

A Spy Among Friends

Press Pack



Press Pack Contents:

1. Series synopsis
2. Episode loglines
3. Character descriptions
4. **** New **** Interview with Damien Lewis
5. Interview with Anna Maxwell Martin
6. Approved clips (YT links)

1 SYNOPSIS

Based on the New York Times best-selling book written by Ben Macintyre, the six-episode series dramatizes the true story of Nicholas Elliott and Kim Philby, two British spies and lifelong friends. Philby was the most notorious British defector and Soviet double agent in history. This is a story of intimate duplicity; of loyalty, trust and treachery. Philby's deeply personal betrayal, uncovered at the height of the Cold War, resulted in the gutting of British and American Intelligence.

2. Episodic guide

EPISODE ONE: “Boom-ooh-yatatatah”

In the wake of Kim Philby’s escape to Moscow, his closest friend in Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (also known as MI6.), Nicholas Elliott, is under investigation by Mrs. Lily Thomas from the Security Service (MI5): Did he facilitate Philby’s escape because he’s also a traitor working for the Russians, or is it just that his judgement was clouded at a critical moment by their twenty-three year friendship? Or maybe, just maybe, he in fact had the last laugh having manipulated Philby to run to the bosom of the KGB for foreign intelligence purposes.

EPISODE TWO: “The Admiral’s Glass”

Lily Thomas understands that Elliott is never going to divulge anything of value about what actually happened in Beirut in a conventional interrogation process. She detects in him a shrewd intelligence officer sitting on a secret while also doing his best to manage the emotional fallout from Philby’s betrayal of their friendship. Understanding that if Elliott has returned from Beirut with any intelligence of worth, Lily realizes that he needs to be out in the world acting upon it; so she uses her psychological skills as a debriefer to steer him in a direction that she believes will shed more light on why he let Philby run to Moscow.

EPISODE THREE: “Allegory Of The Catholic Faith”

Philby begins to understand that the KGB can never fully trust him now that he’s in Moscow and as far as they’re concerned his life as a spy for them is over. He is, however, in covert contact with his old friend James Jesus Angleton of the CIA, with whom he appears to be engaged in a long-term intelligence operation to infiltrate the KGB. In London, Elliott alerts Sir Anthony Blunt, cousin of the Queen and curator of her art collection, that his cover as a Soviet penetration agent has been blown. Lily realizes that maybe in exchange for his life, Philby armed Elliott with the secret about Blunt. But she also learns that the CIA and, notably, James Jesus Angleton, are also onto Blunt, which would rob Elliott of the value of the intelligence Philby gave him.

EPISODE FOUR: “Vodka”

Elliott rattles Blunt’s cage to make him panic. Elliott and Lily, now working together since she alerted him that the CIA were about to step on his toes, follow Blunt to a clandestine meeting in the middle of the night with none other than Sir Roger Hollis, Director General of MI5 and Lily’s boss. The nature of Blunt and Hollis’s tradecraft indicate that if Blunt is working for the Soviets, then so is Hollis.

In Moscow, Angleton’s CIA field agents are led into a trap by Philby and killed by the KGB. Philby used them, and Angleton, to prove that he is still very useful to the KGB.

EPISODE FIVE: “Tea Time”

If Sir Roger Hollis is working for the Soviets, Elliott and Lily now have to assume that no one can be trusted. They must get to Blunt before anyone else to interrogate him and confirm their suspicions about Hollis. But when Angleton hears of the death of his two agents in Moscow, the penny drops that he’s been played by his old friend Philby. In urgent need of a face-saving intelligence coup of his own, Angleton arranges for the

apprehension and rendition of Blunt to a CIA safe house. But Elliott and Lily, one step ahead, retrieve Blunt before it's too late and send Angleton back to America, with the friendly advice that he do everything he can to destroy all evidence of what Philby has done to him.

EPISODE SIX: “No Man’s Land”

Elliott’s four day debrief of Philby in Beirut (that we have flashed back to throughout the series) ends with a painful personal truth for Elliott, rooted in his long and close friendship with Kim. Their final confrontation reveals the complex emotional reasons why Elliott let Philby escape.

Lily has forced him to remember more than he perhaps ever wanted to about Philby, but in doing so he’s inclined to agree with her that he and men of his and Philby’s privilege and class are the real danger to England (and America), more than any one man. Then there’s Angleton, and how he has been infected by Philby to never trust any of his friends and colleagues again — an infection that will surely spread through the CIA and could even destroy it from within. So, informed by how Philby played Angleton, Elliott and Lily understand that their suspicions of Hollis are a construct of the now invisible hand of Philby and must therefore be questioned and treated with caution, if not dismissed entirely before they cripple British Intelligence.

Several months later, Philby sends Elliott a letter asking for a meeting to bury the hatchet in an East Berlin bar. At Christmas that year (1963) Elliott travels to East Berlin, not to be sucked into another game of friendship, but to return an umbrella — which he has always treasured — that Philby once gave him in gratitude for his loyalty and friendship. And Lily is invited to join the Intelligence Service, while the Soviet Union launches the first — and, to this date, last — solo woman pilot into space.

3. CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Nicholas Elliott – played by Damian Lewis

A highly respected intelligence officer, known for his wit and keen mind. His life could have been ruined by the discovery that his closest friend of 23 years, Kim Philby, had been betraying him all along: but his refusal to be beaten is a testament to his strength of character.

Kim Philby – played by Guy Pearce

England’s most famous traitor, who was recruited by Russian Intelligence to penetrate MI6; something he was able to do for thirty years (1933-63), thanks in part to his very upper-crust English persona. A man driven by ego as much by ideology — until exposed, he was adored and revered by the friends he was betraying in British intelligence.

Lily Thomas – played by Anna Maxwell Martin

A debriefer for the domestic security service, MI5. A working-class woman from the north of England, she is a fish out of water in Elliott and Philby’s world of secrets and gentlemen’s clubs.

James Angleton – played by Stephen Kunken

A poet, orchid enthusiast, Anglophile and rising star of the CIA. He was a vehement enemy of communism whose intellectual vanity and snobbery provided the weaknesses for Philby to exploit.

4. **NEW** Interview with Damien Lewis

How did *A Spy Among Friends* come about?

Alex Cary [writer] and I were friends from *Homeland*. He just approached me one day and said, 'I've got hold of Ben McIntyre's book *A Spy Among Friends*, do you want to produce it with me?' I had just read it on holiday funnily enough — I'm a fan of Ben's — and so I said yes very quickly. And then I said, 'What do you intend to do with it?' He explained briefly the way he wanted to structure it, which was to take the book apart extensively — because the book doesn't lend itself obviously to adaptation; it's a sprawling, multi-generational, multi-country, book. But Alex's idea I thought was superb: he has brilliantly centred the structure of our six hours around this now famous four days in Beirut, when Nicholas Elliott is sent to interrogate his friend, bring him home and get him prosecuted — because the evidence against him is now overwhelming. That was also another part of the Elliott story that drew me to him — there's this sort of tragic arc, with the best friend constantly enabling his best friend's treachery.

What was it about Nicholas Elliott that intrigued you?

He's the best friend rather than Philby [played by Guy Pearce] who is obviously the rock star. In this country in particular, Philby and the Cambridge Spies is quite well trodden ground. Why make another programme about Philby, Burgess and McLean, Blunt? They're all familiar names. The one unfamiliar name is Nicholas Elliott. He of all of them was perhaps Philby's greatest pal and he was also a young, rising star at MI6. He's less well known, of course, because he wasn't a traitor. He didn't betray his country. But the way we wanted to tell the Philby story was through friendship — to get in behind the facade and really explore what it might do to friendship, family, country and relationships between different intelligence agencies in different countries if you were to be up close to such a toxic and successful, long-running treachery, such as the one that Philby perpetrated over 30 years. Elliott became our sort of audience, our way in.

I also thought that he was an interesting man to play — in some ways, structurally at least, he's our everyman. But then we also have another character, who is also observing these two and the setting in which they play out their lives. That character is a fictionalised character played by Anna Maxwell Martin, Lily, who is a woman and is also from up north. She is very much not part of the gang of Oxbridge, privately-educated, essentially white, men. And so she performs the role of a magnifying glass, if you like, on to this world.

What was the culture of MI6 and the ruling class back then and has it changed much?

Well, I think it's not actually that dissimilar from now. You know, I think all the intelligence agencies had a strong drinking culture, in pubs and weekend cricket games, sloshing down beer and good claret. It also took place in and out of the hoity toity gentlemen's clubs, the Whites, the Boodles, the Athenaeum... all these different clubs that these guys had easy access to because of where they went to school or university. They are the epitome of the ruling class of the period 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s. For the whole 40, 50 years things remained pretty much the same, even with the advent of free sex and hippies and rock and roll in the mid 60s. This class of man and the places they inhabited continued to exist. And they still do, is the truth of it.

What motivated both Elliott and Philby in their actions do you think?

Well, it's a good question. I'll tell you a little story about when I was researching Homeland and I went to the Special Forces Club and I also went to Langley over in America and met CIA agents and MI6 agents. Each CIA agent I met spoke very clearly about having a moral crusade, a moral purpose. The MI6 guys I spoke to just said, 'Well, I just thought it would be quite interesting.' And essentially a bit of a giggle. It retained a little bit of that upper class, privately educated, amateurism. That very British sense of 'this might be a bit of a caper and intellectually satisfying and do some good at the same time.' I thought that was very telling of our two cultures. And probably quite accurate to the way in which we approach things generally.

Clearly, the difference between these two is for Elliott the thought that you would betray your country is unconscionable. I don't think it crosses his mind, even though lots of people later accused him of being on Philby's side. Philby, on the other hand, is a charismatic, brilliant, adored, mercurial narcissist. He was introduced to the KGB or the NKVD as they were called then and I think he had a disdain for the English upper class. One that was realised through the prism of his experience of his dad, who was a famous Arabist at the time. I think he liked the elite, but he placed himself in an elite of one — because essentially, he alone succeeded in spying for 30 years.

Do you think that the culture among the British ruling class that facilitated Philby has changed, 70 years on?

Things have changed; of course they've changed. In fact it was a little unusual to have people from such an overtly privileged background be back in charge — It's a sort of old school privilege that Cameron and Johnson seemed to bring with them. Things had become more nuanced in the decades before them. It wasn't just a conversation about private and public education — Tony Blair ran the Labour Party; he was privately educated. Thatcher, not privately educated, filled her cabinet with far fewer old school, public school types, didn't she? So they come and go. It's

certainly true that recently they've been around in government and the cabinet. And they don't seem to have helped much.

5. Interview with Anna Maxwell Martin

What first attracted you to A Spy Among Friends?

It was about the people really before I read the actual project. I knew of the director Nick Murphy and his work, which was excellent. And Alexander Cary, who is our writer and showrunner, is incredibly talented - a brilliant writer, a brilliant showrunner and he'd been on Homeland. And because Damian Lewis originated the show with Alex he was obviously attached to it. So it was the people before anything else, and then I read it and the part was just so good.

Were you already familiar with the true story behind the show?

Yes, I was a bit. actually. I know a member of the Philby family and my late husband was obsessed with Ben Macintyre's book and with spying and prisoner of war camps and that kind of thing, so we had all these books in the house. I hadn't read them but after I got the part I delved into them.

How would you describe Lily as a character and her role in the narrative?

She's really tenacious and she's very front-footed without being demonstratively so. She's very clever, she is incredibly good at her job and reading a situation and adapting and doing what she's supposed to do, which is extracting information from people. That's what she's exceptionally good at and I think probably she's sent in because they think she'll be disregarded. And actually what's nice about the relationship between her and Elliott is that they disregard one another at first, then as the story unfolds they have a newfound respect for one another.

As a fictitious character, what does she add to the show?

She's sort of instrumental to it. Alex talks about this so I'm not blowing my own trumpet by saying it. He talks about needing to invent a character as a way into the narrative. He came up with Lily because he had to have someone who could interrogate Elliott and his version of events, so he could see it unfold through his eyes.

Is playing fictional characters more freeing for you as an actress?

I've played lots of real people and I can't think that I've ever felt particularly stifled by playing a real person as opposed to a not-real person. You don't think of it in those terms. You just serve your writer, really, and the character you're playing. So it's irrelevant whether they're real or not real. You just have to have specificity in what you're doing, be active in all the scenes, listen and respond, and do it according to who you're playing.

How was it filming those intense interrogation scenes with Damian?

I love all that. I feel like I've done a proper day's work whilst also having a laugh with a lovely crew and lovely people. I relish it. It's the same as it was on Line of Duty as well. I just think 'Oh my God there's loads of pages of chatting away'. I mean, as an actor why wouldn't you love it? With Lily, she wants to be the victor in that room. She wants to go back to her bosses with all the information, so she's trying to find every single tactic to outmanoeuvre him. It's just brilliant to play a part like that and do those scenes. It's a total gift for an actor.

Why do you think audiences love a good spy story?

I think we love suspense, we love jeopardy, and I think that what we really need in storytelling is simply a good story. And so often that is there with a spy story. That said, the spy story here is a hook, really. It's brilliantly written by Alex and delivered by Nick, and pivotally it's about a relationship between Philby and Elliott and the relationship between Elliot and Lily and what they are and what they mean. Most importantly, I suppose, is that relationship between Philby and Elliott, which is incredibly complex and it's about two men who have to re-evaluate who they are. I think that's what the story is really about. It's like a bromance gone horribly wrong. It's a heartbreak, you know? It's a sort of heartbreak story for me rather than a spy story.

What did you most enjoy about playing Lily?

It's really great to play a part like Lily. She's an absolute badass and they are the best people to play. She's a badass with a heart, who has a journey, and that's the best thing. But really the best thing is always if you're on a nice set with nice people and they're good fun and kind. That set was that at a difficult time in my life and they really were the loveliest, kindest, funniest people to be around. You can play a great character but you don't want to be surrounded by horrible people while you're doing it. So as I say, there's the part and then there's the people, which is probably often more important for me than anything else. And they were talented. They were so brilliant, funny, kind and so mega-talented. It was one of the most talented crews I've ever worked with. Every department was just incredible. We had a lovely time.

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