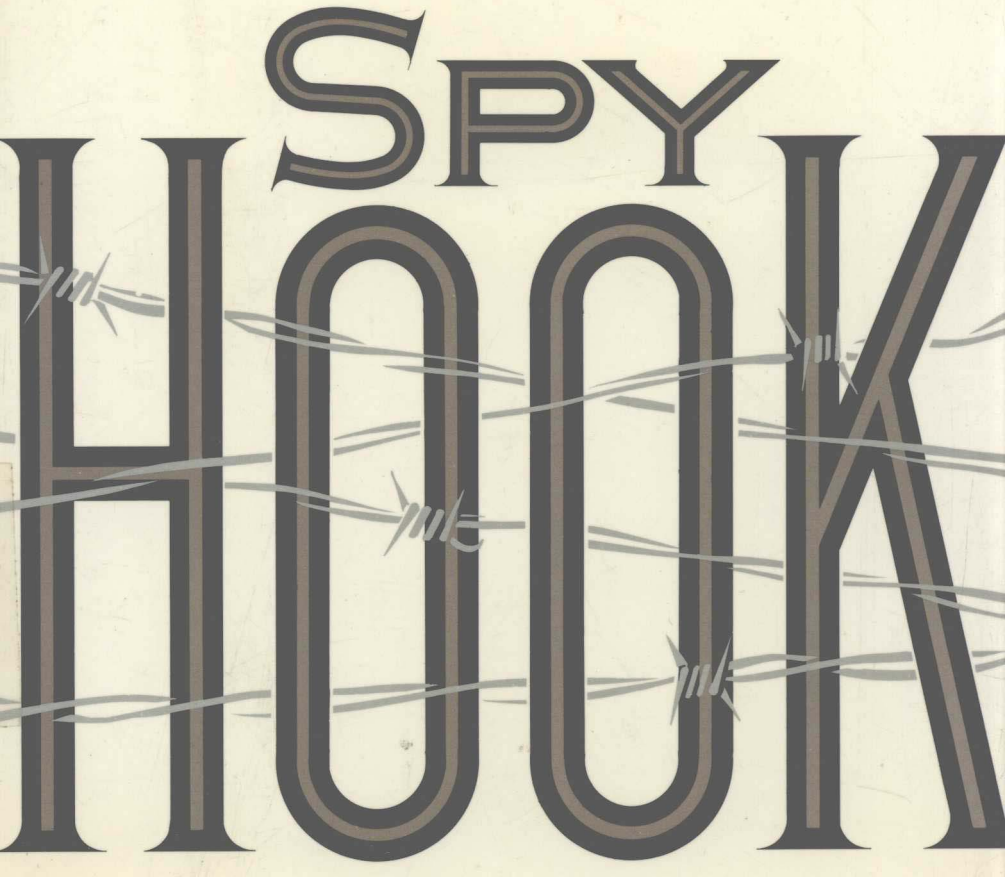
LEN DEIGHTON



SPY HOOK

a novel by

Len Deighton

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SPY HOOK

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Chapter 1

When they ask me to become president of the United States I'm going to say, "Except for Washington, D.C." I'd finally decided while I was shaving in icy-cold water without electric light, and signed all the necessary documentation as I plodded through the uncleared snow to wait for a taxicab that never came, and let the passing traffic spray Washington's special kind of sweet-smelling slush over me.

Now it was afternoon. I'd lunched, and I was in a somewhat better mood. But this was turning out to be a long, long day, and I'd left this little job for the last. I hadn't been looking forward to it. Now I kept glancing up at the clock, and through the window at the interminable snow falling steadily from a steely-gray overcast, and wondering if I would be at the airport in time for the evening flight back to London, and whether it would be canceled.

"If that's the good news," said Jim Prettyman with an easy American grin, "what's the bad news?" He was thirty-three years old, according to the briefing card, a slim, white-faced Londoner with sparse hair and rimless spectacles who had come from the London School of Economics with an awesome reputation as a mathematician and qualifications in accountancy, political studies, and business management. I'd always got along very well with him—in fact, we'd been friends—but he'd never made any secret of the extent of his ambitions, or of his impatience. The moment a faster bus came past, Jim leaped aboard; that was his way. I looked at him carefully. He could make a smile last a long time.

So he didn't want to go to London next month and give evidence. Well, that was what the Department in London had expected him to say. Jim Prettyman's reputation said he was not the sort of fellow who would go out of his way to do a favor for London Central—or anyone else.

I looked at the clock again and said nothing. I was sitting in a huge, soft beige leather armchair. There was that wonderful smell of new leather that they spray inside cheap Japanese cars.

"More coffee, Bernie?" He scratched the side of his bony nose, as if he was thinking of something else.

"Yes, please." It was lousy coffee, even by my low standards, but I suppose it was his way of showing that he wasn't trying to get rid of me, and my ineffectual way of disassociating myself from the men who'd sent the message I was about to give him. "London might ask for you officially," I said. I tried to make it sound friendly, but it came out as a threat, which I suppose it was.

"Did London tell you to say that?" His secretary came and peered in through the half-open door—he must have pressed some hidden buzzer—and he said, "Two more—regular." She nodded and went out. It was all laconic and laid-back and very American, but, then, James Prettyman—or, as it said on the oak-and-brass nameplate on his desk, Jay Prettyman—was very American. He was American in the way that English emigrants are in their first few years after applying for citizenship.

I'd been watching him carefully, trying to see into his mind, but his face gave no clue as to his real feelings. He was a tough customer; I'd always known that. My wife, Fiona, had said that, apart from me, Prettyman was the most ruthless man she'd ever met. But that didn't mean she didn't admire him for that and a lot of other things. He'd even got her interested in his time-wasting hobby of trying to decipher ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform scripts. But most of us had learned not

to let him get started on the subject. Not surprising he'd ended his time running a desk in Codes and Ciphers.

"Yes," I said, "they told me to say it." I looked at his office, with its paneled walls that were made of some special kind of plastic on account of the fire department's regulations. And at the stern-faced president of Perimeter Security Guarantee Trust framed in gold, and the fancy reproduction-antique bureau that might have concealed a drinks cupboard. I'd have given a lot for a stiff Scotch before facing that weather again.

"No chance! Look at this stuff." He indicated the trays laden with paperwork, and the elaborate work station with the video screen that gave him access to one hundred and fifty major data bases. Alongside it, staring at us from a big solid silver frame, there was another reason: his brand-new American wife. She looked about eighteen but had a son at Harvard and two ex-husbands, to say nothing of a father who'd been a big shot in the State Department. She was standing with him and a shiny Corvette in front of a big house with cherry trees in the garden. He grinned again. I could see why they didn't like him in London. He had no eyebrows and his eyes were narrow, so that, when he grinned those superwide mirthless grins with his white teeth just showing, he looked like the commander of a Japanese prison camp complaining that the POWs weren't bowing low enough.

"You could be in and out in one day," I coaxed.

He was ready for that. "A day to travel; a day to travel back. It would cost me three days' work and, quite frankly, Bernie, those goddamned flights leave me bushed."

"I thought you might like a chance to see the family," I said. Then I waited while the secretary—a tall girl with amazingly long red tapering fingernails and a great deal of silvery-yellow wavy hair—brought in two paper cups of slot-machine coffee and put them down very delicately on his huge desk, together with two bright-yellow paper napkins, two packets of

artificial sweetener, two packets of "nondairy creamer," and two plastic stirrers. She smiled at me and then at Jim.

"Thank you, Charlene," he said. He immediately reached for his coffee, looking at it as if he was going to enjoy it. After putting two sweetener pills and the white "creamer" into it, and stirring energetically, he sipped it and said, "My mother died last August, and Dad went to live in Geneva with my sister."

Thank you, London Research and Briefing, always there when you need them. I nodded. He'd made no mention of the English wife he'd divorced overnight in Mexico, the one who had refused to go and live in Washington, despite the salary and the big house with the cherry trees in the garden; but it seemed better not to pursue that one. "I'm sorry, Jim." I was genuinely sorry about his mother. His parents had given me more than one sorely needed Sunday lunch and had looked after my two kids when the Greek au pair had had a screaming row with my wife and left without notice.

I drank some of the evil-tasting brew and started again. "There's a lot of money—half a million, perhaps—still unaccounted for. Someone must know about it. Half a million. Pounds!"

"Well, I don't know about it." His lips tightened.

"Come along, Jim. No one's shouting 'fire.' The money is somewhere in Central Funding. Everyone knows that, but there'll be no peace until the bookkeepers find it and close the ledgers."

"Why you?"

Good question. The true answer was that I'd become the dogsbody who got the jobs that no one else wanted. "I was coming over anyway."

"So they saved the price of an air ticket." He drank more coffee and carefully wiped the extreme edge of his mouth with the bright-yellow paper napkin. "Thank God, I'm through with all that penny-pinching crap in London. How the hell do

you put up with it?" He drained the rest of his coffee. I suppose he'd developed a taste for it.

"Are you offering me a job?" I said, straight-faced and open-eyed. He frowned and for a moment looked flustered. The fact was that, since my wife had defected to the Russians a few years before, my bona fides was dependent upon my contract with London Central. If they dispensed with my services, however elegantly it was done, I might suddenly start finding that my "indefinite" U.S. visa for "unlimited" visits was not getting me through to where the baggage was waiting. Of course, some really powerful independent corporation might be able to face down official disapproval, but powerful independent organizations, like these friendly folks Jim worked for, were usually hell-bent on keeping the government sweet.

"Another year like last year and we'll be laying off personnel," he said awkwardly.

"How long will it take to get a cab?"

"It's not as if my drag-assing over to London would make a difference to you personally. . . ."

"Someone told me that some cabs won't go to the airport in this kind of weather." I wasn't going to crawl to him, no matter how urgent London was pretending it was.

"If it's for you, say the word. I owe you, Bernie. I owe you." When I didn't react, he stood up. As if by magic, the door opened, and he told his secretary to phone the car pool and arrange a car for me. "Do you have anything to pick up?"

"Straight to the airport," I said. I had my shirts and underwear and shaving stuff in the leather bag that contained the faxed accounts and memos that the embassy had sent round to me in the middle of the night. I should have been showing them to Jim, but showing him papers would make no difference. He was determined to tell London Central that he didn't give a damn about them or their problems. He knew he didn't have to worry. When he'd told them he was going to Washing-

ton to work, they'd taken his living accommodation to pieces and given him a vetting of the sort that you never get on joining—only on leaving. Especially if you work in Codes and Ciphers.

So Jim clean-as-a-whistle Prettyman had nothing to worry about. He'd always been a model employee: that was his *modus operandi* Not even an office pencil or a packet of paper clips. Rumors said the investigating team from K-7 were so frustrated that they'd taken away his wife's handwritten recipe book and looked at it under ultraviolet light. But Jim's ex-wife certainly wasn't the sort of woman who writes out recipes in longhand, so that might be a silly story: no one likes the people from K-7. There were lots of silly stories going round at the time; my wife had just defected, and everyone was nervous.

"You work with Bret Rensselaer. Talk to Bret: he knows where the bodies are buried."

"Bret's not with us any more," I reminded him. "He was shot. In Berlin . . . a long time back."

"Yeah; I forgot. Poor Bret; I heard about that. Bret sent me over here the first time I came. I have a lot to thank him for."

"Why would Bret know?"

"About the slush fund Central Funding set up with the Germans? Are you kidding? Bret masterminded that whole business. He appointed the company directors—all front men, of course—and squared it with the people who ran the bank."

"Bret did?"

"The bank directors were in his pocket. They were all Bret's people, and Bret briefed them."

"It's news to me."

"Sure. It's too bad. If half a million pounds took a walk, Bret was the man who might have pointed you in the right direction." Jim Prettyman looked up to where his secretary

stood at the door again. She must have nodded or something, for Jim said, "The car's there. No hurry, but it's ready when you are."

"Did you work with Bret?"

"On the German caper? I okayed the cash transfers when there was no one else around who was authorized to sign. But everything that I did had already been okayed. I was never at the meetings. That was all kept behind closed doors. Shall I tell you something? I don't think there was ever one meeting held in the building. All I ever saw was cashier's chits with the authorized signatures: none of them names I recognized." He laughed reflectively. "Any auditor worth a damn would immediately point out that every one of those damned signatures might have been written by Bret Rensselaer. For all the evidence I have, there never was a real committee. The whole thing could have been a complete fabrication dreamed up by Bret."

I nodded soberly, but I must have looked puzzled as I picked up my bag and took my overcoat from his secretary.

Jim came with me over to the door, and through his secretary's office. With his hand on my shoulder he said, "Sure, I know. Bret didn't dream it up. I'm just saying that's how secret it was. But when you talk to the others, just remember that they were Bret Rensselaer's cronies. If one of them put his hand in the till, Bret will probably have covered it for him. Be your age, Bernie. These things happen: only rarely, I know, but they happen. It's the way the world is."

Jim walked with me to the elevator and pushed the buttons for me, the way Americans do when they want to make sure you're leaving the building. He said we must get together again, have a meal, and talk about the good times we had together in the old days. I said yes, we must, and thanked him, and said goodbye, but still the lift didn't come.

Jim pressed the button again and smiled a crooked little smile. He straightened up. "Bernie," he said suddenly, and

glanced around us and along the corridor to see that we were alone.

"Yes, Jim?"

He looked around again. Jim had always been a very careful fellow: it was the reason he'd got on so well. One of the reasons. "This business in London . . ."

Again he paused. I thought for one terrible moment that he was going to admit to pocketing the missing money, and then implore me to help him cover it up, for old times' sake. Or something like that. It would have put me in a damned difficult position, and my stomach turned at the thought of it. But I needn't have worried. Jim wasn't the sort who pleaded with anyone about anything.

"I won't come. You tell them that in London. They can try anything they like, but I won't come."

He seemed agitated. "Okay, Jim," I said. "I'll tell them."

"I'd love to see London again. I really miss the smoke. . . . We had some good times, didn't we, Bernie?"

"Yes, we did," I said. Jim had always been a bit of a cold fish: I was surprised by this revelation.

"Remember when Fiona was frying the fish we caught and spilled the oil and set fire to the kitchen? You really flipped your lid."

"She said you did it."

He smiled. He seemed genuinely amused. This was the Jim I used to know. "I never saw anyone move so fast. Fiona could handle just about anything that came along." He paused. "Until she met you. Yes, they were good times, Bernie."

"Yes, they were."

I thought he was softening, and he must have seen that in my face, for he said, "But I'm not getting involved in any bloody inquiry. They are looking for someone to blame. You know that, don't you?"

I said nothing. Jim said, "Why choose you to come and

ask me? . . . Because, if I don't go, you'll be the one they finger."

I ignored that remark. "Wouldn't it be better to go over there and tell them what you know?" I suggested.

My reply did nothing to calm him. "I don't know anything," he said, raising his voice. "Jesus Christ, Bernie, how can you be so blind? The Department is determined to get even with you."

"Get even? For what?"

"For what your wife did."

"That's not logical."

"Revenge never is logical. Wise up. They'll get you, one way or the other. Even resigning from the Department—the way I did—makes them mad. They see it as a betrayal. They expect everyone to stay in harness forever."

"Like marriage," I said.

"Till death do us part," said Jim. "Right. And they'll get you. Through your wife. Or maybe through your father. You'll see."

The car of the lift arrived, and I stepped into it. I thought he was coming with me. Had I known he wasn't, I would never have left that reference to my father go unexplained. He put his foot inside and leaned round to press the button for the ground floor. By that time it was too late. "Don't tip the driver," said Jim, still smiling as the doors closed on me. "It's against company policy." The last I saw of him was that cold Cheshire Cat smile. It hung in my vision for a long time afterwards.

When I got outside in the street, the snow was piling higher and higher, and the air was crammed full of huge snowflakes that came spinning down like sycamore seeds with engine failure.

"Where's your baggage?" said the driver. Getting out of the car, he tossed the remainder of his coffee into the snow, where it left a brown-ridged crater that steamed like Vesuvius.

He wasn't looking forward to a drive to the airport on a Friday afternoon, and you didn't have to be a psychologist to see that in his face.

"That's all," I told him.

"You travel light, mister." He opened the door for me, and I settled down inside. The car was warm; I suppose he'd just come in from a job, expecting to be signed out and sent home. Now he was in a bad mood.

The traffic was slow, even by Washington weekend standards. I thought about Jim while we crawled out to the airport. I suppose he wanted to get rid of me. There was no other reason why Jim would invent that ridiculous story about Bret Rensselaer. The idea of Bret being a party to any kind of financial swindle involving the government was so ludicrous that I didn't even give it careful thought. Perhaps I should have done.

The plane was half empty. After a day like that, a lot of people had had enough, without enduring the tender, loving care of any airline company plus the prospect of a diversion to Manchester. But at least the half-empty First Class cabin gave me enough legroom. I accepted the offers of glasses of champagne with such enthusiasm that the stewardess finally left the bottle with me.

I read the dinner menu and tried not to think about Jim Prettyman. I hadn't pressed him hard enough. I'd resented the unexpected phone call from Morgan, the D-G's personal assistant. I'd planned to spend this afternoon shopping. Christmas had passed, and there were sale signs everywhere. I'd glimpsed a big model helicopter that my son, Billy, would have gone crazy about. London was always ready to provide me with yet another task that was nothing to do with me or my immediate work. I had the suspicion that this time I'd been chosen not because I happened to be in Washington but be-