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SNOW WOLF

By Glenn Meade

432 pp. St. Martin's

When Josef Stalin died in 1953, word spread that even his closest associates sighed with relief. From the mysterious zone between rumor and surmise, reports arose that the Soviet dictator, killer of more than 23 million people and arguably the most heartless butcher of our century, was by 1953 laying plans to complete Hitler's final solution to the "Jewish problem" and growing desperate to perfect the hydrogen bomb and drop it on the United States. Predictably then, many, including Stalin's immediate family, believed his death resulted not from cerebral hemorrhage but from murder. In Glenn Meade's riveting debut American thriller, President Eisenhower himself believes Stalin is "the cause of all our present problems, or certainly most of them" and orders Operation Snow Wolf, a CIA plan to assassinate Stalin. Mr. Meade, an Irish freelance journalist, deftly weaves a world of vivid characters into a relentlessly absorbing plot. Incorporating historic figures (Stalin, Eisenhower, Truman, Beria) for realism, the novel follows the hunt of CIA hitman Alex Slanski, gulag survivor Anna Khorev, and their CIA, French, Finnish, Estonian and Russian allies. As the biographies of these cold warriors emerge, many grow larger-than-life yet remain entirely credible. This complex web of characterizations slows the pace of the early pages but soon helps achieve both the sweep of the historical romance and the mesmerizing power of the classic heroic quest. After decades of Soviet families scrambled, entire villages wiped out, *Snow Wolf* shows parent finding child, brother relocating brother, while hunter and quarry constantly shift places as heroes and events race toward Moscow to save, in one president's words, "the future course of the whole damned world."