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opening extract from

Jordan Stryker: Bionic Agent

written by

Malcolm Rose

published by

Usborne Publishing Plc

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Jordan Stryker
BIONIC AGENT

MALCOLM ROSE



First published in the UK in 2010 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

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Cover illustration by Daniel Atanasov at folioart.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781409509752 JFM MJJASOND/10 95840

Printed in Reading, Berkshire, UK.

1 EXPLOSION

"I need to speak to the Prime Minister."

"He's asleep."

"Wake him up, then."

"Can't it wait till morning?"

"No. Put him on the phone now."

"But..."

"It's an emergency."

"Can't I...?"

"No, you can't. Only the PM can give the go-ahead to

evacuate north Kent and south Essex. And give it right now. Not in half an hour, not in the morning. Now."

As soon as his secretary switched on the bedroom light and called his name, the Prime Minister was alert. Being woken in the dead of night meant only one thing. There was a crisis. The chill thought snapped his brain into gear at once. He threw back the duvet and got up. Leaving his wife, he grabbed his dressing gown and said, "What is it?"

"The Head of MI5. She wouldn't deal with me. Something about evacuating the south-east."

In the office, the Prime Minister took the secure phone. "Yes?"

"I don't have time for a full briefing, Prime Minister. You're aware of the wreck of the *Richard Montgomery* in the Thames Estuary, aren't you?"

The PM shuddered. "Yes. The one with the explosives." It was a difficult and costly challenge that the Department of Transport was too nervous to tackle.

In 1944, the SS *Richard Montgomery* was delivering 1400 tonnes of explosives for the war effort when strong winds pushed it onto a sandbank in the River Thames.

It broke its back. The wreck with its deadly cargo had remained there ever since, two-and-a-half kilometres from Sheerness and eight kilometres from Southend. No government had risked moving it or making it safe because one small mistake could trigger the bombs. If that happened, the blast would be one of the world's biggest non-nuclear explosions.

"We're facing an imminent threat," the Head of MI5 said. "There's an unauthorized boat moored to one of the warning buoys. The Port of London Authority has got it on radar. We think a diver's gone down…"

"Whose boat is it?"

"We don't know," she replied.

"Would anyone go there for any reason other than making trouble?"

"Not that I can think of. And the boat's ignored radio warnings to move away from the wreck. Whoever it is, they're not answering communications and they haven't issued any demands."

The PM muttered a curse. "What are the options?"

"Very few. We can't engage the boat militarily. Any disturbance could set the bombs off. As you know, they're unstable. I have the army, Kent and Essex Police, the Marine and Coastguard Agency, Medway Ports, and the emergency services on standby. I suggest we

evacuate the area, up to three kilometres inland. And get as many as possible away from the gas and oil terminals around the Isle of Grain and Canvey Island. If they go up, it doesn't bear thinking about."

"How many people is that?"

"Forty thousand. Maybe more."

The Prime Minister made an instant decision. "Go ahead. Keep me informed."

In the semi-darkness, the three rusted masts poking out of the water looked like sinister church crosses. The same notice had been attached to each one:

DANGER
UNEXPLODED AMMUNITION
DO NOT APPROACH OR BOARD THIS WRECK
By order

Water lapped gently – as if waiting for something to happen. Tied to a buoy, a small deserted motorboat bobbed around menacingly. Now and again, a stream of bubbles rose and broke the surface.

* * *

Ben Smith couldn't sleep. He stood by his bedroom window in Lower Stoke and gazed towards the Thames Estuary. The fields in front of him were never truly dark. To his right the oil refinery was bathed in nightlights and straight ahead the Isle of Grain gas terminal was lit up like a giant fairground. Tapping out a perfect rhythm with his fingers on the windowsill, Ben thought about the Goss family and Amy Goss in particular.

Earlier in the evening, he'd met Amy in their usual place, between the silos in the messy farm at the end of the track leading from Grain Road. That was their secret place. They'd sat together on the earth among the grey containers that looked like eight huge, upright tubes of toothpaste. Daylight had begun to fade. In the shadows of the large cylinders, it was virtually dark. Anyone walking within a few metres would never have known that the two thirteen-year-olds were there. They would not be seen together. They were safe.

"Who do you think did it?" Amy had whispered even though there was no one to hear them.

She was talking about the biggest thing to happen at school this term. Someone had stolen their science teacher's mobile phone. And, Ben guessed, she wanted to talk about it because she thought she'd get the blame. Mr. Bool was a big man – more like a bouncer than a

teacher – and he always looked grouchy. He'd been increasingly tetchy recently. His accusing eyes had turned towards Amy when he'd announced the theft. A lot of the kids had sniggered and eyeballed her as well. But Ben knew Amy better. He hadn't believed for a second that she was the culprit. "Well," he'd said, "I know why everyone looked at you. Your dad's behind ninety-nine point nine per cent of the crime on this planet..."

"Huh! Exaggeration or what?" Amy had replied. "But he's the criminal mastermind of Lower Stoke for sure."

"And Medway."

"Maybe."

"And Kent."

"Well..."

"Everyone knows it. Even the police."

"They haven't arrested him."

Ben had smiled. "Mum says she knows exactly what your dad's up to. It's just that she hasn't got proof."

"That's her problem."

"Yeah, but that's why she always tells me to keep clear of the Gosses."

"And I'm told not to mix with you," Amy had replied with a giggle. "Cop families aren't to be trusted – to put it mildly."

As always, Amy looked quirky and cute. Today, it had been the combination of beanie hat and painted fingernails with hummingbird transfers that had caught Ben's eye.

Perhaps it was the danger of being with Amy that made their friendship irresistible. If Mr. Goss ever found out, he could make life very uncomfortable – even painful – for Ben. And for Amy. If Ben's mum found out, she'd ground him for ever. Detective Sergeant Smith's son could not be seen with a Goss.

As usual, Ben had begun to drum a complicated rhythm with his fingers on one of the metal struts at the base of the grain silo and Amy had begun to complain. "I still don't know how you do that. It's really clever, but it drives me mad."

"Sorry," Ben remembered saying. Even though he hadn't wanted to leave Amy, he'd scrambled to his feet. "It's getting late. If I'm not back for dinner, Mum'll send half the Force out looking for me."

Amy had got up as well. "Dad would just put some heavies on the street and they'd beat people up until someone said, 'I saw her go that way with Ben Smith.'"

Poking his head out from behind the silo, Ben had reported, "All clear."

As they'd walked back down the track together, he'd

said quietly, “Anyway, I know you didn’t nick Bool’s phone.”

She had gazed into his face and nodded. “Good.”

“I know because your mobile’s much classier than his. Why would you nick it?”

In response, she’d thumped him on the arm.

They’d split up as soon as they neared Grain Road. They always left the shadows separately.

Now, it was the middle of the night and Ben still felt wide awake. Facing the window with the curtains open, he rubbed his right arm where she’d hit him. The bruise was probably still there. He smiled because it was a friendly bruise.

It was quiet and calm as a ship, carrying 125,000 cubic metres of liquefied natural gas to the terminal on the Isle of Grain, made its way slowly along the dredged channel 200 metres from the wreck of the *Richard Montgomery*. The true size of *Ocean Courage* wasn’t clear in the gloom but its lights hinted that it was as big as a village. There were only five small craft in the estuary and they buzzed around the lumbering monster like midges.

Without warning, the peace ended.

In a massive explosion, a vast column of seawater, mud, metal and munitions erupted from around the *Richard Montgomery* and shot into the sky. The instant mushroom was hundreds of metres wide and over two kilometres high. Unexploded bombs from the cargo hold were hurled across the entire area. Almost at once, every single pane of glass in the town of Sheerness shattered. The Animal Breeding Station on the seafront at the end of Beach Street took the full force of the blast and crumbled.

One of the airborne bombs crashed right through *Ocean Courage*, another pierced a gas holding tank on the Isle of Grain, and three hit the oil terminal. All of them exploded immediately.

The night was replaced by giant splashes of bright light as each blast triggered another and then another. *Ocean Courage* became a floating inferno. Its crew of thirty had no time to save themselves. Its supply of liquefied gas sent giant yellow spheres high into the sky.

As the enormous pillar of water plunged back down into the estuary, a four-metre wave radiated outwards, heading with devastating force for the coastlines of Medway and Essex. It rocked the blazing *Ocean Courage*, swept over the smaller vessels and sank them. The shock of the explosions caused an earth tremor that travelled through the estuary clay and shook every building up

to three kilometres inland. Some wobbled, several collapsed.

A supertanker discharging its supply of oil under the floodlights of Canvey Island terminal blew up in a mass of searing yellow flame and black smoke. The nightshift workers who hadn't yet been evacuated didn't stand a chance. The ammunition stored at Canvey Arms Factory ignited. The detonation flattened the factory and burning fragments shot into the sky like malicious fireworks. Huge oil storage tanks exploded in sequence along the Essex estuary. The deafening blasts could be heard from four counties.

The area would have been hit very hard even if the bombs stored in the *Richard Montgomery* had been the only source of destruction. But the arms factory, the supertanker, the oil containers, and the passing *Ocean Courage* made a far more lethal cocktail. Metal shards flew like bullets across Southend and the other coastal towns. The authorities' attempts to get the residents away only made it worse. People were on the streets and in vehicles when the lethal missiles arrived and the shock wave turned windows into weapons.

The emergency services had put all their effort into clearing the large centres of population. The smaller places had no warning.

In Lower Stoke, just a short distance across the fields from the gas terminal, Ben Smith was by his bedroom window. When the gasworks exploded, his house was the first to feel the power of the blast. Immediately, the roof above his head ripped away. Tiles and beams came down. His window splintered and showered him with glass. He didn't even have time to cry out. He was tossed across the room along with bricks, plaster, his bed and electronic drum kit. His head smacked sickeningly against something solid. Then he was falling because there was no longer a floor beneath his feet.

The shock wave caused a massive change in air pressure. It ruptured his lungs, eardrums and bowels.

Ben knew he was badly injured. He'd seen his right arm being torn away from his shoulder. He was aware of warm blood. Lots of it. But he felt no pain. Perhaps it was so intense that his body had shut down. He had already moved on to a calmer place. Yet his eyes remained open.

The firefighter didn't need to look closely into the ruins. The state of the bodies told her all she needed to know. The explosion had wiped out an entire family. She said into the microphone attached to her uniform, "Fourteen

Shepherds Way – with parts of sixteen, I think – Lower Stoke. Just awful. Too close to the blast."

"Fourteen Shepherds Way is a priority address," Control said through her earpiece. "A police officer's house. DS Smith. According to records, she wasn't on duty. She was probably in bed."

"I'm sorry. It's a war zone down here. No one's alive."

But, as Debbie turned to leave, the boy's body caught her attention. He was so young. A teenager, she guessed. His skin was as deathly grey as the rest of his family. There was no movement, no sign of breathing, but his eyes were open and they didn't have the usual clouded appearance.

"Just a second," she said, clambering over the debris.

"What is it?" Control asked. "Do you want medical assistance?"

"I don't think so." She kneeled by the boy and felt his left wrist. His right arm was completely missing. Glass from a shattered window had slashed and speared several parts of his body. Even his eyes had been pierced. The back of his skull had smashed against the remains of the brick wall. His brain had probably been severely damaged and he'd lost a huge volume of blood. His arm

was still warm and soft but there was no pulse. She reached out and felt his pale neck. Nothing.

"False alarm," she told Control. "It's a boy. He's dead. I just hope he went quickly."

"Move on," said Control.

Even though she believed no one could survive such awful injuries, Debbie did not abandon the boy straight away. With the back of her hand, she stroked his unresponsive bloodless cheek. At his age, he would have had so much to look forward to. She shook her head with desperation, maybe with defiance.

She knew that medical teams were stretched to breaking point treating the injured. They didn't have time for hopeless cases. But something inside her refused to accept the boy's fate. Maybe it was because of those bloodshot eyes. She could imagine some lingering consciousness behind them. "No," she said into the tiny microphone. "I want medical backup."

"What? Do you have signs of life?"

No pulse, no breathing, no movement. No ordinary human would have the strength and willpower to survive an ordeal like this. But she sensed that this boy was different. She sensed some sort of determination about him. She knew that Control wouldn't send help if she was honest, so she lied. "I thought he just moved."