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REICH

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CHRISTOPHER
REICH

A DELL BOOK

THE FIRST BILLION
A Dell Book

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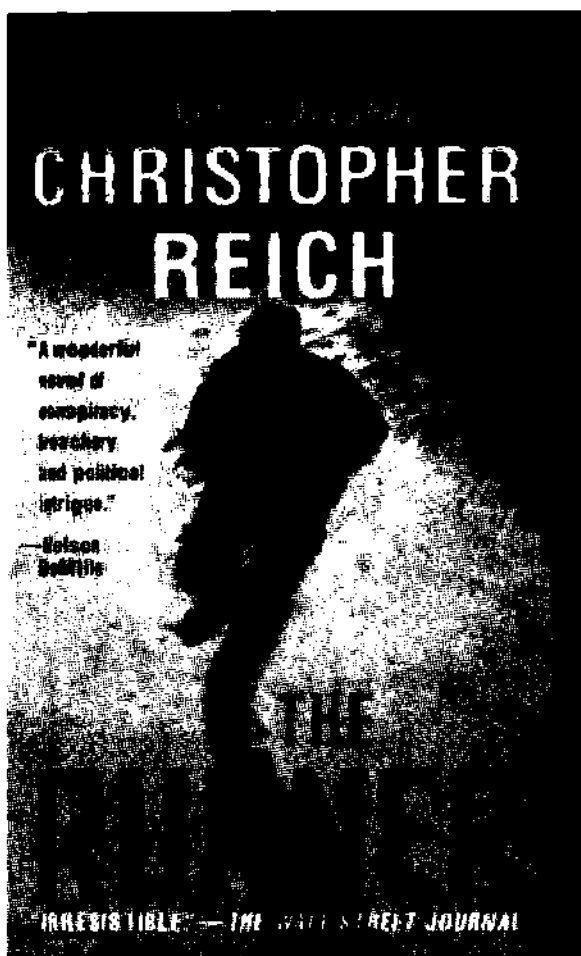
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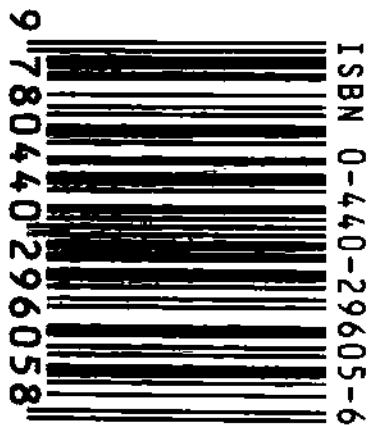
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CHRISTOPHER REICH was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1961. A graduate of Georgetown University and the University of Texas at Austin, he worked in Switzerland before returning to the United States to pursue a career as a novelist. He lives in California with his wife and children.

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ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER REICH

Numbered Account

The Runner

1

YOU ARE MILLIONAIRE?" she asked.

"Me?" Grafton Byrnes pointed a finger at his chest. "No. I'm afraid not."

"Yes," she insisted, adding a coy smile. "You are millionaire. I can tell. You have nice suit. Beautiful tie. You are confident. It is clear. You are millionaire."

Byrnes unglued his eyes from the leggy blond who'd taken a seat at the bar next to him and looked around the room. The place was called Metelitsa, and it was a restaurant, nightclub, and casino rolled into one, located on the Novy Arbat in the center of Moscow. Red curtains blocked out the summer evening's glare. White tablecloths, smoked mirrors, and croupiers in black ties lent the room a touch of class. But one sniff told Byrnes different: the smoke, the perfume, the heady mix of expensive liquor and easy morals. He could recognize a cathouse by scent alone.

"I'm successful," he said, curtly. "Nothing special."

"You are *very* successful, I think. Yes, a millionaire." She pronounced the word—*mee-lone-air*—and her Slavic accent and grave delivery lent the word a patina of its foregone luster. "You would like to buy me drink?"

"Sure," he said, before he could ask himself what he was getting himself into. "What'll you have?"

"Vodka. On rocks with twist of orange."

"Coming right up."

Byrnes was finding it increasingly difficult to keep his eyes off the woman next to him. To call her gorgeous would have been an injustice. She was no more than twenty-one, with white blond hair, satin blue eyes, and the kind of pouty lips that his ex-wife called "bee-stung" and that no amount of collagen injections could reproduce. Her dress was black, short, and tight; her nails were lacquered a rich maroon. But it was her bearing that Byrnes found irresistible: the inquisitive tilt of the head, the brazen posture, the adventurous twinkle to the eyes that seemed to say, "Dare me—I'll try anything." In short, she was every middle-aged divorcé's idea of a fitting companion.

"Bartender!" As Byrnes shifted on his seat to get the barkeep's attention, he inadvertently nudged the man next to him. "*Izvinitye*," he said, offering a smile. Excuse me.

The man looked Byrnes up and down, then rose from his stool. He was six four, about two twenty, with a Marine's crew cut and a neck the size of a fire hydrant. He had a buddy next to him who looked like he'd fallen out of the same tree. Byrnes had been warned about guys like this. "Flat tops," they were called. Enforcers for the Russian *mafia*, or more politely, point men for the Russian business elite.

Be careful, Byrnes's best friend had told him. *Moscow isn't Paris or Zurich or Rome. It may look like a European city, but it's not. You're in Russia. The whole country is in the shithouse. Two percent of the people are making a fortune and the rest don't have a pot to piss in. It's dangerous over there.*

"Excuse me," the Russian replied, in decent English. "I hope I not disturb you and pretty lady."

“No,” said Byrnes. “My fault. Again, I’m sorry. Let me buy you a drink. We’ll call it even.”

“No need,” said the Russian, with grating politeness. “Have nice evening.” He made a show of adjusting his blazer and retook his place. Only a blind man would have missed the nickel-plated revolver nestled beneath his arm—a .357 Colt Python with a pearl handle, if Byrnes wasn’t mistaken.

Turning back to the girl, Byrnes found a round of drinks on the counter. Okay, he said to himself, let’s start over again. And raising his glass, “*Na Strovye.*”

“*Na Strovye.*” She took a sip, then leaned forward and gave him a lingering kiss on the cheek. “My name is Svetlana.”

“I’m Graf,” he said, knocking back the entire drink. “Good to know you.”

“You speak Russian. Why you not tell me so before?”

“*Nemnogo,*” he said. Just a little. The Air Force would be proud of him for having remembered as much as he did. He also knew how to say, “I am an officer,” “My serial number is . . .,” and a few choice obscenities.

“I no like Russian men,” Svetlana confided in his ear. “So arrogant.”

“Me neither,” he complained. “So big.”

She laughed. “Tell me, Graf, why you are in Moscow?”

“Business,” he answered.

“*Beez-ness?* What do you do?”

Byrnes shrugged, looking away. “Nothing interesting. Just some routine stuff.”

His response couldn’t have been further from the truth. He’d arrived earlier that afternoon on an emergency visit. All very hush-hush. Forty-eight hours in country to check out the operating equipment of Mercury Broadband, a multinational Internet service and content provider his company was set to bring public in a week’s time. Questions had surfaced regarding the firm’s Moscow network

operations center—namely, whether it owned all the physical assets it claimed to: routers, switches, servers, and the like. He was to find the facility, verify that it contained equipment necessary to provide broadband services to its publicized customer base of two hundred thousand people, and report back.

The IPO, or initial public offering, of shares in the company was valued at two billion dollars, and nothing less than his firm's continued existence depended on what he discovered. A green light meant seventy million dollars in fees, a guarantee of fee-related business from Mercury down the road, and a rescue from impending insolvency.

Shelving the offering meant death—defined either as massive layoffs, the sale of the firm to a larger house, or in the worst case, shuttering up the shop and putting a “Gone Fishing” sign in the window. Permanently.

“And what you do for business?” she asked.

“Investment banking. Stocks. Bonds. Like Wall Street, you know?”

“So, I am right,” she announced proudly, dropping a hand onto his leg and allowing it to linger there. “You are millionaire.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not. Anyway, it's not polite to talk about money.”

“I think you are wrong. Money is sexy,” she said, winking. “Aphrodisiac, I think.”

He ordered another drink, and when it came he took a greedy sip. He was getting that warm, fuzzy feeling, and liking it. From his perch at the bar, he overlooked a parquet dance floor and a small casino with slot machines and a half dozen gaming tables. A few flat tops had staked out positions at the craps pit. They were dressed to a man in snazzy black suits, open collars, and gold chains. Crisp American greenbacks were exchanged for stacks of blue and silver chips. No one was playing with less than five thousand dollars. Dice tumbled across the green baize tables. Raucous voices lofted across the

room, spirited, cajoling, violent. The staccato shouts had a serrated edge and lent the place an aggressive buzz. At five past nine on a Tuesday night, the joint was beginning to jump.

"And why, Graf, you come to Metelitsa?" Svetlana's hand had moved higher on his leg. A single finger danced along the crease of his trousers. "To see me, maybe? See Svetlana?"

She was staring at him, the magnetic blue eyes commanding him nearer. Her lips parted, and he saw a moist band of pink flashing behind the dazzling teeth. He could taste her warm, expectant breath. The scent of her hair, lilac and rosewater, drifted over him . . . enticing him . . . seducing him.

"Yes . . . I mean, no . . . I mean . . ." Byrnes didn't know what he wanted to say. He wasn't sure whether it was the vodka or just Svetlana, but suddenly he was decidedly tipsy. He was having trouble focusing, too. Placing a hand on the bar, he stood up unsteadily, bumping once more into the thug next to him.

"Watch it!" barked the linebacker.

You're in Russia. It's dangerous over there.

"Sorry, sorry." Byrnes raised his hands defensively. He turned toward Svetlana. "Excuse me. I'll be right back." He mumbled the words "rest room" and "freshen up."

"I help you," she said, resting a hand on his waist. "We go upstairs together. I show you way."

"No, no. I'm all right, really. Where do I go?"

"Up. To right side." She pointed the way, then wrapped her arms around him. "You no leave Svetlana?"

Suddenly, she didn't look so much the unapproachable Russian ice princess as an insecure twenty-year-old frightened she might lose her evening's pay.

"No," he said. "I no leave Svetlana. I come right back." Jesus, now he was even talking like her.

He set off to the rest room, lurching along the bar before recovering his sea legs and guiding himself up the

stairs. Inside the john, he turned the tap on full and took turns slapping cold water on his face and taking deep breaths. A minute passed and he began to feel better. That was some vodka he was drinking. Two doubles and he was on his ass. He promised himself he'd have a word with the hotel concierge, tell him he had something different in mind when asking about a place where a gentleman could get a few drinks and some dinner.

Laying both hands on the sink, he took a close look at himself in the mirror. "Come on, kid," he whispered. "Snap out of it."

Staring back was a vital, handsome father of two teenage children gracefully approaching middle age. Strands of silver streaked a generous head of black hair. Fatigue shadowed his flinty eyes. His bold, clefted chin, the brunt of a thousand jokes, evidenced a slight but noticeable sag. Squinting, he wondered what had happened to the gallant airman who had flown his nation's fighters in two armed conflicts, the able pilot who had deadstick-landed a flamed-out F-15 and bailed out over open ocean after he'd lost his hydraulics.

"Still here," tolled a fighting voice deep within him. "Just get lost once in a while."

"You are a huckleberry," he said aloud, angered by his lack of self-restraint. "Your little lady friend probably had your drink spiked. Five'll get you ten her big buddy is waiting downstairs at this very instant to give you his best regards. You came to do a job, not fuck around. Get thyself out of here. Now!"

Five minutes later, Grafton Byrnes left the rest room. His tie was straightened, if a little wet. His jacket was buttoned. His wooziness had faded, replaced by a whopping headache and an ironclad desire to get as far from the premises as possible. Walking to the head of the stairs, he glanced down at the bar. Svetlana was deep in conversation with the two bullies who'd been sitting next to him.

Idiot! he thought. It really was a put-up job.

Spinning on his heel, he headed to the dining room. An illuminated sign along the far wall read "Exit." He snaked through the tables, bumping into diners, slowing only to offer an apology. Reaching the emergency exit, he threw open the door and found himself standing at the top of a fire escape. He put a tentative foot on the rusted landing. The entire structure swayed and groaned. The thing had been built before Stalin had even thought of the words "five-year plan."

Retreat. Go to plan B.

But even as he turned to reenter the building, the door slammed shut. There was no handle or doorknob to gain entry.

Byrnes swallowed hard, a bolt of unease creasing his shoulders. He wasn't sure if he was frightened or exhilarated, but a moment later he was attacking the fire escape. Rung by rung, he descended the rickety structure, his steps cautious but not unsure. Six flights of stairs took him down three floors, and when he reached the ground he stood stock still, amazed the thing had actually held together.

He was still dusting the rust off his hands when the emergency exit flung open and his favorite flat top emerged onto the landing, six floors above. "*Allo, Graf,*" the Russian called. "Stop. I want to talk. You owe Tatiana money."

Tatiana? What happened to Svetlana?

It took Byrnes less than a second to decide to get the hell out of there. He might owe Svetlana, or Tatiana, or whatever her real name was, an apology for his sudden departure, but he certainly didn't owe her any money. And even if he did, he didn't want to give it to her pimp. Somehow he didn't peg the guy as a believer in win-win negotiation.

A deep breath and Byrnes was off, running down the alley as fast as his Bally loafers would carry him. He

didn't look back to see if the *mafija* goon was following him—the angry creaking of the fire escape told him all he needed to know on that account. The sky was a pale blue, softening to azure. A crescent moon hung in the sky. The air smelled of fried potatoes and automobile exhaust. Rounding the corner of Metelitsa, he hightailed it through the parking lot toward the street.

The Novy Arbat had been built in the early sixties as Khrushchev's answer to Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. Four lanes of traffic flowed in either direction, lined by a succession of nondescript offices and run-down apartment buildings, the kind where air conditioners dripped coolant from jury-rigged perches and half the windows were caked with grime. Maybe the Bowery, carped Byrnes, but Fifth? No way.

Reaching the street, he raised a hand in the air. "Taxi!"

It was a Russian tradition for ordinary drivers to offer their services as taxis in exchange for a few dollars, marks, or francs. In a heartbeat, a red Lada had pulled over and Byrnes was in the passenger seat.

"Hotel Baltschug," he said, then a second later, "No, wait." Digging his hand into his pockets, he found the address of the network operations center he was supposed to visit. If this was Russia, he wanted to get the hell out of it as quickly as possible. He checked the sky again. Plenty of light remained to get his job done. Finish tonight and he could catch the first plane out in the morning. He'd be back in San Francisco at four and in the office by five. Plowing through his E-mails would never be so much fun.

"You know Rudenev Ulitsa?"

"*Rudenev?*" The driver appeared confused, then it came to him. "*Rudenev! Da. Da.*" He was a small man, near sixty, with a Tatar's eyes and a hairline that started about an inch above his eyebrows. Living proof the Mongols had reached the gates of Moscow.

“Rudenev Ulitsa 99,” Byrnes said, yanking a hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet and handing it to the man. “And hurry!”

Five seconds later, the Lada was barreling down the center lane of the Novy Arbat. Byrnes looked over his shoulder out the back window. Late-evening traffic had already closed in around the car. For a moment, he was able to glimpse the parking lot in front of Metelitsa. A long line of cars was pulled up to the valet. Men and women ambled toward the entrance. He saw no sign of his newest friend.

“Rudenev. How long?”

The driver held up a finger. “One hour.”

Byrnes sat lower in his seat, catching his breath.

He knew it had been a lousy idea to come to Russia.