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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Beautiful Assassin**

Written by Michael White

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## GOING VIRAL

Colorado, 1996

Elizabeth had driven several miles past the dirt road before it occurred to her that it might have been the one the old woman had told her to take. After glancing once more at the directions, she decided finally to turn the rental car around and head back along the same parched stretch of eastern Colorado road. The August afternoon was scorching, the blacktop ahead undulating like a snake trying to shed its skin. Her eyes ached from the glare off the pavement, and even with the air conditioner on full blast, her blouse clung damply to her back. On either side of the road, the brown, desiccated plains stretched out to the harsh blue of the sky. The sheer relentlessness of the landscape called to mind a train ride she'd once made to Kiev for a story. She'd been traveling from Moscow, where she was the bureau chief for an American newspaper, and was on her way to interview one of the leaders of the Rukh nationalist movement. This was back in the eighties when the idea of an independent Ukraine was still a pipe dream. She remembered seeing out

her compartment window the Russian steppes unfurling endlessly, their vastness giving her vertigo. Now, halfway around the world, she was, ironically, going to see another Ukrainian, one who'd declared her own independence a long time ago.

There was no mailbox or marker, but she took the chance and turned down the narrow dirt road. She drove over a cattle guard, then up a bumpy incline. The washboard road kicked up stones against the car's undercarriage, the pinging sounding eerily as if someone were shooting at her. When the road leveled off, it appeared headed straight for a wind-break of cottonwoods off in the wavy distance. In the shelter of the trees stood a weather-beaten barn and several out-buildings, a windmill listing precariously, a small white farmhouse. That had to be her place, Elizabeth thought.

She wondered if the old woman would look anything like the person in the newspaper photos. Every picture Elizabeth had come across, as well as everything she'd read about Tat'yana Levchenko, only confirmed that she had been a striking-looking woman. 'A real knockout,' one reporter had called her in that hard-boiled journalistic slang of the times. Dark hair done in those pin curls of the forties, short enough to tuck beneath the forage cap she sometimes posed in. The strong features, the high, Slavic cheekbones and slightly aquiline nose, the smooth, porcelain complexion. A full mouth that, for the cameras at least, was always made up with lipstick and smiling as buoyantly as a Girl Scout, an

image that her uniform, with its cluster of impressive medals, only enhanced. Yet it was the eyes that drew the viewer: a lucid dark, wide and serious, exuding the innocent gaze of an ingenue having just arrived in the big city. But that image, of course, belied the facts, what she'd accomplished in the war (one newspaper article had dubbed her 'the doe-eyed executioner'). Elizabeth sensed something else lurking beneath those innocent eyes. She'd seen that look before, the masklike expression in the faces of the Muscovites she passed in the streets, the old babushkas cautiously avoiding eye contact with strangers, the young trained to be wary, as if their very thoughts were being monitored by the government. Elizabeth felt that if she could get beneath the public face of Tat'yana Levchenko, she would get a glimpse of the real woman who lay beneath and the story she'd been guarding for more than half a century.

The American press back then had had a field day with her. A Communist, war hero, scholar, poet, and on top of everything, movie star good-looking, a figure right out of central casting. They'd fawned over her, eager to introduce her to an American public largely ignorant of their new-found ally, that notorious Russian Bear, and of a European theater of war that, in 1942 at least, was still just a distant rumble. She would have appeared to many a kind of Rosie the Riveter but with a rifle instead of a rivet gun. Today, her story would have commanded a seven-figure book deal; she'd have been on the talk show circuit and had a flood of

movie offers. But today, of course, the woman would be almost eighty, and, as she herself had obviously preferred it, a largely forgotten figure. As Elizabeth drove along she thought of that odd photo of Tat'yana Levchenko up in a tree, one the Soviet press had reenacted for propaganda purposes, just as they had the blowing up of the Nazi eagle over the Reichstag days after they'd already taken Berlin. An obviously staged publicity shot with her wearing a camouflage poncho and holding a rifle, her face quite clearly made up, staring prettily through the scope at an imaginary enemy – all the while perched in a tree! Elizabeth had read the accompanying article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, about her near-fatal duel with the German sniper. How much of it was true, though? How much simply Soviet propaganda? In fact, how much of the woman herself was to be believed, Elizabeth wondered, and how much was just an agitprop creation, that cold war tendency to distort reality for some desired political advantage?

As she neared the house, Elizabeth grew excited at the prospect she was finally going to meet the woman she'd been hunting for years. She felt the sort of nervous anticipation she always did when covering a story that had consumed her so completely. But then she wondered if she should continue the subterfuge she'd started when she first called, that of being a distant relative of the woman's dead husband. She didn't like having to lie, felt her job as a journalist was to find the truth and tell it. But sometimes a small

falsehood was the only way to get your foot in the door to a greater truth. She knew the woman would never have agreed to meet her if she'd confessed her real intentions up front.

'Who are you?' Tat'yana Levchenko had asked over the phone. Her English was fairly good but heavily accented, her labored breathing punctuated by raspy coughs.

'Elizabeth Meade. I'm related to your husband, Mrs. Bishop.' Elizabeth used the woman's married name, not Andreeva, the alias she'd assumed more than fifty years before.

'He never spoke of . . .,' the woman began, but then paused for an intake of breath. 'Any Meades.'

'My mother was a Bishop. May I call you Irina?'

'How did you find me?'

'Through some old letters of my grandmother's,' Elizabeth lied.

'What do you want?'

Elizabeth could hear the wariness in the old woman's voice, the caution of one who'd spent years in hiding, first as a sniper and later a lifetime looking over her shoulder, waiting for someone to come for her. Just as they had for Trotsky. Or Walter Krivitsky, who was murdered by KGB agents in a Washington hotel room. Or like Juliet Stuart Poyntz, a Barnard professor and high-ranking American Communist Party member, as well as a Soviet agent. Poyntz had been invited to Moscow in the thirties, but after seeing the brutality of Stalin's purges firsthand, she'd turned on

the Communist Party. Fearing she might betray important information, Soviet agents were rumored to have kidnapped her in Central Park, and she was never heard from again. In those days, no one was safe from the long reach and even longer memory of Stalin, or his brutal enforcer Beria.

'I'm a writer,' Elizabeth explained. 'I'm writing a family history. I'd like to find out about your husband's side of the family.'

'What's to tell?' the woman said. 'My husband was not very close to them.'

'I'd just like to talk to you. It would mean a great deal to me.'

The woman fell stone silent on the other end for several seconds, so that Elizabeth thought she'd hung up. But to her surprise, the woman finally conceded. 'It is a long way to come for nothing. But if you insist.'

The next day, Elizabeth left New York on the first available flight for Denver. And here she was, about to meet Tat'yana Levchenko, a figure whose sudden disappearance a half century ago had caused headlines.

She pulled up in front of a white two-story house whose paint was badly blistered. As she cut the engine, the dust that had been trailing behind her finally had a chance to catch up. It swirled around her in an ochre cloud, and even inside the car she could taste something like chalk dust. When the air cleared, Elizabeth made out a squat figure standing behind the screen door gazing out at her. As she



got out of the car she was immediately confronted by the yapping of a dog.

'Fu!' the old woman called sharply to the animal. The dog, a border collie with a grizzled muzzle, gave off a few halfhearted growls before slinking off toward the shade of a cottonwood.

'Irina?' Elizabeth called to her.

The woman nodded. 'And you are Elizabeth, no?' She pronounced her name *E-leezabet*.

'Yes. Sorry I'm late.'

Elizabeth reached back into the car for her briefcase, then headed up toward the house. As she approached, the woman opened the screen door and Elizabeth offered her hand in greeting. She was surprised that the old woman's grip was so vigorous, the palm callused, the fingers cracked and hooked like talons. Her hair was short and puffy-white, accentuating a ruddy complexion. She wore a shapeless flowered dress that hung on her, and she was thick through the body, with a large bosom that Elizabeth had not noticed in the old pictures, no doubt camouflaged by the bulky military jacket and Sam Browne belt. Hanging from around her neck was a pair of reading glasses. She was shorter than Elizabeth had assumed, not much more than five feet. Perhaps she had shrunk with age. Still, in all the photos she had projected an image of height, of substance. Her skin was badly wrinkled, her once pretty mouth hard and sunken. She looked nothing like the woman in the photos, just like

some old lady who had lived a difficult life. Nothing about her suggested she'd had such a remarkable past. In fact, for a moment Elizabeth wondered if it could be a mistake, if she had the wrong person. But then the old woman's gaze met Elizabeth's. From this close, her eyes bore an unmistakable resemblance to those of the young woman in the photos. They were still clear and wide, darkly intent as a hawk's searching for prey. Elizabeth could imagine those same eyes fixing a target in her crosshairs. She remembered reading something about how the woman had said that the trick was to silence one's breathing, to kiss the trigger. That killing was simply a matter of controlling one's breath.

*'Zdravstvuyte. Bol'shoye spasibo zato, chto soglasilis' vstretit'sya so mnoy,'* offered Elizabeth by way of greeting.

*'Rada poznakimitsya,'* replied the woman. 'Where you learn Russian?'

'I studied it in school. And I worked as a newspaper correspondent in Moscow.'

'How come you no say you work in Moscow?'

'I used to,' replied Elizabeth, catching the hesitant note in the woman's voice. Suspicion that someone from the old country had finally tracked her down? Or merely nostalgia for her homeland, for her past? Hoping to dispel the woman's fears, she quickly changed subjects. 'I'm so glad to finally meet you.'

'It is hot out here. Come,' the woman said, inviting her inside.

As she held the door for Elizabeth, the dog slipped by them, into the house, its nails clicking on the wood floors. The place had an old-person smell to it, a stale and leathery odor like a pair of old shoes. There was also a vague smell of vegetables boiled and meats fried over a lifetime, the sort of earthy stench Elizabeth associated with Russian households. The woman walked with a cane, her other hand out to the side, touching the wall for balance, moving gingerly like a blind person. She led Elizabeth toward a small screened porch off to the right. A fan coaxed tepid air into the room, bringing with it, too, the same chalky smell Elizabeth had experienced before. Somewhere a fly buzzed noisily, stubbornly crashing into the screen. The room was plainly furnished – in the corner a bureau upon which sat a small portable TV, in the opposite corner a metal card table with two folding chairs. In the middle of the room was a well-worn recliner, in front of it a wicker coffee table with a Plexiglas top, and against the outside wall a metal glider for a couch.

The dog lumbered over to the couch, jumped up onto it, and was about to curl up.

‘Get down!’ the woman commanded. When the animal didn’t budge, she whacked it firmly with the end of her cane. With a desultory slowness, the creature slid off the couch, walked a few feet, and collapsed on the floor with a loud exhalation of air.

‘Please, sit,’ she instructed Elizabeth, indicating the couch.

The woman was nearly out of breath from the short walk from the front door. 'May I . . . offer you something to drink?'

'If it's not too much trouble.'

The woman turned and shuffled out of the room. The momentary break was just what Elizabeth needed – a chance to clear her head, to plan out how she would approach the interview. She glanced around the room, trying to get a feel for what she thought of as her 'subject.' She had interviewed many subjects in their elements, in their homes and offices and places of work. One time it had been in a prison cell where she'd interviewed a noted Soviet dissident writer. Another time it was in a T-62 tank with soldiers stationed in Afghanistan. Most of the time, Soviet citizens were wary of opening up to her, fearful of the repercussions, and Elizabeth had found that the objects they surrounded themselves with sometimes told her more than they themselves did. She'd once interviewed Yuri Andropov. The leader of the Soviet Union and former KGB head was a reticent subject. Both awkward and aloof, he kept fidgeting during the interview, checking his wristwatch. Elizabeth happened to notice a framed photograph of a tabby cat on his desk. She steered the conversation toward cats, and suddenly this hard-line old Communist who'd ordered the arrests of thousands became as chatty as a schoolgirl gossiping among friends.

Yet as Elizabeth glanced around the house, she saw little that hinted at the life of its occupant. The room had that

frugal midwestern efficiency, neat and plain and anonymous as a budget motel room. A few insipid landscape pictures on the walls, some plastic flowers in a vase on the coffee table. On a bookshelf to the right of the recliner sat some knickknacks, as well as an assortment of books, a number, she noticed, in Russian. Elizabeth leaned forward to read their titles. There were several by Akhmatova and Esenin. From her research, Elizabeth recalled how Tat'yana Levchenko had written poetry (she wondered if she still did or was that another part of her that she'd had to leave behind). Sitting on the bookshelf were two framed photos. Both were black and white, one a picture of a tall, lean man wearing a straw cowboy hat. He had a long, angular face, and his expression was one of bemused annoyance. The husband, Elizabeth concluded. Her research had turned up little more than his name – Walter Bishop. The other was of a young blond woman in her twenties, though the hairstyle – bangs, with a large bouffant – suggested the picture had been taken back in the fifties. She was thin, sharp-featured, pretty in an austere sort of way. A daughter, Elizabeth wondered.