

ZRADA

A DEWITT AGENCY ADVENTURE

**A NOVEL BY
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EXCERPT



WOMBAT GROUP MEDIA – ORANGE, CALIFORNIA

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Chapter 1

WEDNESDAY, 11 MAY

“Touch me again,” Carson growls in Ukrainian, “you lose the hand.”

The hand caresses the top of her ass. Its thumb taps the bottom edge of the ballistic vest beneath her slate-blue, long-sleeved polo.

Stepaniak chuckles. After Carson turns to glare—not before—he peels his left hand off her and holds it up, palm out. A playful smile splits his close-cropped black beard. “Dear Carson,” he purrs. “Don’t be that way. You used to like having me touch you, I remember.”

“Used to like lots of things that’re bad for me.”

She uses the window reflection to pat the hood-head out of her hair, then stalks away with two Zero Halliburton aluminum attachés—eight kilos of dead weight at the end of each arm—to the middle of the gravel road carving a slot between two long, low concrete-block buildings. It’s good to be outside and on her hind legs again after being strapped into the Range Rover’s back seat for over four hours with a black canvas sack over her head. Bad road, checkpoint, bad road: rinse and repeat.

The familiar noise of squabbling chickens and the familiar smell of chicken shit leaks out the narrow windows sheltered under the eaves of the corrugated metal roofs. The first thing she’d ever killed was a chicken. Her mom had tried, but she was drunk, as usual, and botched it. Carson had to finish the job. She was nine? Ten? She’d cried over the dead bird she’d helped feed and raise, the next-to-last time she remembers crying.

She turns a slow 360. Ten hostiles—no, eleven, one on overwatch on the north coop’s roof—split into two groups: one by the olive-drab cargo truck ahead of the two Range Rovers, the other arced around the back end of the matte-black Toyota technical behind the SUVs. Smoking, chatting. Three different

camouflage patterns on their utilities, at least two different types of boots, four types of headgear, black or olive balaclavas. Mostly AK-74s or AK-105s.

And she's not armed. She'd tangled with Stepaniak when he told her to leave her sidearm at the Volnovakha hotel this morning, but he won. He'd said, "Our hosts get nervous when people they don't know bring weapons to a meeting." He gave her his slickest smile. "Don't worry, dear Carson. I'll protect you."

Fuck that. That's when she ducked into the toilet and stashed her collapsible steel baton in her body armor. She hates bringing a club to a firefight, but it's the best she can do today.

Stepaniak's muscle—Stas and Vadim—stand smoking by the second Range Rover. Vadim has a slung Ksyukha; Stas a suppressed Vityaz-SN submachinegun. *Hostiles? Hard to tell.* Vadim leers at her knees. Not because he can see them (they're covered with black denim), but because the handles on the Halliburtons are there.

The other militia troops stare at her. Yes, she's the only woman there, but really? *They're way hard up if they're checking me out. Or is it the luggage? Do they know, too?*

She spins toward the rattle of nearby gravel. It's Heitmann, crabbing toward her with two large black portfolios slapping his calves. He'd been in the second Range Rover with Stas and Vadim. He's one reason she's here (the cases being the other). "*Fraulein Carson?*"

"Yeah?"

Heitmann's a curator for a German museum and looks the part: fine-boned face, rimless glasses, careful graying middle-brown hair everywhere except on top. A short, over-neat beard and mustache compensate. "Do you know where we are?"

"You don't?"

He shakes his head. "No, I am sorry. In the negotiations, the solicitor never told us where the militia held our artworks." His English carries a soft German accent—"v" instead of "w," hard esses—and he speaks carefully, like the words might break. He glances around like a bird looking for cats. "We can hope this is the place."

Yeab. Hope. "We're probably still in Donetsk Oblast. Locals call it the 'Donetsk People's Republic,' or 'DNR.' Can't tell how deep

we're in, though." Stepaniak took both their phones, so there's no way to look it up. For all she knows, they're in Russia now. It's only fifty straight-line clicks to the nearest border from where they'd crossed the contact line. But as shaky as Heitmann looks, he doesn't need to hear that.

"We drove so long." Heitmann seems to be developing a bad-car-crash fascination with the militia troops by the cargo truck. "Who are these people?"

"Militia. Rebels."

"What do they rebel against?"

Carson cocks an eyebrow at him. "Figured you'd know all about this."

He shrugs lightly. "Our news is full of Syrians, for obvious reasons."

The "obvious reasons" being the million refugees who crashed into Germany last year. "Well...short version is, late 2013, the president of Ukraine killed an agreement with the EU. Most of the country wanted it." Good thing she read the agency backgrounder. "Yanukovych—the president—was from here, the Donbass. Basically a crook and a Russian stooge. Hear about the Maidan?"

Heitmann nods. "Yes, I think. The big protests in Kyiv?"

"Right. Basically a revolution. Protesters kicked out Yanukovych. That pissed off the Russians—the ones living here and the ones in Moscow. He was their boy. Putin used the Russian Army on the down-low to 'help' the locals take over Crimea. Then he started a civil war here. That was two springs ago." She thumbs toward the militia troops. "They're supposed to be fighting it. Guess the Russian Army's doing most of the fighting now."

"I see." He edges closer. "Your man"—he glances toward Stepaniak—"is he...reliable?"

Is he? Carson doesn't need to look at him to see him, but she does anyway. Stepaniak had liked making an impression when they first met four years ago, and apparently nothing but colors have changed. Back then he wore all black; now it's all blue—the leather car coat, the dress shirt open at his throat, the sharply creased slacks. His black hair should have some gray by now, but doesn't. Dye, not good genes.

"He's agency lead here. They vouch for him." *I won't.*

"I see."

A shout from behind her: “*Pora!*”

It comes from a third low building, this one just east of the southern chicken coop and about a third as long. Three rusty roll-up metal doors. The Kapitán stands in the open middle doorway in his pristine digitized green camo utilities—the latest Russian pattern—fists on hips, like recess is over and the kiddies need to come back to class.

The Kapitán rode in the SUV with Carson and Stepaniak. She doesn’t know who he is, but guesses this is his ‘hood; he wears the same patch on his left shoulder (a blue-and-black shield with a rising yellow sun) as the other troops. Every time they stopped at a checkpoint, his was the only voice she could hear clearly.

She hefts the Halliburtons and jerks her head toward the open door. “You heard the man.” Then she marches off, the gravel crunching under her boots.

She checks her watch: 1:52 p.m. All goes well, they’re out by 2:30 and back to Volnovakha—on the Ukraine side of the line—by six. She wants this to go well, meaning done. Babysitting isn’t her favorite chore. Neither is being a bagman.

Carson stops at the open roll-up to let her eyes adjust. What she sees looks like vehicle maintenance: three service bays, workbenches, tools, floor jacks, a stack of snow tires in the southwest corner, two 200kg barrels against the east wall. Other than the roll-up doors, a standard door set into the west wall to her right is the only other way out.

Something about the setup tweaks her gut. A lot of people are filing into a not-large space. Most are heavily armed. *If shit goes south...*

She jerks away from a hard grip on her shoulder, then spins to find Stepaniak’s face just inches from hers. She growls, “What’d I just tell you?”

Stepaniak hisses in English, “Make sure *nemyets* does his job.” *Nemyets* is Russian for a German. He brushes past her to catch up with the Kapitán.

By the time the roll-up door slams down and the fluorescent strip lights blink on, Carson counts ten people with her in the center bay: Heitmann, Stepaniak, the Kapitán, Vadim, five militia troops, and a dark, semi-handsome man in a shiny charcoal pinstripe suit and no tie.

They gather around an old wooden trestle table holding two side-by-side rectangles, each maybe half a meter by two-thirds, wrapped in midnight-green plastic. Heitmann sucks in a sharp breath when he sees them.

The paintings.

Carson lays the Halliburtons on the table next to the paintings, handle side toward her. Everybody in the room starts to drool. It's like watching a pack of coyotes ogle a rabbit.

Heitmann fidgets next to her at the table, breathing fast. His eyes skate from one assault rifle to the next. He whispers, "So many guns."

Carson has two jobs here. One is to carry and guard the attachés; the other is to keep Heitmann breathing regularly and focused on his job. That second part's harder.

She leans her lips toward his ear. "Relax. Nobody's drunk yet." That's always a good sign for her. The startled look Heitmann gives her says it's not working for him.

Stepaniak and the Kapitán take places on the other side of the table from Carson, their backs to the bay doors. The suit frowns at the end of the table to her right. Four militia troops fan out behind her; the fifth stands beside the center roll-up door. They're looking both more alert and more nervous now. Vadim hovers in the bay to Carson's left, watching everybody else.

Six hostiles still outside, plus Stas. Keeping others out...or us in?

"Carson, *nemyets*, friends. Please." Stepaniak's English lugs a heavy accent, but his cadence sounds like a TV chat-show host. He points at Heitmann, then toward the two plastic-wrapped rectangles. "Look at pictures. They are right? Say yes."

Heitmann leans the portfolios against the nearest table leg and fumbles with the rectangle farthest to the left. He'd work faster if his hands didn't shake so much.

The adrenaline rush starts to dilate time. Carson's rational mind tells her she's not scared, just careful. Her rational mind isn't usually the one that keeps her alive, though.

She flashes to the first time she walked into a room full of shady men with weapons. She was a patrol cop in one of Toronto's crappier neighborhoods, fresh off her probation, less than a month working solo shifts. A prowler call took her to a supposedly empty storefront that was full of biker types doing a bootleg cigarette deal.

Her supposed brothers in blue slow-rolled their response to her backup call—girls still weren't supposed to be street cops—so she had to face down seven hardened felons carrying long weapons and submachine guns with only her Glock, buckets of adrenaline, and a big dose of attitude. It wasn't until backup finally showed and she was safe that she realized she'd pissed herself. Thank God for navy-blue trousers.

The green plastic—a trash bag—rustles to the floor. The painting's gaudy, with messed-up perspective and figures that look like dolls. An angel with a blond perm and red-and-gold wings blesses a praying woman in a blue gown while a glowing pigeon hovers over them both.

Carson whispers to Heitmann, "Museum's paying money for this?"

He shoots her a look usually used on rude children and crazy homeless people. "It is an Annunciation," he whispers. "By Lucas Cranach the Elder, in 1515. Please, have respect."

Whatever. Carson isn't an art expert.

Heitmann pulls a white three-ring binder from a portfolio. It's full of pictures of the painting. He flips to a page, then peers through an old-school magnifying glass at the real thing and compares it to the photo.

Someone grumbles in Russian, "What does he do?"

It takes Carson a few moments to narrow down the voice. It's the first time she's heard the suit speak. His Russian's coated with a thick accent she can't place. He's dark with almond eyes. From one of the Stans? The Caucasus?

Stepaniak says, "He's checking that it's real."

The suit snarls, "Of *course* is real. What do you say?"

"Nothing, Ruslan, nothing." Stepaniak's in calming-the-mad-dog mode. "The museum wants to make sure, that's all. It's a condition."

"They say I cheat? I not cheat. I am honest man."

The Kapitán mutters, "You're a fucking *brodyaga*." A street-corner black-market dealer. Not a compliment.

Ruslan stabs a finger at the Kapitán. He booms, "I am fucking *brodyaga*? You *pay* fucking *brodyaga*. What are you?"

Shit. Now the dick-waving starts.

The Kapitán growls, "Look, *cherniy*—"

Stepaniak darts between the men, holding up a hand to each. “Friends, friends, please. All is good, yes?” He smiles at the Kapitán. “You get your money...” Then at Ruslan. “...*you* get your money...” Then both. “...everyone gets what they want, yes? No need to fight, yes?”

Carson checks on Heitmann while the trash talk spirals toward the roof. The German’s frozen at the table, his magnifying glass vibrating in midair. She hisses, “You done?” He shakes his head. “Get done before this comes apart. Move.”

Ruslan’s slipped into whatever his native language is. It’s not hard to tell what he’s shouting. The arm he stretches toward the Kapitán over Stepaniak’s shoulder says a lot. She’s already heard at least two militia troops running their rifles’ bolts. Carson hopes Stepaniak spotted the pistol in Ruslan’s waistband—not because she cares much about Stepaniak, but because if it comes out to play, the militamen will go kinetic on everybody.

Heitmann’s abandoned the first painting and is stripping the bag off the second one. Sweat runs down his forehead. He’s breathing like he just finished running up a cliff.

Carson switches focus to the fight. A militia troop has Ruslan’s arms pinned. Stepaniak’s huddled with the Kapitán, who’s holding the pistol he’d had in his shoulder holster. Good news: it’s still aimed at the floor...for now. Carson really, *really* misses her Glock.

The yelling and rustling suddenly switches off. Everybody—*everybody*—stares at the table. *What the...?*

It’s an icon, old enough that the paint’s cracked and faded and the faces have turned dark. It looks like the same idea as the other painting, but totally different. The angel and woman are stretched, almost boneless. The flat, fake buildings behind them are a stage set, not a place.

The Kapitán crosses himself the Orthodox way, right shoulder before left. A couple other militamen do the same. Even the suit shuts up for a minute. Someone behind Carson murmurs what sounds like a prayer.

Heitmann looks behind him, then all around, then dives into comparing the icon to the pictures in the binder. Carson whispers, “This famous or something?”

“The artist is. This came from Dionisy’s studio. He and Andrei Rublev founded the Moscow School, the style of icon you see

here.”

None of those names mean a thing to her. “Shouldn’t there be more gold?”

“This is very early. They used not so much gilding then.” Only the halos shine in the strip lights. “The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were very difficult for the Church.”

Okay. She checks the room’s temperature. The Kapitán’s all folded arms and stormy face. His eyes toggle between the icon and Ruslan, who’s pacing a small circle at the end of the table like a caged hyena waiting to kill something. The militia troops keep shuffling their feet and fingering their weapons’ trigger guards.

Stepaniak’s back at the table. When his eyes aren’t glued to the attachés, they follow every twitch the German makes. He’s watching her, too. He smiles. “Is like old times, yes?” he says in English.

Carson grumbles, “Keep telling yourself that.”

Heitmann stands straight, shuts the binder, then faces Stepaniak. “I am satisfied these works are the pieces stolen from our museum.”

Stepaniak puts on a big grin. “Ah, *nemyets*. Very good, you please me.” He shifts to Russian. “Dear Carson, please show the men”—he sweeps his hand around the room—“the gift you brought them.”

Everybody’s watching her now. “I need Heitmann’s phone.”

“Why?”

“The combo’s on it.” A security measure. The museum gave her the cases locked.

Stepaniak grumbles, then dips his hand into his car coat’s left pocket and brings out a newish Galaxy S7. He hands it to her; she passes it to Heitmann. He opens it with his thumbprint, fiddles with the screen, then turns it so she can see. In Notes: “829.”

She draws a deep breath. Once she does this, her value to these men goes to zero. She turns both cases on end and twiddles both locks to the key code. Lays them down, pops the locks, swivels the cases so they face Stepaniak and the Kapitán. “Go ahead.”

Stepaniak lifts the lids on both attachés. His smile turns sharkish. The Kapitán’s jaw sags. Ruslan steps around, peeks, palms his mouth.

They’re looking at a hundred straps of used €200 notes with

non-sequential serial numbers. Ten thousand yellow-faced bills. Two million euros in untraceable cash.

Carson considered taking it herself. That's why the German had the combo.

Stepaniak grabs a random strap. He riffles the hundred banknotes with his thumb, then tosses the bundle into the case. He steps back two paces.

"Dear Carson." His grin practically glows. "Very good. You please me."

He cross-draws a pistol from under his car coat.

He shoots Carson.

EXCERPT

Chapter 2

No air.

Carson lies gasping on her side. It's like an angry draft horse kicked her in the ribs. She tries to suck in a breath but her diaphragm doesn't work, her lungs won't fill. She can hardly make a sound. Not that she could hear it if she did.

Bullets rip apart the air above her.

Who's shooting who? She can't tell. The four militia troops who used to be behind her are now flat on the slab, their blood oozing toward the floor drain. Heitmann's down, dark red spreading over his polo. Carson can't move well enough to see anything else. If she can't start breathing again, she won't see anything at all in a couple minutes.

For an instant, Carson's in a hockey game, sprawled on the ice after a bad body-check. Draws her knees toward her chest to relax her gut. (Doesn't work; hurts like hell.) Tries to force her stomach out when she inhales to kick-start her diaphragm. But her vest, her jeans, even her compression bra are trying to keep everything *in*.

Black fringes her vision. She wants to scream but has no air to do it.

The ringing in her ears is so loud, she almost doesn't notice the shooting's stopped. Not that that's her worst problem right now.

Carson's fingers scabble for her fly. Top button open; unzip. A little room to shove her stomach downward in time with a stunted inhalation.

That works, sort of: a trickle of air sneaks into her lungs. It's like a snort of coke.

A single gunshot. *Why? Not important.*

Stomach up, stomach down. More air. The black edges around her vision melt away.

She's breathing again. *This shit never gets easier.*

Another shot. Closer.

Carson flips on her back, recovers from the effort, then turns

her head toward the sound. Just in time to watch Vadim put a round in a fallen militiaman's head.

Shooting the wounded. Wonderful.

Gunsmoke fills her nostrils. The coughing bucks her upper body off the concrete, then slams it down.

Vadim watches Ruslan drag himself a meter. Aims his pistol, fires.

He looks toward Carson with bored eyes.

Oh, no, you don't.

Her right hand fumbles under her shirt. She'd clipped her baton to the vest's left-hand Velcro side strap this morning.

It's not there.

Vadim's busy pulling cash out of Ruslan's pockets. A man's gotta have priorities.

Carson's fingertips trip over something round and rough just inboard of the side strap. It's metal and warm and sits where an invisible someone is going at her body with an auger. Stepaniak's bullet.

I love my vest.

Vadim's done with Ruslan. He stands, draws his pistol, then steps over Ruslan's blood trail to head her way.

Where's my baton?

Something metal and cylindrical under her digs into her ribcage. She rolls flat on her back so her fingers can grab it.

Vadim stops a foot away to watch her.

She rasps, "What're you doing?"

Vadim shrugs. "Cleaning up." His gun hand swings forward to aim.

Carson's right arm arcs up and out. There's a *zzzzzzzip* sound. Her baton extends an instant before it smashes into Vadim's hand. His scream and the reflex gunshot mask the crunching of bone as Carson follows through her backhand.

Her forehand swing destroys his left knee. She manages to roll out of the way before he crashes onto the slab where she'd been.

Standing is a challenge—every move shoots lightning bolts out of her ribcage into her eyes—but Carson manages. She zips her jeans, retracts and shoves her baton into a hip pocket, pants for a while, then hobbles to where Vadim's pistol landed next to a dead militia troop. A Heckler & Koch P30; nice weapon. She drops the

magazine to check its load. Five rounds left out of fifteen.

She happens to glance at the table.

One briefcase is gone. So's the icon. *Fuck!*

Carson shuffles to Vadim. She searches him roughly, confiscates his stubby Ksyukha assault carbine, three more magazines for the HK, the wad of cash he took from Ruslan, and a Russian tactical knife and its ankle sheath. Vadim swears and groans, often at the same time. Then she crouches behind his shoulders and grinds the pistol's muzzle into his temple. "Listen," she growls in Russian. "I hurt like hell and I'm pissed. Answer my questions or I make you hurt worse than me. Understand?"

Vadim keeps swearing, but there's more groaning. He eventually nods.

"Where's Stepaniak?"

He breathes hard for a few moments, then shakes his head.

"Stupid fuck." Now that she's not suffocating, she has time to get mad. Stepaniak tried to kill her and this idiot tried to finish the job. She jabs her pistol into the back of his right knee and pulls the trigger.

People in Berlin can hear Vadim scream.

She reacquaints the muzzle with his temple. "Let's try again. Where's Stepaniak?"

Vadim pants for a while. "Driving. Get away. Rings. Tells me. Where to go."

"What was the plan?"

More panting. "Take money. Paintings. Ask for. More money."

Of course. *Asshole*. "He tell you to shoot the wounded?"

He nods once.

"He tell you to shoot *me*?"

He nods again. Of course he would. If he said *no*, owned what he was about to do, he'd have to figure she'd blow his brains out. Which she might do anyway.

No. Too easy. "Guess what, Vadim. Just for being an asshole, you get to live...until the militia gets here." Something occurs to her. "What militia is this?"

He pauses. She can't tell if it's because the pain's caught up with him, he's pissed and has stopped talking, or he's thinking about what happens when the militia arrives. "Makiivka Brigade."

Which means nothing to her. Militias are ten a penny here. Still, it could be useful to know.

Carson groans to her feet and staggers toward the roll-up door. There hasn't been a peep from outside since Stepaniak shot her (*that asshole*). She circles the table, steps over the Kapitán's legs—it looks like he caught a round in the side of his head, probably from Stepaniak—then peeks through one of a line of bullet holes in the door.

Bodies cluster around the cargo truck. They're also draped over the second Range Rover's hood (Stepaniak's is gone, of course) and scattered around the technical. All in uniform. Stas must've gone with Stepaniak.

Jesus Murphy. They were serious.

When she turns, she almost stumbles over the fifth militia troop. He sits with his back against the door, clutching his side with both hands. Tears streak his cheeks as he watches her. He's so damn young.

"Hold on," she tells him in Russian. Her voice is still husky and rough. "Help will be here soon."

Heitmann's still when she kneels beside him. No pulse. He took three rounds in the center of his chest; if he wasn't dead when he hit the floor, he was soon after.

Carson braces her hands on her thighs and hangs her head. *Fuck.*

She had two jobs here and she failed at both. The icon and half the money are gone. And Heitmann's dead.

She hardly knew the guy. Still, he was her responsibility and she hadn't protected him. The frozen pain on his face makes her want to barf.

You couldn't even protect yourself.

She gently closes his eyes and carefully replaces his glasses. "Sorry. I'll get the other one." Then she pats him down until she finds his wallet. His German driving license goes in his front hip pocket so they'll know who he is and where he belongs. She stares at a snapshot of an average-looking woman in a floral dress staring back. The wife? Carson let her down, too. She pockets his wallet, watch, and wedding ring so the local vultures don't steal them. The least she can do is get them to his museum.

His phone's on the floor by his feet. The top-left corner's

chipped, but the screen still works. She presses his right thumb against the button, turns off the passcode, then enters her left thumb as a second print. At least now she has a phone.

The militia kid's sobbing by the time Carson gets back to him. The right side of his utility blouse is solid rust. She checks her watch: it's been fourteen minutes since she walked through this door. She needs to get out of here. This kid isn't her problem.

But he's *so* young. A boy. Jug ears and a fuzz of dark stubble where hair should be. He reminds her of her kid brothers. He won't last until help comes if she doesn't do something.

Sigh. "Wound kit?" she asks. He nods toward his right thigh pocket.

Carson does what she can with the basic supplies in the little medical pouch, using his belt to strap a gauze dressing against the ragged wound near the bottom of his ribcage. He probably won't bleed out as fast. No matter what she does to him, he doesn't make a sound other than crying. *You're wasting time* fights with *why can't I do more for him?* in her head.

When she's done, she lays the wound kit and his canteen on his lap. The utterly lost look he gives her almost breaks her heart. She strokes the puppy hair on his scalp. "Stay there. Don't move. Help will come."

Now what?

She can't get caught in a roomful of dead people. Nobody'll want to listen to an explanation.

Find Stepaniak. Get the icon. Fuck him up for shooting me.

Carson swipes a not-too-bloody tactical belt off a dead militia troop. It holds four thirty-round magazines that'll fit the Ksyukha—the AKS-74U she'd swiped off Vadim—a Russian-pattern canteen, and a larger version of the kid soldier's wound kit. It's heavy but useful. She closes and locks the Halliburton and tosses the painting into one of the black portfolios.

Call for help? Of course, there's no cell reception in this concrete box.

An engine sounding like an asthmatic lawn mower clatters into earshot outside. Tinny doors slam; men yell; gravel crunches.

The adrenaline hit that Carson had when she left the Range Rover less than half an hour ago returns for an encore. She rushes to peek through the perforated door. An olive-green Jeepish UAZ

with two blue bubble lights on the roof crouches near the Toyota technical and its sprinkle of dead men. Two men in peaked caps and sky-blue shirts race from body to body. One's on his phone. (*He gets reception. Figures.*) Ukrainian police, or more likely, rebels in police uniforms. Nobody Carson can afford to meet.

She has no idea where she is or which way to go.

But she goes anyway.

EXCERPT

Chapter 3

Mashkov stops at the line of six dead men laid side-by-side, shrouded with their own ponchos. He whispers, “*Bozhe moy.*”

Vasilenko stalks down the line toward Mashkov. The senior sergeant’s face is as dark as the rain clouds smothering the sky.

Mashkov exits his UAZ Hunter—the Russian answer to the Toyota Land Cruiser—and meets Vasilenko near the last dead man in line. No salutes; they’re in the field, and it had taken ages to teach the men to not salute and show the enemy snipers who to kill. “How many?”

“Eleven dead.”

Worse than I thought. “What happened?”

“Still working it out. Three shooters, as far as we can tell.”

“And the money?”

“Gone.” Vasilenko shakes his head like it’s made of uranium.

Damn it! Mashkov allows himself a long growl of frustration, then stows it. He can’t start screaming and kicking the Hunter’s tires; he’s the commander and he has to set an example. “Stepaniak?”

“Also gone, along with that scarecrow Stas. The one with no neck? Vadim? He’s still here.”

That’s promising. “Has he told you anything yet?”

“He hasn’t come to yet. Somebody got to him before us. His right hand’s smashed and both knees are chopped meat.” Vasilenko shakes his head. “Think it’s bad out here? Just wait until you see in there.” He jerks a nod toward the smallest of the three structures around them.

This was supposed to be easy, Mashkov grumbles to himself as he follows his brigade’s senior NCO toward what looks like a storage or maintenance building. His men snap to as he passes, but his brain’s too busy to react. *Swap money for a couple of paintings. Everyone wanted this to happen—the museum, us, the Chechen. What in God’s name happened?*

The stink hits him the moment he passes through the right-hand steel door: blood, piss, shit, gunpowder. He's smelled all this before, though not usually so concentrated. Maybe the close quarters are making his stomach heave.

Two of his troops shuffle past with a body slung in a black tarp. Three more of his men sprawl in a lake of blood at his feet. Stepaniak's man is closer to the table. A civilian—a balding man with graying hair—lies on his back nearby. "Who's that?" Mashkov asks, pointing.

"A German. Dieter Heitmann. Probably the museum's man."

"Oh, Colonel." Dunya—the brigade's lead medic—pops up from behind the table. Her utilities are at least a size too big for her. "This man's awake now."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Mashkov skirts the table, then halts when he sees Fedak crumpled on the floor with a hole above his ear. Mashkov's hand slams the tabletop before he can control it, startling every living person in the room. *My best captain. That bastard Stepaniak's going to pay for this.*

The medic's kneeling beside a bloody, pale soldier. The young woman wears running shoes. Mashkov used to be the "Donbass boot tsar," and now his troops can't get proper footwear.

He crouches next to them. The wounded soldier's face is another punch in the gut. It's a child's face turned old by agony. A schoolboy. *Bozhe moy.* "What happened to him?"

The medic's face is also young and aged by pain—other people's, but a constant burden. She backhands a drift of brown hair from her forehead. "One entry wound here, exit wound here. It hit his lung or liver, I can't tell. But..."

"Yes?"

She bites her lip. "Someone tried to patch him up." She waves toward the soldier's discarded olive web belt and a pile of bloody dressings. "He couldn't have done it, not in his state. It probably saved his life."

Would Stepaniak have done something like that? Mashkov doubts it. He leans close to the boy and strokes his cheek with his fingertips. "Son? What's your name?"

The boy's breath rasps. His big brown eyes try to focus on Mashkov but can't quite pull it off. "Artem. Sir."

“My father’s name. Can you tell me what happened?”

Artem’s body bucks under a spasm of hacking that bubbles blood from his mouth. The medic quiets him, wiping sweat off his forehead with what looks like a dishrag. She nods to Mashkov.

“Artem?”

The boy wrestles with his breathing for some while. “Man in blue. He shoots everyone. Runs away. He takes the icon. And money.”

“All the money?”

“One suitcase.”

That son of a whore. “What happened to the other suitcase?”

“The lady took it.”

“What lady?”

More coughing. Mashkov feels the pain that twists the boy’s face. *What have I done? He shouldn’t be here. He should be in school. He should be with his mother.* But the veterans—the men who joined the brigade in 2014—are either dead or retired to their farms or fled to the West. There aren’t enough men to replace them.

So he recruits boys. And the boys die.

“Son?”

“She had...the money. Came with...with the man in blue.”

A woman with Stepaniak? “Did she shoot people?”

“No. He...shot her.”

But clearly didn’t kill her. This makes no sense to Mashkov. “Who helped you?”

“The...the lady.” Artem’s voice is slowly fading.

Dunya takes the boy’s pulse, then faces Mashkov. “Sir, you have to stop. He’s very weak.”

“Can’t you help him?”

“No, sir. I have no supplies, no drugs. He needs to go to a hospital.” Her face crinkles. “I’m sorry.”

Not that the hospitals are much better off. The boy may have important information, but Mashkov won’t risk killing him with questions. He gently kisses Artem’s forehead and strokes what little hair he has. “Rest, son. We’ll take care of you. You’ve done well.” He squeezes Dunya’s shoulder. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

He has to leave quickly before he loses control.

Mashkov stops once he’s outside again. He stares at nothing as

a familiar anger slops up from his gut.

“What do you want to do, sir?” Vasilenko’s next to him.

Mashkov pivots and grabs the sergeant’s arm. “I want that bandit Stepaniak hanging from an electric pole. I mean that literally. Understand?”

“Yes, sir. The GLONASS bug on his Range Rover is still working. We’ll find him.”

“See that you do. Take whatever resources you need. We need that money, Lenya. That’s fuel for the brigade and the troops’ back pay, yours and mine included. Keep me posted.”

Vasilenko gives Mashkov his usual saw-toothed smile. “Yes, *sir*. The woman?”

The woman. On the one hand, she took half the money, so she may be in with Stepaniak; on the other hand, the bandit shot her, so perhaps not. And she helped the boy. “Find her. It shouldn’t be too difficult. Bring her to me if you can. I want to hear her story.”

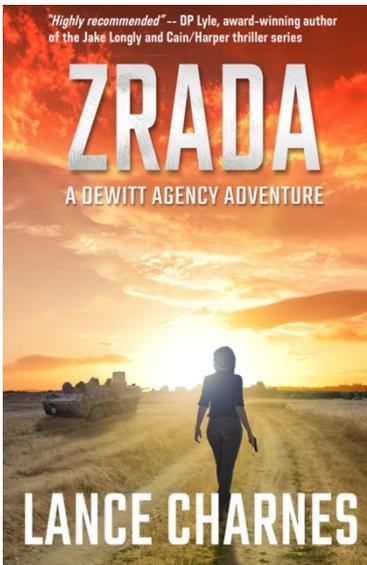
“If she resists?”

Mashkov marches toward his Hunter. “Do what you need to. That *suka* doesn’t get to escape.”

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