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LEN DEIGHTON

AUTHOR OF
SPY HOOK

SPY LINE

On the run from his enemies, Bernie Samson discovers they are closer than he ever suspected. . . .

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Ballantine/Fiction/37006/U.S. $5.95

SPY LINE

A Novel by

LEN DEIGHTON

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

 Published in the United States of America by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published in Great Britain by Century Hutchinson Ltd., London, in 1989 and in the U.S. by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 89-45302

ISBN 0-345-37006-6

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books International Edition: April 1990
First Ballantine Books Edition: January 1991

CHAPTER 1

"Glasnost is trying to escape over the Wall, and getting shot with a *silenced* machine gun!" said Kleindorf. "That's the latest joke from over there." He spoke just loudly enough to make himself heard above the strident sound of the piano. His English had an American accent that he sometimes sharpened.

I laughed as much as I could, now that he'd told me it was a joke. I'd heard it before, and anyway Kleindorf was hopeless at telling jokes: even good jokes.

Kleindorf took the cigar from his mouth, blew smoke at the ceiling, and tapped ash into an ashtray. Why he was so finicky I don't know; the whole damned room was like a used ashtray. Magically the smoke appeared above his head, writhing and coiling, like angry gray serpents trapped inside the spotlight's beam.

I laughed too much, it encouraged him to try another one. "Pretty faces look alike, but an ugly face is ugly in its own way," said Kleindorf.

"Tolstoy never said that," I told him. I'd willingly play the straight man for anyone who might tell me things I wanted to know.

"Sure he did; he was sitting at the bar over there when he said it."

Apart from regular glances to see how I was taking his jokes, he never took his eyes off his dancers. The five tall, toothy girls just found room on the cramped little stage, and even then the one on the end had to watch where she was kicking. But Rudolf Kleindorf—or "Der grosse Kleiner," as he was more usually known—evidenced the truth of his little joke. The dancers—smiles fixed and eyes wide—were distinguished only by varying cellulite and different choices in hair dye, while Rudi's large lopsided nose was surmounted by amazingly wild and bushy eyebrows. The permanent scowl and his dark-ringed eyes made unique a face that had worn out many bodies, not a few of them his own.

I looked at my watch. It was nearly four in the morning. I was dirty, smelly, and unshaven. I needed a hot bath and a change of clothes. "I'm tired," I said. "I must get some sleep."

Kleindorf took the large cigar from his mouth, blew smoke, and shouted, "We'll go on to 'Singing in the Rain'; get the umbrellas!" The piano stopped abruptly and the dancers collapsed with loud groans, bending, stretching, and slumping against the scenery like a lot of rag dolls tipped from a toybox. Their bodies were shiny with sweat. "What kind of business am I in, where I am working at three o'clock in the morning," he complained as he flashed the gold Rolex from under his starched linen cuffs. He was a moody, mysterious man and there were all manner of stories about him, many of them depicting him as bad-tempered and inclined to violent rages.

I looked round "Babylon." It was gloomy. The fans were off and the place smelled of sweat, cheap cosmetics, ash, and spilled drinks, as all such places do when the customers have departed. The long chromium-and-mirror bar, glittering with every kind of booze you could name, was shuttered and padlocked. His clients had gone to other drinking places, for there are many in Berlin which don't get going until three in the morning. Now Babylon grew cold. During the war this cellar had been reinforced with steel girders to furnish a shelter from the bombing, but the wartime concrete seemed to exude chilly damp. Two blocks away, down Potsdamerstrasse, one of these shelters had for years provided Berlin with cultivated mushrooms until the health authorities condemned it.

It was the "carnival finale" that had made the mess. Paper streamers webbed tables still cluttered with wine bottles and glasses. There were balloons everywhere—some of them already wrinkled and shrinking—cardboard beer mats, torn receipts, drinks lists, and litter of all descriptions. No one was doing anything to clear it all up. There would be plenty of time in the morning to do that. The gates of Babylon didn't open until after dark.

"Why don't you rehearse the new show in the daytime, Rudi?" I asked. No one called him Der Grosse to his face, not even me, and I'd known him almost all my life.

His big nose twitched. "These bimbos work all day; that's why we go through the routines so long after my bedtime." It was a stern German voice, no matter how colloquial his English. His voice was low and hoarse, the result no doubt of his devotion to the maduro-leaf Havanas that were aged for at least six years before he'd put one to his lips.

"Work at what?" He dismissed this question with a wave of his cigar.

"They're all moonlighting for me. Why do you think they want to be paid in cash?"

"They will be tired tomorrow."

"Yah. You buy an icebox and the door falls off, you'll know why. One of these dolls went to sleep on the line. Right?"

"Right." I looked at the women with new interest. They were pretty, but none of them were really young. How could they work all day and half the night too?

The pianist shuffled quickly through his music and found the sheets required. His fingers found the melody. The dancers put on their smiles and went into the routine. Kleindorf blew smoke. No one knew his age. He must have been on the wrong side of sixty, but that was about all he was on the wrong side of, for he always had a huge bundle of high-denomination paper money in his pocket and a beautiful woman at his beck and call. His suits, shirts, and shoes were the finest that Berlin outfitters could provide, and outside on the curb there was a magnificent old Maserati Ghibli with the 4.9-liter engine option. It was a connoisseur's car that he'd had completely rebuilt and kept in tune so that it could take him down the Autobahn to West Germany at 170 mph. For years I'd been hinting that I would enjoy a chance to drive it, but the cunning old devil pretended not to understand.

One persistent rumor said the Kleindorfs were Prussian aristocracy, that his grandfather General Freiherr Rudolf von Kleindorf had commanded one of the Kaiser's best divisions in the 1918 offensives, but I never heard Rudi make such claims. Der Grosse said his money came from "car-wash parlors" in Encino, southern California. Certainly not much of it could have come from this shabby Berlin dive. Only the most intrepid tourists ventured into a place of this kind, and unless they had money to burn

they were soon made to feel unwelcome. Some said Rudi kept the club going for his own amusement, but others guessed that he needed this place, not just to chat with his cronies but because Rudi's back bar was one of the best listening points in the whole of this gossip-ridden city. Such men gravitated to Rudi and he encouraged them, for his reputation as a man who knew what was going on gave him an importance that he seemed to need. Rudi's barman knew that he must provide free drinks for certain men and women: hotel doormen, private secretaries, telephone workers, detectives, military government officials, and sharp-eared waiters who worked in the city's private dining rooms. Even Berlin's police officials—notoriously reluctant to use paid informants—came to Rudi's bar when all else failed.

How Babylon kept going was one of Berlin's many unsolved mysteries. Even on a gala night, alcohol sales didn't pay the rent. The sort of people who sat out front and watched the show were not big spenders: their livers were not up to it. They were the geriatrics of Berlin's underworld: arthritic ex-burglars, incoherent con men, and trembling forgers; men whose time had long since passed. They arrived too early, nursed their drinks, leered at the girls, took their pills with a glass of water, and told each other their stories of long ago. There were others, of course: sometimes some of the smart set—Berlin's *Hautevolee,* in fur coats and evening dress—popped in to see how the other half lived. But they were always on their way to somewhere else. And Babylon had never been a fashionable place for "the young"; this wasn't a place to buy smack, crack, angel dust, solvents, or any of the other powdered luxuries that the Mohican-haircut crowd bartered upstairs on the street: Rudi was fanatically strict about that.

"For God's sake, stop rattling that ice around. If you want another drink, say so."

"No thanks, Rudi. I'm dead tired, I've got to get some sleep."

"Can't you sit still? What's wrong with you?"

"I was a hyperactive child."

"Could be you have this new virus that's going around. It's nasty. My manager is in the clinic. He's been away two weeks. That's why I'm here."

"Yes, you told me."

"You're so pale. Are you eating?"

"You sound like my mother," I said.

"Are you sleeping well, Bernd? I think you should see a doctor. My fellow in Wannsee has done wonders for me. He gave me a series of injections—some new hormone stuff from Switzerland—and put me on a strict diet." He touched the lemon ice floating in the glass of water in front of him. "And I feel wonderful!"

I drank the final dregs of my Scotch, but there was no more than a drip or two left. "I don't need any doctors. I'm all right."

"You don't look all right. You look bloody ill. I've never seen you so pale and tired-looking."

"It's late."

"I'm twice your age, Bernd," he said in a voice that mixed self-satisfaction and reproof. It wasn't true—he couldn't have been more than fifteen years older than me—but I could see he was irritable, and I didn't argue about it. Sometimes I felt sorry for him. Years back, Rudi had bullied his only son into taking a regular commission in the Bundeswehr. The kid had done well enough, but he was too soft for even the modern army. He'd taken an overdose and been found dead in a barrack room in Hamburg. The inquest said it was an accident. Rudi never men-

tioned it, but everyone knew that he'd blamed himself. His wife left him, and he'd never been the same again since losing the boy: his eyes had lost their sheen; they'd become hard and glittering. "And I thought you'd cut out the smoking," he said.

"I do it all the time."

"Cigars are not so dangerous," he said and puffed contentedly.

"Nothing else, then?" I persisted. "No other news?"

"Deputy-Führer Hess died . . ." he said sarcastically. "He used to live in Wilhelmstrasse—number forty-six. After he moved to Spandau we saw very little of him."

"I'm serious," I persisted.

"Then I must tell you the real hot news, Bernd: you! People are saying that some maniac drove a truck at you when you were crossing Waltersdorfer Chaussee. At speed! Nearly killed you, they say."

I stared at him. I said nothing.

He sniffed and said, "People asked what was a nice boy like Bernd Samson doing down there where the world ends. Nothing there but that ancient checkpoint. You can't get anywhere down there: you can't even get to Waltersdorfer, there's a Wall in the way."

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what's there, I told them, memories." He smoked his cigar and scrutinized the burning end of it as a philatelist might study a rare stamp. "Memories," he said again. "Was I right, Bernd?"

"Where's Waltersdorfer Chaussee?" I said. "Is that one of those fancy streets in Nikolassee?"

"Rudow. They buried that fellow Max Busby in the graveyard down there, if I remember rightly. It took a lot of wheeling and dealing to get the body back. When they

shoot someone on their side of the Wall, they don't usually prove very cooperative about the remains."

"Is that so?" I said. I kept hoping he'd insist upon my having another shot of his whisky, but he didn't.

"Ever get scared, Bernd? Ever wake up at night and fancy you hear the footsteps in the hall?"

"Scared of what?"

"I heard your own people have a warrant out for you."

"Did you?"

"Berlin is not a good town for a man on the run," he said reflectively, almost as if I weren't there. "Your people and the Americans still have military powers. They can censor mail, tap phones, and jail anyone they want out of the way. They even have the death penalty at their disposal." He looked at me as if a thought had suddenly come into his mind. "Did you see that item in the newspaper about the residents of Gatow taking their complaints about the British Army to the High Court in London? Apparently the British Army commander in Berlin told the court that since he was the legitimate successor to Hitler he could do anything he wished." A tiny smile, as if it caused him pain. "Berlin is not a good place for a man on the run, Bernd."

"Who says I'm on the run?"

"You're the only man I know who both sides would be pleased to be rid of," said Rudi. Perhaps he'd had a specially bad day. There was a streak of cruelty in him, and it was never far from the surface. "If you were found dead tonight there'd be ten thousand suspects: KGB, CIA, and even your own people." A chuckle. "How did you make so many enemies, Bernd?"

"I don't have any enemies, Rudi," I said. "Not that kind of enemies."

"Then why do you come here dressed in those old

clothes and with a gun in your pocket?" I said nothing, I didn't even move. So he'd noticed the pistol; that was damned careless of me. I was losing my touch. "Frightened of being robbed, Bernd? I can understand it, seeing how prosperous you are looking these days."

"You've had your fun, Rudi," I said. "Now tell me what I want to know, so I can go home and get some sleep."

"And what do you want to know?"

"Where the hell has Lange Koby gone?"

"I told you, I don't know. Why should I know anything about that shmuck?" It was not a word a German uses lightly: I guessed they'd had a row, perhaps a serious quarrel.

"Because Lange was always in here and now he's missing. His phone doesn't answer and no one comes to the door."

"How should I know anything about Lange?"

"Because you were his very close pal."

"Of Lange?" The sour little grin he gave me made me angry.

"Yes, of Lange, you bastard. You two were as thick . . ."

"As thick as thieves. Is that what you were going to say, Bernd?" Despite the darkness, the sound of the piano, and the softness with which we were both speaking, the dancers seemed to guess that we were quarreling. In some strange way there was an anxiety communicated to them. The smiles were slipping, and their voices became more shrill.

"That's right. That's what I was going to say."

"Knock louder," said Rudi dismissively. "Maybe his bell push is out of order." From upstairs I heard the loud slam of the front door. Werner Volkmann came down the beautiful chrome spiral staircase and slid into the room

in that demonstratively apologetic way that he always assumed when I was keeping him up too late. "All okay?" I asked him. Werner nodded. Kleindorf looked round to see who it was and then turned back to watch the weary dancers entangle umbrellas as they danced into the nonexistent wings and cannoned against the wall.

Werner didn't sit down. He gripped a chair back with both hands and stood there waiting for me to get up and go. I'd been at school, not far from here, with Werner Jacob Volkmann. He remained my closest friend. He was a big fellow, and his overcoat, with its large curly astrakhan collar, made him even bigger. The ferocious beard had gone—eliminated by a chance remark from Ingrid, the lady in his life—and it was my guess that soon the mustache would go too.

"A drink, Werner?" said Rudi.

"No thanks." Although Werner's tone showed no sign of impatience, I felt bound to leave.

Werner was another one who wanted to believe I was in danger. For weeks now he'd insisted upon checking the street before letting me take my chances coming out of doorways. It was carrying caution a bit too far, but Werner Volkmann was a prudent man; and he worried about me. "Well, good night, Rudi," I said.

"Good night, Bernd," he said, still looking at the stage. "If I get a postcard from Lange, I'll let you put the postmark under your microscope."

"Thanks for the drink, Rudi."

"Anytime, Bernd." He gestured with the cigar. "Knock louder. Maybe Lange is getting a little deaf."

Outside, the garbage-littered Potsdamerstrasse was cold and snow was falling. This lovely boulevard now led to nowhere but the Wall and had become the focus of a sleazy district where sex, souvenirs, junk food, and denim

were on sale. Beside the Babylon's inconspicuous doorway, harsh blue fluorescent lights showed a curtained shopwindow and customers in the Lebanese café. Men with knitted hats and curly mustaches bent low over their plates, eating shreds of roasted soybean cut from the imitation shawarma that revolved on a spit in the window. Across the road a drunk was crouched unsteadily at the door of a massage parlor, rapping upon it and shouting angrily through the letter box.

Werner's limp was always worse in the cold weather. His leg had been broken in three places when he surprised three DDR agents rifling his apartment. They threw him out of the window. That was a long time ago, but the limp was still there.

It was while we were walking carefully upon the icy pavement that three youths came running from a nearby shop. Turks: thin, wiry youngsters in jeans and T-shirts, seemingly impervious to the stark cold. They ran straight at us, their feet pounding and faces contorted into the ugly expressions that come with such exertions. They were all brandishing sticks. Breathlessly the leader screamed something in Turkish that I couldn't understand, and the other two swerved out into the road as if to get behind us.

My gun was in my hand without my making any conscious decision about needing it. I reached out and steadied myself against the cold stone wall as I took aim.

"Bernie! Bernie! Bernie!" I heard Werner shout with a note of horrified alarm that was so unfamiliar that I froze.

It was at that moment that I felt the sharp blow as Werner's arm knocked my gun up.

"They're just kids, Bernie. Just kids!"

The boys ran on past us, shouting and shoving and jos-

tling as they played some ritual of which we were not a part. I put away my gun and said, "I'm getting jumpy."

"You overreacted," said Werner. "I do it all the time." But he looked at me in a way that belied his words. The car was at the curbside. I climbed in beside him. Werner said, "Why not put the gun in the glove compartment?"

"Because I might want to shoot somebody," I said, irritated at being treated like a child, although by then I should have become used to Werner's nannying. He shrugged and switched the heater on so that a blast of hot air hit me. We sat there in silence for a moment. I was trembling; the warmth comforted me. Huge silver coins smacked against the windscreen glass, turned to icy slush, and then dribbled away. It was a red VW Golf that the dealer had lent him while his new BMW was being repaired. He still didn't drive away: we sat there with the engine running. Werner was watching his mirror and waiting until all other traffic was clear. Then he let in the clutch and, with a squeal of injured rubber, did a U-turn and sped away, cutting through the back streets, past the derelict railway yards to Yorckstrasse, and then to my squat in Kreuzberg.

Beyond the snow clouds the first light of day was peering through the narrow lattice of morning. There was no room in the sky for pink or red. Berlin's dawn can be bleak and colorless like the gray stone city which reflects its light.

My pad was not in the part of Kreuzberg that is slowly being yuppified with smart little eating places, and apartment blocks with newly painted front doors that ask you who you are when you press the bell push. Kreuzberg 36 was up against the Wall: a place where the cops walked in pairs and stepped carefully over the winos and the excrement.

We passed a derelict apartment block that had been patched up to house "alternative" ventures: shops for bean sprouts and broken bicycles, a cooperative kindergarten, a feminist art gallery, and a workshop that printed Marxist books, pamphlets, and leaflets; mostly leaflets. In the street outside this block—dressed in traditional Turkish clothes, face obscured by a scarf—there was a young woman diligently spraying a slogan on the wall.

The block in which I was living had on its façade two enormous angels wielding machine guns surrounded by men in top hats standing under huge irregular patches of color that was the underpainting for clouds. It was to have been a gigantic political mural called "The Massacre of the Innocents," but the artist died of a drug overdose soon after getting the money for the paint.

Werner insisted upon coming inside with me. He wanted to make sure that no unfriendly visitor was waiting to surprise me in my little apartment, which opened off the rear courtyard. "You needn't worry about that, Werner," I told him. "I don't think the Department will locate me here, and even if they did, would Frank find anyone stouthearted enough to venture into this part of town?"

"Better safe than sorry," said Werner. From the other end of the hallway there came the sound of Indian music. Werner opened the door cautiously and switched on the light. It was a bare low-wattage bulb suspended from the ceiling. He looked round the squalid room; the paper was hanging off the damp plaster, and my bed was a dirty mattress and a couple of blankets. On the wall was a tattered poster: a pig wearing a policeman's uniform. I'd done very little to change anything since moving in; I didn't want to attract attention. So I endured life in this dark hovel: sharing—with everyone living in the rooms around this

Hinterhof—one bathroom and two primitive toilets, the pungent smell of which pervaded the whole place. "We'll have to find you somewhere better than this, Bernie." The Indian music stopped. "Somewhere the Department can't get you."

"I don't think they care any more, Werner." I looked round the room, trying to see it with his eyes, but I'd grown used to the squalor.

"The Department? Then why try to arrest you?" He looked at me. I tried to see what was going on in his mind, but with Werner I could never be quite sure.

"That was weeks ago. Maybe I've played into their hands. I've put myself in prison, haven't I? And they don't even have the bother or the expense of it. They are ignoring me like a parent might deliberately ignore some child who misbehaves. Did I tell you that they are still paying my salary into the bank?"

"Yes, you told me." Werner sounded disappointed. Perhaps he enjoyed the vicarious excitement of my being on the run and didn't want to be deprived of it. "They want to keep their options open."

"They wanted me silenced and out of circulation. And that's what I am."

"Don't count on anything, Bernie. They might just be waiting for you to make a move. You said they are vindictive."

"Maybe I did, but I'm tired now, Werner. I must get some sleep." Before I could even take my coat off, a very slim young man came into the room. He was dark-skinned, with large brown eyes, pockmarked face, and close-cropped hair, a Tamil. Sri Lanka had provided Berlin's most recent influx of immigrants. He slept all day and stayed awake all night, listening to ragas on a cassette player. "Hello, Johnny," said Werner coldly. They had