Opening Extract from...

Moskva

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I

Red Square, Christmas Eve, December 1985

In the same hour that a sergeant in the Moscow police threw a tarpaulin over the naked body of a boy below the Kremlin Wall, a missile pulled by a diesel train a thousand miles away jumped its rails approaching a bend and killed everyone on board. Faced with such a disaster, the local soviet took the only decision it could.

Military bulldozers began gouging a 200-yard trench in the dirt.

In the weeks that followed, any evidence that the track had not been properly fixed was buried, along with twisted rails, the wreckage and the bodies it had contained. Fresh track was laid along the edge of a lake and fixed, properly this time. The accident simply ceased to exist.

In Moscow, the truth was harder to hide.

It was six in the morning, not yet dawn, and the old man using the short cut behind Lenin's Tomb was old enough to remember when Resurrection Gate still guarded the entrance to Red Square; back in the days before Stalin had it demolished to make it easier for tanks to parade.

The old man was unkempt, shaggy-haired. He'd been born to peasants and fought beside Trotsky in his teens. He'd be happy to resign his seat on the politburo if only the USSR had someone to replace him.

That fool Andropov, dead after fifteen months. Chernenko didn't even last that long. Now Gorbachev, practically a child . . .

How could he possibly step down?

The man only realized something was wrong when a torch momentarily blinded him. It was lowered quickly, lighting trampled snow. The sergeant was apologetic, abjectly so. 'Comrade Minister. Sorry, Comrade Minister . . . I didn't realize it was you.'

'What's happened?'

'A car crashed into a bollard.'

'What kind?'

'Sir?'

'A Zil, a Volga, a Pobeda?'

'A Volga, sir. A new one.'

The old man frowned. The waiting list for a Volga was so long it could be resold instantly for double the original price. Even in a country where vodka was often the only way to keep out the cold, crashing a new one would be more than unfortunate.

He watched the sergeant shift nervously from foot to foot.

How long would it take him to realize the obvious? There would be tyre tracks in the snow if he was telling the truth. He didn't blame the man. He'd obviously been ordered to lie.

'Tell them I insisted on seeing for myself.'

'Yes, Comrade Minister. Thank you, Comrade Minister.'

They should have been around when Stalin was alive. Then they'd know what real fear was. Ahead, lit by uplights on the Kremlin Wall, a major of the militsiya, Moscow's police, stood bareheaded before a politburo member the old man had never liked. The man's preening idiot of a son was on the far side.

'Vedenin,' the old man said.

'Comrade Minister? You'll catch cold.'

That was Ilyich Vedenin for you, the old man thought sourly. Always willing to state the obvious. At their feet, falling snow turned a tarpaulin white.

'Well, aren't you going to show me?'

Vedenin's son yanked back the cover to reveal a boy of twelve or thirteen, apparently asleep. He was naked, his head and any body hair shaved clean. His mouth was very slightly open and his genitals looked tiny. The jelly of his eyes was milky white and he stared so blindly that for a second the old man looked away.

The little finger of the boy's right hand was missing. The cut was clean, no blood on the snow beneath. Kneeling, the old man touched the boy's chest and then his face, almost gently. The flesh was hard as ice.

'Strange,' he muttered.

'What is, sir?'

'He can't have been here long enough to freeze.'

The old man was readying himself to stand when he paused and covered his action by tapping for a second time the white marble of the frozen boy's chest, pretending to listen to its dull thud. Then he checked that he'd seen what he thought he'd seen.

Almost entirely hidden in the boy's mutilated hand was a tiny wax angel.

That was unnerving enough. What was more unnerving still was that the angel had the boy's face. Glancing up, to make sure he wasn't being watched, the old man palmed the angel and pocketed it.

There was a message in the whiteness of the wax.

As there was a message in the frozen state of the body placed so carefully in front of the Supreme Soviet's centre of power. The old man had to admit he was slightly shocked that the dead boy and figurine should come together. Not least because the latter could only have come from someone he knew to be dead.

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New Year's Eve, December 1985

The British embassy on Maurice Thorez Embankment was across the river from the Kremlin. As the ambassador was fond of reminding people, the sight of the flag on its roof once so upset Stalin that he demanded the building back. When the British refused, Stalin had curtains put up to hide the view. Anglo-Soviet relations were better these days.

But not by much.

The last man to arrive at that night's party was a major in British Army intelligence, recently seconded to Moscow at short notice and with the kind of ill-defined job that annoyed Sir Edward intently. The ambassador liked people who knew their place. He also liked to know what that place was. It might have reassured him to know the major wasn't a whole lot happier.

The place, the people, the party . . . none of them fitted Tom Fox's idea of a perfect New Year's Eve.

He'd arrived five days earlier to discover that barely anyone at the embassy knew he was coming and those who did seemed bemused by the fact. Only Sir Edward had been unsurprised, and he'd been disapproving without bothering to say why.

Tom managed fifteen minutes before heading for the nearest balcony and an emergency cigarette. Standing in a chill wind, with snow splattering on to his dinner jacket, he looked resignedly at the icy flatness of the Moskva River and wondered how soon he could head back to his flat.

He'd been in the Soviet Union less than a week.

It was already too long.

If Caro were here, she'd say go and make friends. She'd know what to say and who to say it to. His wife's talent for socializing had rubbed off for a while; until things soured between them and he'd stopped bothering. When the balcony door creaked, he refused to look as a figure came to stand beside him, leaning against the cold balustrade.

'Got a cigarette?'

He passed his packet across without comment.

'I'll need a lighter.'

Tom put his Bic on the balustrade where it wobbled in the wind until the girl closed her fingers around it. As it flared, and she put up a hand to shield the flame, he noticed a jade ring on her engagement finger and a graze on her wrist.

'These are foul.'

He nodded.

With the tiny stub of tobacco only half gone, she flicked her papirosa over the edge and they watched the wind whisk it away, darkness taking it long before it hit the snow below. 'It's bloody cold out here,' she said.

Tom nodded.

'You don't say much, do you?'

Shaking his head, he kept his gaze on the red brick of the Kremlin Wall, which was lit from below. He'd been told how many kilos the red star on top of Spasskaya Tower weighed, how much power it took to make it glow. Like most of what he'd been told in the past week, he'd forgotten. He had a sense though, as the balcony door shut, that he'd remember the girl. If only because she'd been wearing black jeans and a dinner jacket of her own.

Then he blinked, and the moment was gone, and he forced himself back inside, heading for the floppy-haired young

military attaché whose job it was to help him settle in. Gold cufflinks, signet ring, a dinner jacket he looked as if he'd been born in . . . Tom sighed; he should give the boy a chance.

'Do the Soviets usually attend these things?' Tom asked.

'The Russkies? We always extend an invitation. Mostly they turn us down. Prior engagement. You know the kind of thing. This year . . .'

'What's different about it?'

'They accepted. Well, a few of them did.'

'No, I mean, what's different about this year?'

'Who knows with them?'

'It's my job to know.'

'Is it now?' The young man looked interested. 'We were wondering what you did. "Visiting analyst" sounds a bit American. You know, cubicle offices and fountains in the foyer. Some of us thought you must be a treasury spy.'

'You don't approve of efficiency drives?'

'Only if they improve efficiency.'

'Believe me,' Tom said, 'I'm not a treasury spy.'

The young man excused himself, pleading necessity. Tom watched him head through a crowd of uniforms, dresses and dinner jackets towards the loos, wondering if he'd return, and if he did, how to politely ask his name for a third time, and maybe even remember it.

'You all right?' the man asked, when he got back.

'This isn't really my thing.'

'Nor mine. But it comes with the territory.' He caught the eye of a black woman in a long white dress, who swerved around a Russian colonel, nodded apologetically to the group she'd been about to join and strode towards them.

'Impressive, isn't she?'

Tom wondered whether he'd say that about any other woman there.

'First at Oxford. Good school too.' As she reached them, he said. 'This is Mary Batten. She knows things.'

'Tom,' said Tom. 'Tom Fox.'

'I know,' Mary said. 'I approved your flight. How's the flat?'

'Bug-ridden, most probably.'

For a second she looked surprised, then laughed loudly enough to make a young Russian in a flashily cut velvet jacket glance across. He held Tom's gaze and nodded politely. 'Who's that?' Tom asked.

'See the thickset man smoking cigars by the window? That's Ilyich Vedenin. Newly made minister. 'He's the highest-ranking Soviet in this room. Vladimir's his son.'

'And the man he's talking to?'

'A general,' said a voice behind Tom. 'Recently recalled from Afghanistan . . .' They turned to find Sir Edward Masterton, the ambassador, looking every bit as languid as Tom remembered from their introductory meeting. 'It might be best,' Sir Edward said, 'if the three of you mingled. We have slightly more shows than expected. We did ring round, didn't we?'

'Yes, sir.' Mary Batten nodded.

'So what happened?'

'Everyone came.'

'Typical. I'd love to know why Vedenin accepted.'

'I'll find out,' Tom said.

Sir Edward raised his eyebrows. 'And how will you do that?'

'I'll ask him, sir.'

Minister Vedenin shook the hand offered and glanced at the crowd over Tom's shoulder. For a moment Tom thought he was looking for someone more interesting, then he realized the real reason.

'Your son's over there.'

They looked towards an alcove where the young Russian was deep in conversation with the girl who'd begged the cigarette earlier. As they watched, the girl stopped glowering and almost smiled. The minister sighed.

'He's a good-looking boy,' Tom said.

'And knows it, unfortunately. You have children?'

Tom hesitated. 'A boy,' he said finally. 'With his mother for Christmas.'

'Who is not here?' Opening a silver case, Vedenin offered Tom a cigar. 'These things happen . . . Life is invariably more complicated than one wants. Especially family life. Of course, in my position, the whole of the USSR is my family.'

'That must make for a headache.'

'You have good Russian. For a foreigner.'

'I have terrible Russian.'

The minister shrugged. 'I was being polite.'

The man smelled of cigars and brandy, and a faint whiff of what could be cologne or schnapps. If it was schnapps, it came from a hip flask. He looked like the kind of man who might carry a hip flask for when his hosts kept insisting on offering champagne long after everyone stopped tasting it.

'You went to Sir Edward's school?'

The Russian watched in amusement as Tom half choked on his champagne.

'I doubt they'd have let me through the door . . .'

'Ah, you're . . .' Vedenin smiled. 'Salt of the earth? That's a Rolling Stones track, isn't it? From *Beggars Banquet*. My son has the album.'

'Should you admit that?'

'Times they are changing. That's Dylan.'

'He has that album too?'

'I do. Vladimir bought it for me in America . . .'

The man looked over to where his son stood talking to an Indian woman. 'I was born in 1923,' he said. 'Two-thirds of Soviet boys born that year didn't survive the war. My hope is Vladimir never has to go through the same.'

Together, Tom and the Russian examined the crowd.

Two hundred and fifty guests filled a ballroom that probably looked just as it had back in the days when the embassy was a rich sugar merchant's mansion. All those uniforms, all that braid, all those dinner jackets. Caro would have been entirely at home.

'Would it be rude,' Tom said, 'to ask why you're here?'

'I was invited.'

The two men stared at each other and Tom wondered whether Vedenin dyed his hair or if he wore a wig, or if his hair really was that dark and wiry. The man lacked his son's good looks, and as a young man would have had an earthiness missing from the boy.

'My wife was an ice skater. Famously beautiful. She died young.'

'How did you know what I was thinking?'

The minister smiled. 'You looked at me, you looked at him, you looked momentarily puzzled. It wasn't hard to follow.'

'I'll remember that.'

'I'll remember you knew I was looking for the boy.' Vedenin hesitated. 'She's young, that English girl you keep staring at. Pretty, admittedly. But young. You know whose stepdaughter she is, of course?'

'I take it you do?'

'What do you find so interesting?'

The dinner jacket, the shaved sides to her head, his bubbling anger at the graze on her wrist . . .

'It's hard to say.'

'You mean you won't. "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." You know who said that?'

'Churchill. About Russia.'

The minister smiled. 'What are you doing in Moscow?'

'I've been exiled.'

'Really?' Vedenin looked intrigued.

'Well. Someone thought it would be useful if I was out of the way.'

The Russian laughed. 'Your queen offered Ivan the Terrible refuge once. Did you know that? He wanted to marry her. She refused but said if he ever got into trouble at home he could come to live in England. So you see, the ties between our countries are historic and strong. If a little fractious, in the way of all families. Especially those where the members haven't been talking for a while. And that, to answer your question, is why I'm here. Now, if you'll excuse me . . .' The minister swept the ballroom with a sharp gaze, looking for more than his son this time.

A Soviet colonel in dress uniform nodded and slid across to a general, who glanced at Vedenin and nodded in turn. The man the minister didn't look at, the one not in uniform, the one who'd been watching Vedenin's son earlier, didn't catch anybody's eye. He still managed to disengage himself from an elderly Indian diplomat though. And he reached the door ahead of his principal. He was the one who'd checked for the exits, windows and light switches earlier. The one Tom Fox recognized as a young version of himself. The one he'd have worried about, if worrying about these things was still Tom's job.

With the Soviets gone, the party relaxed.

Someone turned the lights down and the music up and a woman began chivvying couples on to the dance floor. Most

were embarrassed but well aware there were still two hours to midnight. Abba gave way to Rod Stewart. Rod Stewart to Hot Chocolate . . . Not really Tom's kind of music. He was thinking about going back to the balcony when he saw the ambassador lean in to the woman and mutter something. There was a manicured look about her as if she'd wandered in from Chelsea, and now found herself living in a Georgian rectory somewhere in Wiltshire and regretted the move.

She frowned but headed for Tom all the same.

'It's always hard,' she said, 'when you first arrive. If you don't know anyone. We're a friendly bunch really. Edward says your family will be joining you later.'

'Possibly.'

Her smile faltered.

'My wife's having Christmas with her parents and Charlie's back at school on the seventh. I might try to get back for half-term if I can.'

'Charlie's your son?'

Tom nodded.

'Anna,' she said, putting out her hand.

'Lady Masterton?'

'I prefer Anna.'

Her grip was as strong as her gaze was unfocused. 'I couldn't help noticing you glancing at my daughter earlier.'

'Her dinner jacket is an interesting touch.'

Anna Masterton winced. 'She's cross with me.'

'You in particular?'

'Everyone really. It's a difficult age.'

'Seventeen?'

Anna Masterton didn't know whether to be amused or appalled. 'Is that what she told you? She's sixteen next month.'

'What's she furious about?'

'Lizzie went to Westminster for sixth form and Alex wanted to go too. Lizzie's her friend. My husband wouldn't let her. So now it's a battle. An East German girl she met at the pool was having a party tonight. Edward said she had to come to this. Now he wants to drive out to Borodino, stay a few nights and walk the battlefield. Alex says he can't make her. You can grin, but it's bloody tiring.'

She spoke with the fierce intensity of the quietly drunk.

'I'm sure it is,' Tom agreed.

Anna Masterton shook her head, quite at what Tom wasn't sure, and forced a smile more appropriate to an ambassador's wife at an official function. 'You're a Russia expert, Edward says.'

'I wouldn't go that far.'

'But you did lots of preparation for your visit here.'

'I rewatched *Andrei Rublev*.'

She looked at him quizzically. 'Isn't that the strange black-and-white film with naked peasants in a forest setting fire to everything?'

'Tarkovsky. 1966. It opens with a pagan festival.'

'I thought Russia was Christian by then?'

'Double faith,' said Tom. 'It's called *dvoeverie*. Think of it as dual nationality for the unseen kingdoms.'

'This is your area?'

'That, and recognizing patterns in things. I'm here to write a report for the Foreign Office on religion in Russia.'

'Isn't that rather academic?'

'If faith can move mountains, why shouldn't it bring down a government?'

She looked round, realized her Soviet guests really had gone and lifted another glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter.

'Do we want to bring their government down?'

'Your husband's more likely to know that than me.'

It wasn't the real reason he was here, of course. He was here to keep him out of trouble. How much trouble he was in was being decided back in London. Meanwhile, to give his bosses a break, he was here.

Having made enough small talk to give him a headache, Tom pleaded the need for air and another cigarette. Avoiding the dance floor entailed endless 'excuse me's as he made his way round the edge of the chocolate-box ballroom, with its white panels and gilding. As he went, he wondered what Caro was doing, then wished he hadn't.

It would be teatime back home. She'd be on the sofa between her parents most likely, a fire already blazing in the hearth. The black-and-white portable wouldn't be turned on until later. And even then it would have the sound down so no one had to pay it any attention until the chimes. Charlie would be getting ready for bed.

A brief protest at not being allowed up, then sleep and, with luck, no dreams.

A year from now . . . ? His boy would still be in bed come New Year's Eve. Probably still protesting, but not fiercely enough to make a difference. And Caro? Whoever's bed she climbed into, Tom doubted it would be his. So why not give her what she wanted? It would be best for the boy. That was what she kept telling him. Charlie needed to know where he stood. 'Bitch,' Tom muttered.

'Hey, that's rude.'

It was the girl who'd begged a cigarette.

Tom blinked, 'I'm sorry?'

'I said that's really rude.'

'I wasn't talking about you, obviously.'

'*Obviously* . . .' She did a passable imitation of Tom's irritation.

'People are watching,' he said.

'You think I care?'

'No, I think that's what you want.'

Her hair was wilder than before, her dinner jacket too tight to button. She'd folded up both sleeves since he last looked. Close to, he could see she was younger than he'd imagined. Her gaze found Sir Edward in the crowd and she smirked. 'I'm going to tell my stepfather about you.'

Tom grabbed her as she turned.

The bones in her damaged wrist felt frighteningly fragile. Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw the black woman he'd talked to earlier heading towards him and let the girl's wrist drop. She wasn't the only one drunk around here.

'Roll your sleeves down,' he said, stepping back. 'Or roll them up, let your parents see and have the damn argument. You're obviously desperate for a fight.'

'He's not my parent.'

'Whatever.'

Beneath her cuffs, not quite visible and not quite hidden, raw welts crossed both wrists. A blunt knife would do it.

'What's it got to do with you anyway?'

'Nothing.'

'Exactly.'

'Wrist to elbow,' he said. 'Wrist to elbow. If you're serious.'