

A Conversation with Lance Charnes about Engaño

Carson, your female ex-cop, is back for another adventure. For the people who haven't read Zrada, the first in the DeWitt Agency Adventures series, what happened to her last time?

The DeWitt Agency sent Carson to the Donbass in eastern Ukraine to back up a German museum official who was trying to ransom two paintings that had been stolen from his museum. Things went totally pear-shaped, a lot of people died, and Carson ended up forty miles behind the lines of the hottest war in Europe with a million euros and one of the paintings. Everybody involved in the deal came after her to get the money, the painting, or both. Carson hired a local, Galina, to help her get to the Ukraine side of the line. Of course, Galina had her own history and agenda. Things got messy.

Engaño is a very different story from Zrada. Why the huge change? Aren't there more combat zones for Carson to visit?

When I finished *Zrada*, I decided that Carson had to go someplace nice for a change or she'd probably eat her gun. I also wanted her to have to grapple with her softer side, something we've only glimpsed before. We know she can handle violence; can she handle emotions?

Up until now, Carson's been something of a blunt instrument. She's rough and tough and swears a blue streak. But how did she get that way? Is she just a Terminator without the Austrian accent? I've salted some hints into the three books she's appeared in [*Note: the first two DeWitt Agency Files novels and Zrada*], but this is the one where we really find out what's inside her. To do that, I couldn't toss her into someplace that was obviously dangerous. She needed to unclench before the action started.

We find out a lot more about Carson's private life in Engaño. For instance, it's almost surprising that her best friend isn't a guy. Where did Brianna come from?

Carson met Brianna McMurphy when they were new cadets in Toronto Police College. They were both young women from farm country diving into a male-dominated environment and they both liked to raise hell after work, so it was natural that they'd gravitate to each other. Bri is Carson's last remaining friend from her police days and the only "civilian" who knows what Carson does for a living.

I'm totally over action heroes who have no friends, attachments, or private lives. Bri is the sister Carson never had. They love each other as sisters. They've had similar experiences—Bri also left the Toronto Police Services under a cloud, she's also been divorced, she also knows what it's like to not have much money in an expensive city. Bri's the more outgoing of the pair, wears her heart on her sleeve, and isn't afraid to say exactly what's on her mind. Carson needs someone like that in her life; people who don't have that kind of relationship tend to die early.

Even though Brianna appears in only one chapter, she sets up the story's theme.

Yes. Carson's in a funk. She's tired of going to crappy places and getting the snot beaten out of her. She doesn't like the job Rodievsky [*Note: her Russian mafiya boss*] has given her. Bri takes her hand and tells her, "Let yourself live. Let yourself feel." Everything that follows stems from Carson trying to take that advice and finding out how hard and sometimes painful it is.

We've known since The Collection that Carson grew up with four brothers, part of what turned her into what she is at the beginning of Engaño. This is the first time we've heard any details about any of them. Why now, and why Dominik?

Dom's her youngest brother and got the rawest deal from their alcoholic mother: he was affected by Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder. Carson was raising her two younger brothers by the time Dom appeared. He needed the most attention and was the most fragile of the three. She had to learn how to be more of a mother and less of a drill sergeant so she could give him what he needed. They have a close and loving relationship to this day, though she doesn't see him often.

This accomplished two things. For one, you hear about Carson's deeply buried maternal side and, by contrast, her rougher parenting practices with the other two brothers. Secondly, she immediately notices that Celeste [*Note: a supporting character in Engaño*] is much like Dom. This helps the two bond more deeply than Carson expects. That bond is both a boon and a threat for Carson. It ends up driving the last third of the story.

Carson's job in Engaño is to find Viktoriya Baranova, the wayward daughter of the Russian Minister for Internal Affairs, and send her home. She's as different from Galina as she can be. How did you arrive at Vicki's character?

Carson and Galina had different temperaments but were essentially cousins. This time around, I figured Carson needed to deal with someone who's alien to her experience: pretty, young, feminine, rich, outgoing, and popular—the high school prom queen Carson probably hated. Add to that Vicki's preening for her 160,000 Instagram followers and Carson actually does hate her at first sight.

Brianna points out to Carson that Vicki's doing what Bri and Carson would've done if they'd had the money and time at Vicki's age. That and being chained to the job by Rodievsky forces Carson to pay attention to Vicki and understand why she's doing what she does. Then Carson discovers that the real Vicki and Insta Vicki aren't the same person. Carson has to question herself and her assumptions to get the job done, which opens her to new experiences.

Including stepping up her physical presentation. We've never seen Carson having to be concerned about her appearance before.

True. Vicki and her posse are all attractive and stylish. Carson's fashion choices lean toward comfortable and functional. We know from *The Collection* that Carson cleans up well, but she rarely has to.

The real impetus for Carson's episodic makeover is when Iris—Vicki's right-hand woman—tells her, “You could be hot if you tried.” Nobody's ever said that to Carson before and she's had little reason to believe it. Iris makes a project of Carson, who fights the process until she figures out she likes the results. Carson's still not Gal Gadot at the end, but she's learned from the experience.

It doesn't hurt that not one, but two men are pursuing her. This is the first time we've seen Carson in romantic situations. Will this be a trend in future books?

Strictly speaking, it's the second time—Carson hooked up with a New Zealand SAS guy in *Stealing Ghosts*, but it was offstage.

It's all part of Brianna's “let yourself live, let yourself feel” directive. We'll see if it continues.

The men are very different.

Deliberately. They're not only different from each other but also from Carson's usual hookups. She normally goes for cops/firefighters/soldiers who aren't especially good-looking and don't mind that she's not Charlize Theron.

Sebastian—the young, tall, handsome Irishman in Vicki's posse—is the traditional romance partner (picture a young [Jason O'Mara](#)). He's outwardly perfect: polite, charming, sensitive, knows how to dance and give sensual massages, and enjoys “women with curves.” He's definitely not the kind of guy who's normally attracted to Carson, but she doesn't mind that he is. Of course, she hasn't watched enough Lifetime movies to know how this usually turns out.

Carson met Edik Rogozhkin in *Zrada*. He was a senior officer in the Russian Army's special forces and was chasing her (for the money, not her body) for some part of that story. He's fifteen years older than Carson, with a lot of mileage from a long, hard career in the field. He's never had both the inclination and the opportunity for a wife at the same time. Not the most promising match for Carson, but they “understand each other” (as they've both said) and he may be temperamentally the better choice.

Making Carson sort through a love triangle was a stretch for both her and me.

Let's move on to the setting. The Costa del Sol isn't the kind of place we'd expect Carson to go to. Is that the point?

Of course it is. What's more different from a combat zone in eastern Ukraine than one of the great fleshpits of Europe? Millions of northern Europeans flock to the Spanish Mediterranean

coast each year to get sunburned, drunk, drugged up, and laid. Ibiza in particular is still like Las Vegas on steroids—what happens on the island stays on the island. It's a favorite weekend getaway for British and Irish stag and hen parties.

Once Carson got her bearings in the Donbass, she more-or-less understood the place; she'd dealt before with violent, corrupt, ruined places with toxic politics. She's never been to the Costa del Sol and never would go under her own power...now. We learn that she and Brianna were party animals when they were Vicki's age, and they both had a now-distant history with drugs. Not even that prepares her for the megaclubs, Michelin-starred restaurants, the megayacht that takes Carson to Ibiza, and the ocean-view mansions that are part of Vicki's everyday life.

Vicki's posse and Carson spend a lot of time in dance clubs. Some of them are pretty over-the-top. Are they really that extreme? Would the posse really go clubbing every night the way they do?

Most of the places Vicki and Carson go are (or were) real. I made up two of the clubs because of the things I made happen there, but they aren't out of line with the real clubs in the same locations. "Over the top" is the whole idea behind these venues—they host thousands of people every night and have to make themselves worth the sometimes eye-watering cover and drink charges.

As I understand it, the young people who go to places like Marbella and Ibiza go specifically for the club scene. They spend all day at the beach clubs and all night at the nightclubs. No self-respecting nightclub opens before midnight. The cool kids don't show up until one or two in the morning, then stay until five or six a.m. This works because breakfast isn't a major meal in Spain and dinner doesn't happen until nine or ten p.m. Vicki's posse doesn't go clubbing as much as some of the tourists would, but it's still too much for Carson, who's a good fifteen years older than most of them.

Did you have a lot of experience in these clubs or in the electronic dance music scene before you wrote Engaño?

None. I spent the night in Marbella in September 2016 (a month after Carson was there) and went to Puerto Banús that evening. I'm neither pretty enough nor rich enough to do well in clubs and I couldn't justify the time and cost to get inside one. Had I only known I'd be writing this book five short years later... Luckily, the club scene is massively documented in words and pictures. The hardest part was making sure I name-checked the right clubs and restaurants for the time. Hot nightspots burn brightly and flame out quickly.

I never developed a taste for EDM in its many forms. However, after listening to a lot of it on YouTube so I could write about it, I've come to understand it well enough. DJs set a crowd's mood and energy level with their choices of music and how they mix it together. A really good DJ can keep thousands of people dancing and cheering for hours.

You usually put your characters in real places. Other than the two invented dance clubs, are all the other settings in Engaño real?

Yes. Carson's Marbella hotel, the Ibiza and Barcelona mansions, the two megayachts, the named restaurants and stores, the inn at Arboçar, even the salon where Iris takes Carson for a new hairdo are real places. I couldn't find a good layout of the Barcelona mansion's interior, so I had to design my own. Again, the area is comprehensively documented online, unlike the places *Zrada* visited.

Once again, you've given us a foreign word for a title. What's up with that?

"Zrada" is the Ukrainian word for "betrayal"; "engaño" is the Spanish word for "deception." If you search the Amazon Kindle store for "betrayal," you get back over 40,000 hits. "Deception" turns up 20,000. "Zrada" and "engaño" return four and 1,000 hits respectively, and my books are on the first results page for each. Questions?

Is a third Carson book coming next?

I haven't decided yet. I'd like sales for *Zrada* and *Engaño* to be stronger before I commit the time. It didn't help matters that I launched *Zrada* into the teeth of a global pandemic. The Carson books are fun for me and they're relatively quick to write, but if no one wants them, there's no point.

You leave Carson in a pretty good place at the end of Engaño, just like you left Matt in a good situation in Chasing Clay. Will they just stay there?

They could. They're frozen at the end of 2016. The following four and a half years were bad enough that I'll need to work up the will to revisit them. I've been playing with another concept that would be a huge departure from both series. Is that next? I'll figure it out soon enough. In the meantime, enjoy both series and my two standalone thrillers. I'll catch you on the other side.