

# T H E   K I S S

B Y   L E W I S   S H I N E R

He came around the corner with the Walther out and ready. The Russian was standing in the middle of the alley, hands shoulder high, well away from his body.

“Wait,” the Russian said.

He looked helpless enough. Martin moved closer and put his back against the alley wall so he wouldn’t get any surprises from behind. “All right,” he said. “Talk to me.”

“Believe me,” the Russian said, laughing. “It was no more pleasant for me than for you.” He was young, thin, with short brown hair and intense black eyes. “You must know I’m Russian.”

“I could taste the Sobranies on your breath.”

“You know the work of Dr. Zoshchenko.”

“I’ve heard the name.”

“Immunology. He is working to find a cure for the retrovirus.”

“AIDS, you mean.”

“Among others. Several kinds of retrovirus.”

It was starting to snow. That in itself was nothing new in Finland in November, but Martin wasn’t dressed for it. “Get to the good stuff.”

The Russian nodded. “He found what he wanted. To put it simply, it is another virus. One that makes the retrovirus devour itself. This new virus is delicate. It can only survive inside a living carrier. It can be passed from person to person, but it is not airborne, you understand?”

“Kissing would do it.”

“Yes.”

“Keep talking.”

“Zoshchenko is a patriot. Once our side has the cure, then the retrovirus can become a weapon of war. Some of us do not want this. Zoshchenko will not listen. We decided the West must have this knowledge.”

“Why me?”

“There are not so many Americans here. Your true profession is known to us. We hoped you would believe us.”

Martin could still feel the Russian’s mouth on his own, the Russian’s tongue forcing its way in. The sandpaper rasp of the Russian’s stubbled chin. Sitting stunned just long enough for the Russian to get out the door.

“It acts quickly,” the Russian said. “In a few minutes you will begin to run a fever. Two hours from now you will be healthier than you have ever been.”

Or, Martin thought, I’ll just be too sick to help myself, and I’ll carry some fiendish new plague home with me. He stared into the Russian’s eyes. He saw sincerity, hope, fear. All the things he saw in the Director’s eyes when the Director lied about the Iran business, the things he saw in the eyes of Presidents and station chiefs and pages in the Capitol building. Instincts were no good any more.

Martin shot the Russian through the heart.

The silencer killed most of the noise, and the snowfall got the rest. He took the Russian's overcoat for warmth and then he buried the body in a snowdrift. It might just have been the effort, but he was starting to sweat.

He sat against the wall of the alley. If the Russian was lying, he told himself, he would know it before much longer. He should have strength enough to do one thing. He turned the Walther around and looked into the frayed silencer. He put both thumbs against the trigger and braced his elbows on his knees.

He waited.

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