner. 'He asked if I knew them. I used to know Paul very well, but I told Stinnes I knew the family only from the newspapers.'

'Werner, you didn't tell me you know the Biedermanns,' Zena interjected excitedly. 'They are always in the gossip columns. Poppy Biedermann is beautiful. She just got divorced from a millionaire.'

Dicky looked at me and said, 'Better you talk to Biedermann. No sense in me showing my face. Keep it informal. Find out where he is; go and see him. Would you do that, Bernard?' It was an order in the American style: disguised to sound like a polite inquiry.

'I can try.'

Dicky said, 'I don't want to channel this through London, or get Frank Harrington to introduce us or the whole world will know we're interested.' He poured himself some iced water and sipped a little. He was recovering some of his composure, when suddenly he screamed, 'You bastard!', his eyes fixed on poor Werner and his head thrust forward low over the table. Werner looked perplexed until Dicky, still leaning forward with his head almost on his plate, yelled, 'That bloody cat.'

'Cherubino, you're very naughty,' said Zena mildly as she bent down to disengage the cat's claws from Dicky's leg. But by that time Dicky had delivered a kick that sent Cherubino across the room with a howl of pain.

Zena stood up, flushed and furious. 'You've hurt her,' she said angrily.

'I'm awfully sorry,' said Dicky. 'Just gave way to a reflex action, I'm afraid.'

Zena said nothing. She nodded and left the room in search of the cat.

'Paul Biedermann is approachable,' said Werner, to cover the awkward silence. 'He arranged a bank guarantee for me last year. It cost too much but he came through when I needed him. He has an office in town and a house on the coast at Tcumazan.' Werner looked at the door but there was no sign of Zena.

'There you are, then,' said Dicky. 'Get on to him, Bernard.'

I knew Paul Biedermann too; I'd exchanged hellos with him recently in Berlin and hardly recognized him. He'd smashed himself up driving a brand-new Ferrari back to Mexico from a drunken party in Guatemala City. At 120 miles an hour the car had gone deep into the roadside jungle. It took the rescuers a long time to find him, and a long time to cut him free. The girl with him had been killed, but the inquiry had glossed over it. Whatever the truth of it, now one of his legs was shorter than the other and his face bore the scar tissue of over a hundred neat stitches. These infirmities didn't help me overcome my dislike of Paul Biedermann.

'Just a verbal report. Nothing in writing for the time being. Not you, not me, not Biedermann.' Dicky was keeping all the exits covered. Nothing in writing until Dicky heard the results and arranged the blames and the credits with godlike impartiality.

Werner shot me a glance. 'Sure thing, Dicky,' I said. Dicky Cruyer was such a clown at times, but

there was another, very clever Dicky who knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. Even if
did sometimes mean giving way to one of those nasty little reflex actions.

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