



## Muir's Gambit: A Spy Game Novel

**Michael Frost Beckner**

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*Two men interrogate each other in the tense spy novel Muir's Gambit, musing over espionage's moral quandaries and costs.*

Opening with a succinct, explosive declaration—"Charlie March is dead"—Michael Frost Beckner's taut spy thriller *Muir's Gambit* follows a CIA attorney and a legendary spy as they engage in a battle of wits.

Charlie was once one of the CIA's best officers. His dying words bind him to another legendary operative: Nathan Muir. The CIA respond to this connection by sending in an attorney, Russell, to investigate. Legal issues aside, Russell was chosen because he was recruited by Nathan years ago but was marked as ineligible for espionage work and shunted off to the CIA's legal department. Russell still harbors aspirations of fieldwork, so he agrees to have a talk with his old mentor.

Much of the book involves Nathan and Russell sitting on a porch in the pouring rain, drinking heavily and probing each other's stories to find the crack that will prove to be the other's downfall. A multilayered narrative unfolds, spanning decades, piles of secrets, the men's sordid pasts, and the race toward the truth behind Charlie's murder.

The men's conversations are sharp and candid, with the feel of a therapy session. Back and forth, the two exchange quips and barbs, with neither gaining much ground. Nathan knows that the CIA treasures its secrecy, and he spars with Russell using debonair one-liners. The flashbacks to previous events are gritty and tense as well. Both men are unreliable narrators, but Russell doesn't realize that Nathan is always a step or two ahead of him.

The novel is a prequel to the movie *Spy Game* and also functions as the first entry in a trilogy that focuses on Russell. Russell is flawed and raw, struggling to control his emotions and his mounting regrets. In a flashback sequence, he recounts every detail of the moments leading up to him murdering his wife and her lover in a fit of rage. There's also always more being said than what is written, though: words are weapons for both men, and Nathan unleashes them as from a machine gun, filling the air and making it difficult to avoid the ones that he knows will strike home. The detailed scenes of torture command attention, but in its quieter moments, the book achieves a different kind of tension, conveying that at any moment either man might snap.

Two men interrogate each other in the tense spy novel *Muir's Gambit*, musing over espionage's moral quandaries and costs.

JOHN M. MURRAY (July 26, 2022)

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