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Opening Extract from...

Moscow Sting

Written by Alex Dryden

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MOSCOW STING

ALEX DRYDEN

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PROLOGUE

January 2008

ADRIAN CAREW GLARED through the rain-streaked window of a British Intelligence pool Vauxhall Carlton as if the application of willpower alone could unsnarl the traffic. Cars were bumper to bumper going west out of London and the weather was only making things worse.

His driver, Ray, with fifteen years of service and an almost Zen-like calm by comparison with his boss, half-turned towards the rear seat.

'We'll be through this in a minute or two, sir.' His words barely made their way through the noise of the rain drumming on the roof of the car.

With his usual expression of irritation back in place – teeth clamped, jaw muscles twitching – Adrian addressed his reply to the side window.

'Never mind.'

At sixty-three years old, the former SAS hero,

military intelligence wizard, and later Chief of MI6 Moscow Station, had earlier in the day gleaned from one of his eyes and ears at Joint Intelligence that he had been elevated to the informal shortlist for the top position at MI6: Spymaster-in-Chief, the media called it.

He should be out celebrating, he thought, not trotting off abroad like some messenger boy – and to bloody Finland of all places. But the Russians had insisted that they would see him and him alone.

Dimly now through the fogged-up window, Adrian eyed the scene, noting the decline of London's grandeur into ever greater shabbiness with every mile they travelled. The city's clean-cut stone heart at Whitehall degenerated, first to the redbrick post-war semis of Shepherd's Bush and then on past the plastic shopfronts at London's ragged edges, their bleakness and grime seeming to leach into the rubbish-strewn countryside.

Adrian came this way at weekends, but only after dark on a Friday night, when he was going down to the country house in Hampshire where his wife Penny now spent most of her time. During the week, he remained in London, with its gentleman's clubs for male ritual and his discreet mistress, Hazel from the Far Eastern Desk, for female diversion.

He wiped the window with the back of his hand. The sky was thick with black clouds. It would be a bumpy flight, he thought without concern, and a noisy one. The vintage RAF transport plane that had been press-ganged

into giving him a last-minute lift on a routine flight to Helsinki was hardly five-star.

He settled back into his seat, thinking it was good, once in a while, to get away from the designer culture that had swamped even MI6 headquarters, and swap his pampered life in London's clubland for an oily, twin-prop rattletrap where even simple conversation was an indulgence. It reminded him of the old days.

Adrian listened to the swish of the wipers as they cleared waterfalls of rain from the windscreen. The violent weather had broken up what was otherwise a typically monotonous January afternoon.

'We're going to be a few minutes late, I'm afraid, sir,' Ray informed him.

'They'll wait,' Adrian snapped from the back seat. The whole affair, this journey to Brize Norton's military airport included, was suddenly reminding him of the days of the Cold War, and the thought briefly buoyed his spirits.

Short in stature, with a flop of slightly greasy brown hair over his forehead, Adrian possessed a stocky, muscular frame maintained through regular games of squash. His tried and trusted modus operandi, from his days in the jungles of Borneo to the present-day jungles of Whitehall, was to storm through the world sucking the air from everyone who got in his way. He was the embodiment of pre-emptive attack, one colleague observed. Others offered their amateur psychological

diagnosis that Adrian behaved as if the planet had done him some grievous disservice.

His physical deportment and mental attitude revealed a pugnacious defensiveness. Under the good-life flab that now showed signs of mushrooming around his waist, his wired-up muscles were ready to spring, his fists regularly clenched, and the dark eyes in his livid red face rarely rested.

Adrian was never as meticulous about anything as he was in matters of revenge – and that was the purpose of his trip this evening. Revenge fuelled him like nothing else.

It was revenge against a broken home that had driven him to excel in the military, some said, and revenge against his small stature that drove him to graduate from SAS headquarters at Hereford in the 1960s ahead of all his contemporaries. Others pointed to a sort of muddled revenge against the Establishment while all the time wanting to be deep inside it. This, they said, was what had propelled him upwards in MI6, now almost to the top. But it was a particular revenge that had brought him out of his lair today.

It had taken Adrian over a year just to get to this point, but at last here he was, at first base. He was now in possession of an identity – the identity of an assassin – with a name, address, phone number, and probably an inside leg measurement, too, given the efforts of the Office researchers on this particular assignment.

The assassin – a Russian hood by the name of Grigory Bykov – had, in 2006, terminated the life of one of the Service's own officers; and one of a select few Adrian liked to call his 'best boys'.

Diligent researchers on the third floor had gladly embraced overtime without pay. Finn had been family, popular too – even loved. Inter-departmental cooperation had been unusually fluid, and the focused urgency of revenge for Finn's murder had driven everyone on, Adrian included, until the task was done.

Fourteen months of drip-fed leads from sources as diverse as a disaffected KGB officer in Azerbaijan, to the owner of a steam bath and brothel in the Siberian city of Irkutsk, had led conclusively to Grigory Bykov.

The researchers had drawn up Bykov's biography with meticulous care. In short, Bykov was a petty criminal and south Moscow mafioso; coached to KGB standards and then inducted into the Russian foreign intelligence service east of Moscow, known as The Forest. There they had primed him for this single murder. After all this expert training, Grigory Bykov had finally tracked down Finn in Paris, then killed him with a deadly nerve agent – type unknown – that he'd smeared on the steering wheel of Finn's rental car.

That was the Russian side of things.

The British side was more complex. Finn had *once* been one of Adrian's 'best boys', that was the truth of it. Adrian had recruited Finn personally at Cambridge in

1985, back in Gorbachev's time. And no matter that Finn had turned his back on the Service in later years, Finn was still Adrian's property, in death as well as in life. Nobody – Vladimir Putin included – was going to get away with ordering the death of one of Adrian's best boys.

In his grey silk suit and expensive Oxford-blue cashmere overcoat, both courtesy of Penny's private fortune rather than his Service pay, Adrian might look like a toothless catwalk panther, but underneath it all the animal core was still the same one that had driven him through Far Eastern jungles forty years before, where he'd shot or cut the throats of Commie insurgents, and saved the world from Putin's KGB predecessors.

Adrian began to stoke his own righteous anger now, in preparation for the meeting with Sergei Limov, Putin's go-between for this evening. Three days it had taken Finn to die, thanks to Bykov – in the trunk of a car somewhere in Germany, it was said, though Finn's body had been delivered anonymously to the British Embassy in Berlin.

By whom? Adrian asked himself for the hundredth time. Who would deliver a corpse, let alone one as hot as Finn's? One thing he was sure of: it could not be the killer.

There'd been a note attached to Finn's body laid out respectfully on the back seat of a Cherokee Jeep, which was abandoned outside the Embassy. The note was

addressed to Adrian personally. *You betrayed him in life*, it said. *Honour him in death.*

Who was it, with Finn's corpse on their hands, who dared express such anger – and such accuracy – almost on the steps of the British Embassy? The note pointed him towards two people.

Adrian's mind turned once again to Finn's woman, Colonel Anna Resnikov. Was it she, Anna, formerly the youngest female Colonel in the KGB, who had first betrayed her country, then run away with Finn and married him? Had she in cold fury delivered the dead body of her husband? Trained to the highest degree you could reach in Russia's foreign intelligence service, the SVR, she was more than capable of it – possessed all the cunning and subterfuge needed to pull off a feat like that.

Or, more interestingly perhaps, was it *Mikhail* who had slyly delivered Finn's body?

Over the previous Friday afternoon, before he had gone down to Penny's country house for the weekend, for another boring Saturday-night dinner party with her friends, Adrian had read through Mikhail's file once again, even though he knew it almost by heart.

Codename Mikhail had approached Finn in February 1995 in Moscow, where Finn was using the cover of the British Second Secretary for Trade and Investment at the Embassy. Right from the start, Mikhail would talk only to Finn. That was the deal. From day one, Codename

Mikhail was adamant that he would communicate with – and be known to – nobody else, and so Finn's strategic importance had rocketed.

For the next five years, Mikhail had fed the highest quality intelligence to the British, via Finn. It was so good that it had kept the British right up there, sitting at the high table with the Americans for a while.

And then, in 2000, Vladimir Putin ascended to power in a well-planned KGB coup. Mikhail was so close to Putin that, as Finn put it, 'he practically shits in Putin's bathroom'. Mikhail was one of the tiny group of so-called 'Patriots' deep within Putin's innermost circle. The quality, the importance, of his information was greater than ever.

But then politics back home intervened. The Prime Minister insisted that Vladimir Putin was a man he could do business with. The new American President George W. Bush added the rider that he had 'looked into Putin's soul' and liked what he saw.

Suddenly Mikhail's warnings about Putin's Russia were off-message. The politicians didn't want to hear what he had to say. Under orders from Downing Street, the Service was told that Mikhail must be dropped – 'exposed as a fraud' was the method the politicians suggested. And so Adrian – promotion and a knighthood at the front of his mind – followed orders. Mikhail was excised.

But Finn hadn't followed orders. He left the Service,

rather than see his priceless source trashed for reasons of political expediency. And Anna, his woman, defected from Russia just for him, not for some cause, and they married. A love story, Adrian supposed, if such a thing existed.

For the next five years, the two of them and a team Finn put together financed from Russian exiles' money, independently pursued Mikhail's leads that the British refused to touch. And Mikhail's material was as good as it had ever been. It was so hot, in fact, that Finn had been murdered for it.

The British government's craving to be on friendly terms with Vladimir Putin had cost Britain and the West five years of high-level intelligence. But it had cost Finn his life.

Adrian sat reflecting on the twists and turns of events. For now, there was a new twist. The wheel had turned full circle. At the dawn of 2008, policy had gone into reverse with regard to Putin's regime. It turned out you couldn't do business with Putin after all, and there was apparently nothing very nice to be seen in his soul, if indeed he had one. Orders went out that Mikhail was to be rehabilitated. 'Find Mikhail,' that was the cry.

But with Finn dead, and former Colonel Anna Resnikov disappeared, nobody knew how to contact Mikhail.

One of the many reasons for the new policy towards Russia was Finn's assassination and its aftermath. Grigory

Bykov's reward for the murder of a British intelligence officer was the title of Hero of the Russian Federation – Russia's highest award – and a seat in Russia's parliament, the Duma. These days, the Russians made their killers MPs.

Adrian looked at the road ahead and broke away from his thoughts for a moment.

'Foot down, Ray,' he demanded. They were on the motorway and the traffic had stretched itself apart.

'There's a weather speed limit, sir,' Ray replied.

'Never mind the bloody speed limit.' Carew wasn't going to let that get in his way.

His mind closed around the revenge he sought for Finn's murder. Adrian was not planning to be as generous to Grigory Bykov as the Kremlin had been. He hadn't spent fourteen months finding Bykov, in order to have a British diplomatic rap over the knuckles administered to the Russian Ambassador.

At a claret-fuelled encounter with the Perrier-drinking Teddy Parkinson, the Joint Intelligence Chief, at the Special Forces Club in Knightsbridge, Adrian had demanded Bykov's life. 'An eye for an eye . . . just as it should be, always has been, and always shall be, Teddy.'

To return murder for murder was, after all, the standard procedure. An intelligence officer had been the victim and MI6, *Adrian's* Service, was not to be viewed as a patsy. That would be tantamount to inviting future

acts of murder against Service officers, not to mention a savage blow to the morale of Finn's colleagues.

Nevertheless Adrian had known that he would need to lobby Teddy Parkinson hard and cleverly to obtain this natural justice. A British government that could blithely march its armies to slaughter in Iraq – against an abstract enemy and on the basis of false information, to boot – was surprisingly squeamish when it came to dealing death to an actual person with a name and an identity. No matter that the evidence against Bykov was overwhelmingly clear. Without a doubt, the Russian state-sponsored, state-trained and state-armed hood had murdered Finn, a British intelligence officer.

And so Adrian had entertained Teddy on his own ground at the Special Forces Club, where the beneficial results of force were everywhere in evidence: in the photographs of heroes on its walls, in the letters written in the blood of Gestapo torture victims who had died rather than give up British secrets. The club was a place where bureaucrats like Teddy were viewed with, at best, suspicion.

Adrian wanted to show his superior what intelligence work at the sharp end was really about. Unlike himself, Teddy had never been in the armed forces, and dealing with Grigory Bykov was going to be brute work. In his own take-no-prisoners diplomatic style, Adrian had wanted to remind Teddy of both of these facts.

'But he's a Russian MP,' Teddy had pointed out with

exasperation, when Adrian, in proof of his displeasure at not getting his demands immediately met, was rounding off lunch with a serviceable cognac. 'It makes things complicated.'

'That's why they made him an MP, isn't it – so we would back off,' Adrian insisted, leaning right in across the table so that Parkinson almost flinched. 'Are we going to let rogue states go around assassinating our officers just because the KGB turns its murderers into MPs?'

'Russia is not a rogue state,' Parkinson said mildly.

'It just looks like one, acts like one and smells like one,' Adrian said. 'What if it had been Syrian intelligence who had murdered Finn? Would we be pussy-footing off to the Middle East requesting a fair trial?'

But Parkinson had dutifully delivered to Adrian the message from the Prime Minister's office. First, before extreme measures were even contemplated, they were to demand Bykov's extradition at Intelligence level, away from the media. That way the Russians had the opportunity to ditch Bykov without losing face.

But Adrian was well aware that these new Russians were never going to give Bykov up. Putin's Russia had made it clear a dozen times in the past eight years that they would flaunt their old-style power and arrogance with complete immunity.

And so, sitting in the car now, he knew this was first base only: a winter evening flight to Helsinki, a meeting

with one of Putin's stooges, followed by the Russians' inevitable rejection of the Prime Minister's ponderous and deliberately indecisive plan.

Make a reasonable request for the hood Grigory Bykov's extradition? There was nobody reasonable left in power in Russia.

Outside, the rain was backing off a little. The day was heading into night without ever having put in a real appearance. The Service car turned off the A40 and ran the few miles to the airport along country lanes clogged with the mud and excrement from a herd of cows that had been moved to a new field.

High winds battered and shoved the twin-engine converted reconnaissance plane across the North Sea as the temperature outside plummeted. Adrian rubbed his hands, more from nostalgia for the old days than from the cold. It was good to feel he was on a mission, even a mission he had little respect for, rather than sitting behind a desk. As they descended on to Helsinki's military airfield, the snow was driving down hard and he spotted the lights of the snow ploughs at the end of the runway. An Embassy car met him and he sped away without formalities.

The meeting was to take place in a rooftop conference room at the Heikinen Hotel. From the long, high-windowed room, there was a fine view of Helsinki's marketplace and the twinkling lights of the

waterfront beyond. Distant sounds of splashing and shouts from a hot tub permeated the otherwise silent venue. A party of loud, naked Finns were disporting themselves, then rolling in the rooftop snow – all lubricated with several bottles of vodka.

The Russian, Sergei Limov, had refused to come to the British Embassy and Adrian had rejected the Russian offer of 'hospitality', for obvious reasons. The Heikinen conference room was hastily swept for bugs by both sides.

Now Adrian sat opposite the huge figure of Sergei Limov. The heavy-lipped, frowning multi-billionaire owner of oil transportation and shipping companies was a trusted servant of Vladimir Putin from the old days, and KGB to the core. In the Soviet 1980s, Adrian recalled, Limov had been the chief Soviet Trade Representative in Western Europe. But he had morphed from those days of Russia's atrophied economic policies to become one of the world's richest men, due partly to his own cunning, but mainly to his KGB and mafia sponsors.

There were two bottles of Finnish mineral water on the table and a bottle of Finnish vodka, neither of which had been touched.

Briefly, Adrian presented the case against Bykov and thrust a file of back-up documents across the table, which Limov ignored and looked like he planned to continue ignoring. Now Adrian waited for the ritual slap

in the face, but his anger was directed more at Teddy Parkinson than at the Russians. The request itself, his own presence, and the cap-in-hand nature of British policy in general towards the Russians seemed designed to humiliate him.

'What have you got for us in return for Bykov?' Limov said at last, leaning back in the seat that was too small for him. He fiddled with the diamond-encrusted, gold Rolex watch on his right wrist as if he had more important things to do. Adrian noted all this with growing fury.

So they wanted a trade. What did Limov – or Putin – want, Adrian wondered. Did they expect the Russian assets of British Petroleum to be handed over to the Kremlin on a plate? The Houses of bloody Parliament, perhaps?

'It's not a deal, Sergei,' Adrian replied smoothly. 'It's a matter of international law. The one you're signed up to. A Russian citizen has murdered a British citizen.'

'Ah, *justice*,' Limov said, as if it were something stuck to the sole of his shoe.

'Call it what you like,' Adrian said generously. 'As I say, it's a matter of international law. Either Russia obeys what it's signed up for, or it doesn't.' He could see Limov blanch at the word 'obey', just as he'd intended.

Limov leaned across the table and with one huge hand picked up the bottle of vodka and two glasses. He poured Adrian a glass and then one for himself.

But Adrian withdrew a silver flask from the inside pocket of his silk suit and poured himself a nip of Scotch into the silver cup that served as a lid. He raised it towards Limov.

'You can't be too careful these days,' he said, and drank it.

'What are we drinking to?' Limov asked, as Adrian helped himself to another shot.

'Why don't you choose, Sergei?' he said.

'To justice,' Limov replied, and roared with laughter. He drank the vodka in one gulp, placed the glass on the table like a winning chess move and leaned in.

'What we want is Resnikov,' he said. 'That's the deal.'

So. They wanted Finn's woman, Colonel Anna, their beautiful but vanished KGB defector who had given the Russians, the British – and all the rest of them – the slip.

'As far as I know,' Adrian said with icy calmness, 'she hasn't murdered anyone.'

'Worse. A lot worse,' Limov replied.

'So this is a refusal to give us Bykov to face a trial,' Adrian stated, and he realised that this was what he'd hoped for all along. He wanted Bykov dead, on his orders, not in court.

'We want her,' Limov replied simply, without being drawn into Adrian's refusal scenario. 'Then you can have your justice.'

'I'll convey the Kremlin's thoughts to London, in that case.'

'When we have the woman, we can give you Bykov,' the Russian said. 'With pleasure,' he added.

In the car that drove him back to the Embassy where he was staying overnight, Adrian thought of two things. The first was that the Kremlin would happily give up a Hero of Russia in return for what they wanted. Their cynicism was boundless. It outstripped even his own.

But the second, unexpected piece of information, was that the Russians didn't have her. Colonel Anna was still free, she was still out there somewhere, an asset to be won by whoever got there first. And, with her, would surely come the main prize itself, the source he had been instructed to reinstate: Codename Mikhail.