

The Mephisto Threat

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Published by MIRA Books

Extract

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1

HEAT was killing him. Blades of light skewered his skin. Without air, the soaring temperature suffocated, halting time and muffling his senses so that he couldn't focus on the narrow streets, sprawling stalls and brightly coloured bougainvillaea, couldn't smell the spice and fenugreek, honey and dried beef, couldn't taste his apple tea or hear the blare of car horns signalling another mad couple's leap into matrimony. In all of his thirty-three years Tallis had never known weather like it, not even when he'd fought in the first Gulf War. It was as if the whole of Istanbul was being microwaved.

He changed position, slowly, lethargically. He would have preferred a café nearer to the university. Students were always attracted to the best hangouts, but Garry had insisted they meet close to the Spice Bazaar, or Misir Carsisi, to give it its Turkish name, a cavernous, L-shaped market within sight of the New Mosque. He didn't know the reason for Garry's choice of venue, or whether it held significance.

Tallis reran the conversation he'd had with Morello at

the airport. They'd literally bumped into each other, a surprise for both of them.

'Fuck me, Paul, what are you doing here?'

'Could ask you the same question.'

Garry tapped the side of his nose. 'Work.'

Tallis copied his friend, taking the piss. 'Holiday.'

'Lucky sod.' Oh, if only you knew, Tallis thought. 'How long for?'

'Three weeks, maybe more.'

'Good. I'll be back from the UK by then. Actually,' Garry said, 'there's something I'd like to bounce off you, something I'm following up.'

'I'm a bit out of the game, man.'

'Once a cop always a cop.' Tallis flashed a smile. Garry had no idea that, since he'd left West Midlands police, he'd become involved in working for the Security Services. Oblivious, Garry returned the smile then his look turned shifty. 'I'll explain more next time we meet. Give me your number and I'll give you a call soon as I'm back in Istanbul.'

Tallis had hesitated, felt tempted to give him the brush-off. He was working undercover and *off the books* for MI5. Asim, his contact, had been privy to a limited amount of chatter, which he wanted Tallis to verify. There was no huge expectation because the word on the ground was embryonic, no specific threats, no timing, no hard targets, but there remained a major fear that terrorist organisations were dreaming up a new kind of campaign, involving different methods of destruction, different tiers of people, hinting at an involvement with British organised crime. In among the

white noise, the city of Birmingham was hinted at. A meeting with Garry could horribly complicate things but, apart from the insistence in Garry's manner, he owed the man.

As a freelance crime correspondent, Morello had covered the botched firearms incident in Birmingham for which Tallis, then a member of an elite, undercover firearms team, felt responsibility, even though he had officially been cleared. Unlike many, Morello wrote a balanced account, sympathetic almost, along the lines of a firearms officer's job was not a happy one. Tallis had phoned him afterwards to thank him and they'd hit it off. He'd stayed in touch ever since, even having several dinners with him and Morello's wife, Gayle, at their home in Notting Hill. When Garry was in Birmingham, he made a point of calling Tallis so they could hook up. Friends like that were hard to come by so, in spite of the risk, Tallis had given Garry his new mobile number with a smile. And Garry had got in touch.

Tallis adjusted his sunglasses. He was looking and listening, his senses attuned for anything out of kilter. He'd already closely considered his surroundings: five tables arranged outside on what passed for a pavement, all of them occupied, one by a group of middle-aged Turks smoking and playing backgammon, another by a young British couple. Some dodgy-looking Russians were eating mezes to his left. The furthest table away was taken by a single male, early thirties, nationality unidentifiable. For some time he'd been mucking about with a mobile phone. As Tallis glanced at him the man smiled with hooded eyes,

black, same colour as prunes, then put away the phone and turned to his *Newsweek*.

Tallis continued to sip his tea, a beverage more suited to regulating body temperature than beer. Not that he was drinking alcohol—unprofessional to consume booze on the job.

He looked out onto a street crackling with latent heat, sky a screaming shade of blue. There was a small commotion as a street trader ambling past, his cart filled with plump bulbs of garlic, narrowly missed a taxi, the moustachioed cab driver displaying his displeasure by placing his hand flat on the horn and gesticulating wildly. Tallis smiled. When it came to driving in Turkey, you took your life in your own hands, the high road accident rate evidence that it was never wise to assume right of way. Just one of those many little things he'd discovered in the short time spent travelling in this strange, beguiling nation, a magical blend of ancient and modern, fast-paced and fast-changing and full of contradictions.

Take its government, Tallis thought. It desperately wanted to be accepted into the European Union but did the very things that made it unacceptable; it was an open secret that Turkey's human rights record continued to raise concern. By the same token, its people were friendly, generous and full of good humour. Especially the blokes. When a Turk declared himself your friend, an *arkadas*, he genuinely meant it, and it amused Tallis that while every Turk honoured the female of the species, every Turk also reckoned himself irresistible to women. While fathers

could allow their daughters to enjoy certain freedoms, many saw no contradiction in offering them for sale, particularly to well-heeled Englishmen.

But this was all extraneous stuff, Tallis reminded himself. His brief concerned the criminal and political. Turkey might be a secular society, but there was enough pull from a variety of religious quarters to make it extremely vulnerable to conflict—that and its geographical position. Lying midway between Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the country was a gateway, a melting pot for culture and ideas on the one hand, terrorists and organised crime on the other. No accident that many unsuspecting girls were trafficked through its borders. More worrying still the significant trend for criminal organisations specialising in arms smuggling and extortion, with all their consequent violent sidelines, to get themselves involved in religious fundamentalism. An explosive mix.

Tallis checked his watch: after noon. Garry was late. He refocused his gaze on the Russian contingent. A popular holiday destination for many Russians, Istanbul was a particular favourite, though Tallis decided from a snatch of overheard conversation that tourism was not uppermost in the Muscovites' minds. He idly wondered whether these hefty-looking guys with flat, sawn-off features were Mafiya, a breed who favoured no room for error killing—cut throats, crushed lungs and bashed-in skulls. Job done.

'Paul, good to see you,' Garry Morello said, slumping down in the chair next to him. A heavyset man with dark features that spoke of Italian blood, he took out a handker-

chief and mopped his profusely sweating brow. ‘Christ, this heat is insane.’

Tallis agreed. For the past hour, perspiration had been consistently leaking from his hairline and plastering his short dark hair to his brow.

‘Good holiday?’ Garry said.

‘Most enjoyable.’ After bumping into Garry at Dalaman Airport, he’d travelled by taxi on a blood-pressure-raising journey through the mountains to Fethiye, a working town with a Crusader castle. There he’d treated himself to a Turkish bath, full hot and cold and slapped flesh, and, as a means to build up his cover, joined a *gulet*, a traditional Turkish wooden sailing vessel. Apart from the four-man crew, there were six others on board—four Brits, two Australians. The destination was Kalkan, originally a fishing village with winding, paved streets, recently transformed into a cosmopolitan marina of sophisticated but unspoilt charm. Apart from swimming and fishing off the boat, he’d spent the first week zombied out in what felt like a narcotic-induced sleep. He guessed it was his body and mind’s way of recovering. He’d experienced something similar after engaging in battle. There was a particular type of lethargy that set in with exhaustion, especially when the fight was so unequal, when your enemy were half-starved boys and old men. But his most recent battle had involved neither guns nor grenades. His battle had been with grief and sorrow. He still felt raw from losing Belle. When it had finally sunk in that he would never see her again, he hadn’t really believed that he’d ever recover.

‘Drink?’ Tallis smiled.

‘Beer, thanks.’

Tallis ordered the locally brewed Efes Pilsen, leant back in his chair, waited for Garry to set the pace. There was a restlessness about him, Tallis thought. The Russians paid their bill and left the table, noisily scraping back the chairs as they went. Tallis briefly wondered if they were the reason Garry had chosen the venue. He inclined his head towards the departing diners. Garry followed his gaze. ‘Mafiya,’ he said neutrally. ‘Wrote a book on the subject last year.’

Yesterday’s news, then, Tallis thought.

The beer arrived. Garry took a long draught then glanced over his shoulder. His expression was uncertain. To help him out, Tallis kept his mouth shut. Most people couldn’t bear silences. Garry was no exception. He craned forward. Tallis wasn’t certain whether it was to block out the din from the neighbouring streets or because he wished to speak in confidence. ‘Know a guy called Kevin Napier?’

‘Not “nearly took out one of his own side” Napier?’ Tallis said dryly.

‘Care to enlighten me?’

‘If we’re talking about the same guy...’

‘Suspect we are. Napier was a tank commander during the first Gulf War and left to join the police same time as you.’

Tallis pushed his sunglasses onto the bridge of his nose. After leaving school at sixteen, he’d joined the army and served with the First Battalion, the Staffordshire Regiment. Eight years later he’d joined West Midlands police.

‘Am I right?’ Garry said.

‘Napier served with the 7th Armoured Brigade.’

Garry flashed him another expectant look.

‘He shot at one of our vehicles by mistake,’ Tallis said, ‘and doused the occupants with machine-gun fire, injuring a couple of British officers.’

‘Not a very smart move.’

‘Proved no obstacle to his career path.’ Tallis shrugged. It had rightly caused an almighty stink at the time, he remembered. The Brits were used to the Americans accidentally firing on them but not one of their own.

‘Did you know he’s with the Serious and Organised Crime Agency?’

Tallis resisted the temptation to react. ‘I’d heard along the grapevine he’d applied.’ So the bastard got in, he thought. Possibly not the smartest move. It was reputed that SOCA, with its high ideal of taking on the Mr Bigs, had fallen rather short of its remit. Experienced officers were leaving in droves either to retire or return to policing. Word on the ground implied SOCA was hamstrung by an unwieldy and top-heavy management system, crammed with analysts, but with no clear brief or expertise in processing data and intelligence. He wondered how Garry knew about Napier. ‘What about him?’

‘I’ll come to that in a moment. Thing is, Birmingham’s your patch, right?’

‘Used to be.’ It was almost two years since he’d worked as a firearms officer. After handing in his notice, he’d temporarily worked as a security guard in a warehouse before

being recruited to work off the books for MI5. It hadn't been one of those 'apply, endure a host of interviews under the gaze of humourless experts, we'll get back to you' type appointments. His was more 'we want you, we need you, you've got the job' arrangement.

'But you still know the movers and shakers in the criminal world?'

'Not exactly up to date.' This time Tallis had to lean forward. The noise from the street had suddenly grown in intensity and penetrated the thickened atmospherics. Sounded like the Dolphin Police, a rapid response motorcycle unit, but when he glanced round, trying to source the din, he saw a Ducati hacking down the narrow street, zipping in and out, driver and pillion passenger clobbered up in leathers and helmets. They must be cooking, Tallis thought.

'Reason I ask...'

But Tallis wasn't listening. He'd turned back. Something was off. Couldn't quite work it out, but his sixth sense was suddenly on full alert. The air throbbed. Street hawkers continued to ply their wares but the chatter of conversation receded like someone had turned down the volume control. He felt that nip in the pit of his stomach, part fear, almost sexual, like when he'd been going into a firearms incident. Everything that happened next followed in slow motion. The driver ground to a halt, one foot resting on the pavement, bike tilting at an angle, the engine still running and revving. Garry glanced to his right but, unperturbed, continued to talk. Too late, Tallis saw the pillion passenger reach into his jacket. Fuck, too late, he saw the

gun, the outer reaches of his mind processing that the weapon was a Walther PPK. Tallis shouted out, and dived for cover as three shots rang out and hit Garry in the chest.

Chaos broke out. Someone shouted. Everyone hit the deck. Tables overturned. Glass and crockery smashed. The British girl was screaming her lungs out, as were several passers-by. Blood was pumping out of Garry's chest like an open faucet and although Tallis ripped off his shirt and tried to staunch the flow, it was no use, no fucking use at all. Blood. Blood everywhere.

'Bir ambulans cagrin! Polis cagrin!' the café owner screamed. *Get an ambulance. Call the police.*

'Report,' Garry rasped, his face fast draining of colour, becoming pale as old snow.

'Take it easy, mate,' Tallis said, applying as much pressure as he could to the wound, appalled at the speed with which Garry's body was going into shock.

'Report,' Garry said again, his breath laboured, expression contorted, life-blood filling his mouth and spurting out between his teeth.

'Don't speak. It's all right,' Tallis murmured, watching with dismay as Garry's body twitched and juddered. 'Everything will be all right.'

But it wasn't. Two minutes later, Garry was dead.

Tallis leapt to his feet and ran. The imagined sound of the speeding motorbike drum-rolled like a heavy-metal soundtrack in his head. He guessed the killers had headed off in the direction of Galata Bridge, a bridge spanning the mouth of the greatest natural harbour in the world, the

Golden Horn, and providing the vital connection to the dense interior of the city. Although they had more than a head start, would have probably ditched their bike by now, stripped off their leathers and jumped into a car or cab, even though pursuit was entirely fruitless, Tallis gave chase. It didn't matter that he was a stranger and this was their terrain. Didn't matter that the traffic, which the police systematically failed to control, was clogging every turning. Some bastard had just callously killed his friend. Bloodied, tense with anger, oblivious to the baffled stares of Turks and tourists, he continued for almost a full kilometre, through streets dense with a tapestry of colour and life until, lungs exploding, he stopped, pitched his six-foot-two-inch frame forward and gasped for breath. Several lungfuls of fetid air later, he walked back to the café defeated.

At the sight of the police, Tallis took another big, deep breath. He'd only ever had one encounter with them and that had been the customs guys. He and his fellow sailing companions were drifting dreamily through navy-streaked and turquoise-coloured seas alongside Patara beach when a high-powered launch suddenly disturbed the calm and roared towards them. Two officers lashed their boat to the *gulet*, climbed on board and aggressively demanded to see everyone's passports and papers, their disappointment at finding everything in order palpable. Tallis was used to aggro, but his fellow travellers found it a deeply unsettling experience.

The police had clearly moved with impressive speed, he thought, looking around him. The café, no longer a

place of entertainment, was cordoned off as a crime scene. Someone had draped a tablecloth over Garry's body, though nothing could conceal the vast amount of blood that slicked the ground. Several security police officers in uniform were talking to witnesses. Traffic police, distinguished from the others by their white caps, were trying, and failing, to disperse the gathering crowd of onlookers. Out of them all, one man stood out. He was short and trim. Educated guess, Tallis thought, a man in his forties. Clean-shaven, with a shock of dark hair, the officer's nose was wide, mouth full and mobile and his teeth were spectacularly white. He wore navy trousers and a pale blue, short-sleeved shirt, open-necked. He was speaking in rapid Turkish, ordering his men to ensure that witnesses remained where they were, that nobody was to leave without his say-so. Might prove tough, Tallis observed. The single man who'd been sitting alone, playing with his mobile phone, was noticeably absent.

At Tallis's approach, the man in charge turned, introduced himself as Captain Ertas.

'You must be the Englishman.' Dark eyes that appeared to miss nothing fastened onto Tallis. He suddenly realised the state he was in. In any other circumstances he'd have felt a prime suspect. 'Why did you run away?' Ertas said.

'I didn't. I gave chase,' Tallis said evenly.

'Lying dog,' one of the uniformed officers said. Tallis understood every word, but resisted the temptation to either look at him or answer back. More valuable for them to believe he couldn't speak the language.

'I understand you were with the dead man,' Ertas said, inclining his head towards Garry's fallen form. Tallis noticed that Ertas spoke excellent English with an American accent. Probably one of the new, modern, ambitious brands of Turkish police officer that choose to study at the University of North Texas and get a criminology degree.

'Yes,' Tallis confirmed.

Ertas stroked his jaw, said nothing for a moment. 'Friend?' Ertas enquired.

'Acquaintance.'

'He has a name?'

'Garry Morello.'

Ertas nodded again. He already knew, Tallis thought, just checking to see whether we're singing from the same hymn sheet. He'd probably checked Morello's pockets straight away and found his passport. Since a spate of terrorist attacks, aimed mostly at the police, it was obligatory to carry some form of identification, particularly in the city. 'And you are?'

'David Miller,' Tallis said.

'Passport?'

Tallis unzipped the pocket of his trousers and handed it, freshly forged care of the British Security Service, to Ertas. Not that they needed to have gone to so much trouble. From what he'd heard it was pretty easy to fool the Identity and Passport Service. All you needed was a change of name by deed poll.

'Your business here?'

'Tourist,' Tallis replied.

'And what do you do when not a tourist?'

‘I’m an IT consultant.’

Ertas said nothing.

‘I sell technology systems to the hotel and leisure industry,’ Tallis said smoothly.

Ertas raised his eyebrow as if technology was a dirty word. This wasn’t quite going according to plan, Tallis thought. Everything he said seemed to rattle Ertas’s cage. Was it personal or had Ertas rowed with his wife that morning? Historically, the cops were poorly paid, lacked proper facilities and received contempt from the rest of the population. Tallis had thought this a thing of the past. Perhaps he was wrong.

Ertas glanced at Tallis’s passport and read through the bogus list of destinations to which Tallis had ostensibly travelled. Tallis mentally ticked them off—Spain, Germany, Czech Republic, United States of America.

‘Look, I could really do with cleaning up.’

‘Of course,’ Ertas said, handing back the passport. ‘I will instruct one of my officers to fetch you clean clothes. You may use the facilities at the station. You have no objection to accompanying us, Mr Miller?’

‘None at all.’

‘Your relationship with Mr Morello...’

‘A passing one.’ Christ, Tallis thought, this could get tricky. ‘We’d briefly met in London. Mr Morello is, *was*,’ he corrected himself, ‘a journalist.’

‘A crime correspondent,’ Ertas said with a penetrating look.

Ertas didn’t get that off the passport, Tallis thought. ‘I believe so.’

‘So your friendship with him had no professional basis.’

‘None.’

‘Affedersiniz.’ Excuse me. It was the uniformed officer who’d made the jibe about Tallis being a lying dog. He was stick thin with the same sweating, sallow features Tallis had observed on smackheads. He was instantly reminded of a conversation he’d had with Asim, his current contact in MI5 and the guy he directly reported to. It was suspected that many Turkish drug gangs were protected by officialdom. Same old: heroin and money. Tons of it.

‘Evet?’ *Yes?* Ertas said impatiently.

‘The café owner.’

‘What about him?’

‘He says he saw everything.’

‘Ve?’ And?

‘He says the bullet was meant for the Englishman,’ the police officer said. Eyes narrowed to slits, he looked straight at Tallis.

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Published in Great Britain 2009.
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978 0 7783 0295 7

58-0909

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Printed and bound in Spain
by Litografia Rosés S.A., Barcelona