

ENGAÑO

A DeWitt Agency Adventure

CHAPTER 1

BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA

West of the warehouse, a black Audi SUV pokes its nose around the street corner, then backs out of sight like a cat waiting for the mouse to get closer.

Carson kicks the roll-up door's jamb. *Shit, they're here already.* She digs in her pocket for the key to her rented VW Tiguan, parked a few steps away.

The remote fob comes out in pieces, thanks to Pawel, the big moose slumped on the metal flatbed cart next to the SUV.

She fumbles the key into the driver's door lock. It's stiff—nobody ever uses the physical key. Eventually she gets the engine started and the back doors open. On her way into the warehouse, she stops by the cart. Pawel's been a pain in the ass and tried to break her spine, but the poor dumb bastard was only doing what he was told. If she leaves him, the opposition will kill him, probably after torturing him for info he's too dense to have.

Leave him.

Can't. It's like leaving a dog to be kicked to death. She kicks Pawel's leg. "Wanna live? Get in the back and lie down. Now."

Carson gimps back to the small safe. She needs to slow down the opposition so she and Pawel can get away. Those assholes followed her all over Bratislava; there's no doubt in her mind what they'll do to her if they catch her. They've already killed two people she talked to about the red-and-white Sparta Prague thumb drive now hiding in the duffel slung over her shoulder. They'll probably want the €20,000 in cash and the bottle of good whisky she took from the safe, too.

After a few moments of scheming, she pulls the pin on an old Russian hand grenade in the safe, sets the nearby baggie of coke on the grenade's spoon, then almost closes the door.

She hobbles as fast as she can to the SUV. Pawel's collapsed on

the back seat with his feet poking out the open door. She slams the door, climbs behind the wheel, then stomps the gas.

Three black Audi SUVs race out to block the road ahead of her.

“Grab and hang on, Pawel.”

The Tiguan goes backward surprisingly fast. To her left, the rusted river barges choking the industrial marina blur by. Carson jams on the brakes an instant before the SUV reaches the warehouse complex’s far end. The Audis charge toward her in a file. *Get greedy, assholes. Stop for the safe.*

The front two SUVs swerve into Pawel’s warehouse. The third one races toward her.

She shifts into first gear and floors it. The Tiguan leaps forward. The distance between her and the Audi shrinks crazy fast. *If this doesn’t work, I hope the airbags do.*

At the last possible moment, the Audi swerves and crashes into a rusted shipping container. Its airbags work fine.

Carson tears her eyes away from the rear-view mirror so she can concentrate on avoiding the potholes and derelict cars.

“One-Two-Six? Are you there?” Olivia’s creamy Oxbridge voice cocoons in her ear through the open phone connection. She keeps track of DeWitt Agency associates in the field, helps get them what they need for their projects, and makes sure they’re paid.

“A little busy.”

“The client will take charge of your man. I’ll text the rendezvous point. Are you well?”

Carson glances in the mirror. Her face looks like bad Halloween makeup. Every part of her body aches from Pawel—now groaning in the back seat—trying to smash her bones into dust. *Crawled through the armpit of Bratislava to find the fucking drive. Ate bad food. Got the shit kicked out of me. Feel like a truck hit me. I hate this fucking job.*

She sighs. “About average.”

CHAPTER 2

HARBOURFRONT, TORONTO

Carson scowls across the two-top table at Brianna, the best of her very few female friends. “I didn’t forget my birthday. I’m ignoring it.”

Brianna almost snorts beer out her nose. “So it’ll go away? They’re not like stray dogs, you know. More like horny guys. The more you ignore ’em, the more they think it’s a come-on.”

“When I hit forty, I’ll start going backward.”

“Why wait that long? Why not start now? Let me know when you’re nineteen again. You were a helluva lot more fun then.”

Carson sighs. “I know.” She bites off another mouthful of Downtown Brown Ale and watches the black-and-white Hanlan’s Point ferry churn across Toronto’s Inner Harbor. It’s a perfect Ontario summer day: 25° Celsius, a huge blue sky smeared with wispy clouds, only fifty percent humidity, no wind worth mentioning. Two and a half more hours of daylight and a jaunty crescent moon hanging in the west over Brianna’s head. The harbor and Lake Ontario stretch flat and blue off to the horizon. These are the days she likes to remember when it’s January and -15° with the lake wind blasting snow sideways through the streets.

As usual for a summer evening, the red-brick Amsterdam Brewhouse is busy, its harborside top deck full. How Brianna scored a prime table like this is beyond Carson, though she’s glad for it. One of her favorite places in the GTA, with one of her favorite people. Too bad about the birthday part.

Brianna sets down her glass of Boneshaker IPA and pats Carson’s hand. “You okay? Still hurt from that last job?”

“Bratislava? Sorta. Bruises are gone, lip’s almost healed. Back’s still sore.” Almost three weeks. It’s taking longer to mend these days. “I just feel old.”

“You can’t be old. We’re the same age, and I’m sure as hell not

old.”

“It’s mileage, not years.”

Brianna shakes her head, then takes another swipe from her beer. “So, where’s your next trip to?”

“Don’t have one yet. Know how you want something to happen because now sucks, but you don’t want it because you know the new thing will suck worse? That’s where I’m at.”

“At least you get to go somewhere. All I do is sit behind a radio and push fire engines around. I swear my butt gets wider every day.”

“I go to shitholes—”

“Like Milan?”

“—and get the shit beat out of me. Careful what you wish for.”

Brianna knows all about Carson’s two jobs. She’s the only civilian who does. Anything she tells Bri will stay between them; she knows enough of Bri’s secrets to put her in jail, while Bri knows enough to get Carson killed. Being able to unload to someone she trusts completely is a luxury Carson knows not a lot of people have. But sometimes she simply doesn’t want to talk about it.

“How’s Jason?” Bri’s mostly-steady boyfriend, an EMT with the Toronto Fire Services.

Brianna puts on that goofy smile she always wears when she talks about Jason. “He’s good. We’re waiting for the results from his captain’s test.” She holds up crossed fingers. “It’s his second try. He says if he makes it, he’ll make an honest woman out of me.”

“What, he’s a magician now?”

Brianna sticks out the tip of her tongue. “How’s *your* guy?”

“What guy?” Knowing perfectly well who Bri means.

“The Russian guy? The one who keeps calling you. What’s his name? Ro...something?”

“Rogozhkin. He’s not ‘my guy.’ He’s a guy I met in Ukraine.”

“Who keeps calling you. You gonna go see him?”

“Well...” Carson had wanted to skip telling Bri until afterwards. Now that Bri’s asked, that’s not an option. The one rule they have is that they never lie to each other. “Um, yeah. Sunday.”

Bri’s eyes light up like there’s a nuclear reactor behind them. “Sunday? Like, six days from now?” She whoops, drawing looks from nearby tables. “That’s *awesome!* Is he stoked? Are *you* stoked? How long are you staying? He’s living in that mansion, right?”

What—”

Carson holds up a “stop” hand. “Cool your jets. Breathe.” This is why she didn’t want to tell Bri until after the trip. “Yeah, he’s jazzed. He keeps coming up with stuff he wants to do and things he wants to show me and I keep saying, ‘Chill. I wanna relax. I wanna talk.’ There’s a lot we need to talk about. The kind of stuff you don’t want to go over on the phone.”

“That’s what you do after sex, right?”

“Bri...” Carson growls, then brings up yesterday’s Rogozhkin text and lays her phone in front of Brianna. “Here’s the latest.”

Bri picks up the phone and scrolls with her thumb. Her eyebrow arches. “It’s in Russian.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Carson pushes down the phone’s top edge so she can see the screen. Rogozhkin sent her two photos. She points at the first, a shot of a wooden sunbed in full sunshine. “This one says, ‘Your place.’” The next picture shows the edge of an infinity pool that almost matches the Mediterranean behind it. “That one says, ‘Your view.’”

“Awww. That’s so sweet!” She drops the phone on Carson’s paper placemat. “He’s into you! Why aren’t you excited about this? What’s wrong?”

Bri’s right—it’s awfully sweet coming from a retired Russian special-ops officer. “Remember the part about he’s fifteen years older than me?”

“So? You were just bitching about how old you feel. Maybe you’re the same age mentally.”

“Nice. I don’t wanna build up a lot of expectations.” Carson’s looking forward to the trip. The man she’s gotten to know over the phone seems a lot steadier than most of the men she’s been with. Still, her history doesn’t give her a lot of reason for optimism. She slams the rest of her beer. “What’s the point? It won’t—”

Before Carson can finish, her phone starts playing Bowie’s “Strangers When We Meet,” her ringtone for a caller who’s not in her contacts. She doesn’t recognize the number, but it starts with “+43” and it’s twelve digits long. Vienna.

She knows exactly who’s calling. Damn it.



Once she gets to a solitary place on the walkway by the marina, Carson unmutes her phone and growls, “*Shto?*” Russian for *what?*

“Larochka.” A familiar deep, rough Russian voice that’s covered a lot of road. Rodievsky, the only man who can get away with using that little-girl diminutive of her name. “You are always so abrupt when I ring. Do I interrupt something?”

“Dinner with a friend.”

“For your birthday? My best wishes to you. A man friend, perhaps?”

Why’s everybody so hot to hook me up? “None of your business. You’re up late.”

“When you are as old as I am, you sleep less. Also, a very good friend woke me with an urgent request. Tell me—Miss DeWitt has no plans for you in the near future?”

“Not that she’s told me.” Not that it would matter. Rodievsky gets first dibs on her.

“Very good. Do you know the name Oleg Germanovich Baranov?”

Carson paces along the railing that separates the concrete pavers from the water. “No. Should I?”

“You should. He is the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs.” Otherwise known as the MVD. “I always make certain I am good friends with the minister, whoever he is. It is very good for my business.”

His business is being the *pakhan*—godfather—of the Solntsevskaya Bratva organization in Vienna. The Solntsevo gang is one of the Russian *mafiya*’s largest offshoots. Carson’s tied to Rodievsky now because her father was incredibly stupid about whom he borrowed money from to start a security company that failed.

“Glad you got a social life,” Carson grumbles. “I care...why?”

“Larochka.” She hates that nickname. “Please. Oleg Germanovich has a number of business interests that happen to coincide with my own. Also, he controls the *politsiya*, the Main Office for Drug Enforcement, and the Main Office for Migration. You can imagine how this interests the *Bratva*. So when my good friend Oleg Germanovich rings after midnight, I do answer the phone and listen carefully. Just as when I ring you, you answer and listen carefully, yes?”

Carson does, but wouldn't admit it under torture. "What does your good friend want in the middle of the night?"

Rodievsky clears his throat. "He has a daughter, Viktoriya Olegovna. A lovely girl, and very intelligent. She graduated with honors from Cambridge University two years ago. She is also very willful and independent, much as I imagine you were at her age."

"I was a cop at her age."

"I know. Still, I like to think you were as hard-headed and rebellious then as you are now. I say that with great affection. I have three sons, and each is a perfect *apparatchik*. They bore me."

Carson's always uncomfortable with these late-night (for him) calls. Rodievsky tells her things she'd rather not know about him. He also takes a long time to get to where he's going. She doesn't want to be his surrogate daughter or confidant or whatever he thinks she is. They have a business arrangement that works completely in his favor, that's all. "Let me guess—Viktoriya doesn't want to come home and marry some nice Russian oligarch and start calving."

"Calving?" He sighs. "You spent too much time on farms in your younger days. No, Viktoriya has been running wild around the Mediterranean for the past two years. She goes to parties and nightclubs and consorts with inappropriate men and spends her money foolishly. Oleg Germanovich has indulged her until now. He wants her to come home to Moscow so she can start learning his businesses. He wants her to take over when he retires."

"Isn't that usually the son's job?"

"Yes, if there are sons. Baranov has none, only two daughters. The younger one, Valeriya, is also very pretty but not nearly as intelligent as her sister. She will be the one who marries the oligarch and calves. That is not the point. Her father has been trying for six months to bring Viktoriya home. He has sent several of his men to fetch her. She always gets the better of them and escapes. So Oleg Germanovich calls his good friend for help. Can I use my resources to bring his older daughter, the apple of his eye and dagger in his heart, back to her home and family? And of course, I say yes."

"Of course." Carson knows what's next. "How many *boyeviki* work for you?"

"There is no reason to think *Bratva* muscle can reach Viktoriya

if MVD muscle cannot. I want to try something different. Send a woman. Someone who can speak her language, maybe who is or was like her. Reason with her. Convince her that playtime is over and it is time to become an adult.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“I am not.” Rodievsky’s voice hardens. “I am very serious. Oleg Germanovich is anxious to bring her home before she ruins her future. You—”

“By getting knocked up?”

“That can be managed. Drugs, arrests, diseases, inconvenient politics...those are bigger worries. You will find her, talk to her, get control of her, and make her go home. I have promised her father I will do this, so it is now a matter of honor. Do you understand what that means?”

“Yeah.” It means if she fails, he’ll consider it a personal insult. That’s how sudden deaths happen. *Shit*. “How do I find her?”

“She makes it easy. Do you know Instagram?”

“Yeah.”

“She has an account. I understand it is very popular with a certain audience. I will send the address to you now.” He sighs again, then lowers his voice. “Larochka. This should be pleasant for you. No violence, no danger. Warm, pretty places with clean water and soft bedsheets. When you succeed, I will reduce your debt to me by fifty thousand, plus whatever reasonable expenses you incur. This is my birthday gift to you.”

Good thing she took that €20,000 in Bratislava to stake herself. She has to pay all her own expenses on Rodievsky’s jobs. Luckily, she usually spends less than he knocks off her father’s debt. “Euros or Canadian?”

“Euros, of course. Although I am still very fond of your coins with the little birds on them. You will start immediately. Please keep me informed of your progress. Have a good evening, Larochka.”

Carson’s thumb stabs her phone’s “disconnect” icon hard enough that it should crack the glass. Babysitting and life coaching—two of her least-favorite things. This will also blow up her visit with Rogozhkin. Despite what she told Bri, she really does want to see him. Figure out whether there’s anything they can build together, or maybe just have some fun.

She checks the new email in her inbox and finds an Instagram link. Dreading what she's about to see, she punches the link.

Oh. *Fuck*. No.



"God, I want her hair."

Carson's gnawing on a smoked rib. She frowns at Brianna. "Why? You're already blond."

"Yeah, but this...this is *movie star* hair. This is red carpet hair."

"You need that with your radio headset."

"Liss! Jeez. Lighten up." Brianna scrolls through more pictures of Viktoriya playing on the south coast of Spain. "I have twenty-two Insta followers and they're all related to me. She has a hundred sixteen *thousand*. Can you imagine that many people caring about what you do?"

Carson thinks about it for a couple of seconds, then shudders. "Sounds like a kind of hell."

Brianna tsks. "While I'm at it, I'll take her face, too."

"You're already pretty."

"No, I'm 'cute.' I've always been 'cute.' You know what that's like?"

Carson glares at her. "No. I don't. Never been accused of it."

"Oh, come on. You look fine. You got that great skin. You're gonna look the same when you're seventy—"

"Oh, thanks."

"I didn't mean it that way—"

"Thanks anyway."

Brianna growls, then scrolls. "She looks like she's doing fine to me. What do you think?"

"She's a waste of space." Carson sets down her de-fleshed bone and moves on to the next rib. "I mean, all that money and all that education, and she blows it on Champagne and clothes she wears once."

"She's having fun. Remember that?" Sigh. "I wish I could've done this when I was her age. It took every loonie I had to get off the farm and come down here." Bri picks at her lemon chicken schnitzel with one hand while she scrolls with the other. "Remember how poor I was when we met, back at cadet training?"

You had to buy me toilet paper?”

Carson chuckles at the memory. “Had to feed you more than once, too. Surprised you survived my cooking.” She nods at the phone. “Rodievsky wants me to talk to her. Reason with her. How do I do that? I look at her and see a spoiled rich bitch burning daddy’s money. Do we even speak the same language?”

Bri turns off the phone and sets it in front of Carson’s plate. “You sound like my mother.”

“Told you I feel old.”

“What about your trip to see your Russian guy? Can you do that first?”

“You don’t tell Rodievsky ‘later’ or ‘no.’” Carson shakes her head. “He’s never gonna let me go.”

“Even after you pay off your dad’s debt?”

“He’ll make sure I never do. I’m too useful to him, and too cheap.”

Brianna digests this for a few seconds. “Okay, go. But make it a vacation. I mean, the Costa del Sol. Gorgeous beaches, great weather, warm water. Hot Spanish guys.”

“Now you sound like Rodievsky. ‘Clean water and soft sheets.’”

“You’ve done worse. Don’t look for Viktoriya too hard. Get a tan. Swim. Drink umbrella drinks. Get laid. Adjust your attitude. Then you’ll be all tan and relaxed when you see your guy. And maybe you’ll be in a better mood when you find this Viktoriya chick.”

Carson snorts. “If I have to keep looking at that shit, I’ll wanna wring her neck.”

Brianna sighs and sets down her fork. Her mouth and shoulders sag.

Carson knows this look: Bri’s hurt or discouraged. *Have I been that bad? Yeah.*

“Give me your hand.” Bri holds out her right hand, palm up. “Come on.” Carson does; Brianna folds it in both her hands. “You know I love you, right? You’re my sister—”

—“from another mister. Yeah.” Carson looks through the Plexiglas next to her at the harbor. “And...I...”

“I know.” Brianna squeezes. “I know it’s been hard for you, these past five years.”

“Longer than that.”

“Yeah. I get it—you don’t want to hurt anymore. I’ve been there too. But because I love you, I can say stuff like this to you: Let yourself live. Let yourself *feel*. Stop trying to control everything. The best things that happen in life are the things you never planned. So let things happen and enjoy them. I want my best friend back. I really, *really* miss her. And I worry about her. Okay?”

Carson doesn’t dare look at Bri, not when she’s having trouble with the hitch in her throat. She’s been a shitty friend lately. Her bad mood’s become semi-permanent, and even she doesn’t want to be around herself. Finally, she nods, because she doesn’t trust herself to say a word.

CHAPTER 3

MÁLAGA, SPAIN

Yuri Grebnev follows a servant through a quiet, arcaded courtyard in the center of the stately, whitewashed Mediterranean villa. The sun isn't high enough yet to reach the courtyard's terracotta floor, leaving the space cool and still. They skirt the obligatory tiled fountain on their way to three graceful arches that appear to open onto thin air.

Grebnev can't tell exactly what function the person he's following fills here. The plain black slacks and long-sleeved, white button-down shirt don't give away any clues. Housekeeper? Server? He's finally figured out she's female; her unisex face and hair could go either way.

The arches lead to three broad steps down, then to a terrace overlooking a swimming pool as blue and nearly as large as the summer sky. The heat hits him immediately: nine-thirty in the morning and it's already over 30° C. Despite the two large patio umbrellas and the misters, Grebnev deeply regrets the slate-gray wool suit that's now slowly broiling him.

A black wrought-iron patio table sits dead-center on the carved-stone railing, flanked by matching chairs. An elaborate breakfast covers the white tablecloth. A man draped in a knee-length, embroidered dressing gown lounges on the chair to Grebnev's right, scrolling through a tablet's screen.

He grins. "My dear Grebnev! Welcome." His Russian comes from south and west of Moscow—Belarus, Ukraine, that area. He stands to shake hands. "Now that I see you, I recall that we met in Rublyevskoye two years ago. Your CEO's dacha. Ex-CEO, I should say."

Grebnev's reasonably sure he's never seen Konstantin Brusin in his life, though he's heard plenty about the man. He sits in the unoccupied chair and glances out on the cascade of red tile roofs

spilling down the hill to a broad beach and blue sea. "Lovely view."

"It is, isn't it?" Brusin settles into his chair and waves a hand over the table. "Join me for breakfast? My chef is a miracle."

"No, thank you. I already ate." At six, his usual time. Grebnev's not sure he could stomach breakfast this late in the morning. "Coffee is fine."

Brusin aims a stream of Spanish at the housekeeper, who leaves with a little bow. Then he turns to smile again at Grebnev. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Mr. Severinov didn't tell you?"

"He told me to expect you, not why you're here. I assume it has something to do with security since, well, Severinov."

The Chief Security Officer for Zapadneft, Russia's third-largest oil company, and Grebnev's immediate superior. "It does. We have a...situation. We're hoping you can use some of your contacts to help us resolve it."

"Of course. Anything I can do for a valued client."

Splashing water and laughing distracts Grebnev. A good-looking young man and a pretty young brunette are playing in the pool. Both are quite nude and apparently know each other extremely well. Grebnev clears his throat and returns to Brusin. "Am I interrupting a party?"

Brusin glances toward the pool, smiles and waves, then chuckles. "No, no. The party was last night. And this morning, too, I suppose. I love high season on the Costa del Sol. Please, continue with your situation."

"Right. It appears we've been hacked. Someone managed to break into our financial system and created more black accounts."

"Like the ones for your executives."

"Yes. The funds disappear into numbered accounts all over the world and that's the last we see of them. I'm told they were quite skillful about it. That may be why we hadn't noticed it until recently."

The housekeeper sets a chrome-handled glass mug in front of Grebnev. The top half is dark coffee; the bottom half is something creamy white.

Brusin notices Grebnev's puzzlement. "It's a café bombón, from Valencia. Espresso poured over condensed milk. Live a little."

"Of course." Grebnev doesn't usually have much tolerance for

experimenting with coffee, but he needs to be as gracious a guest as possible. He sips the espresso, then glances at the hovering housekeeper.

Brusin says, "Go on. She doesn't speak Russian."

"How do you know?"

Brusin laughs. "You got me there." He dismisses the woman. "Have any accounts I process been affected?"

Process. An interesting euphemism for *launder*. "No, they're all fine. The people in Finance and IT who were asleep at the wheel have been dealt with. But we're left with accounts we can't, ehm, *account* for, if you will. Also, IT has yet to discover how the hackers pulled off the exploit. We're leaving the accounts alone for now to see if the people who created them come back to tweak them."

"Oh, Connie, darling!" A woman's voice with an English accent pulls Grebnev's attention to the pool again. A striking young blonde with a scarlet streak in her jaw-length hair stands next to the pool in a frilly white robe. Her fists are planted on her hips. "Are you coming? It's too hot to stay out here for long."

Brusin stands and leans his palms on the balustrade. "Of course, my dear," he calls in lightly accented English. "In a few minutes. I have business."

"You always have business. Don't take too long." She flings off her kimono—she's also quite nude—and paddles to the young couple. She appears to know them both extremely well. Grebnev watches for a few moments, both fascinated and a bit embarrassed. Things like this never happened in the army.

Brusin thumps into his seat, chuckling. "Mixed doubles, my dear Grebnev. When in Rome and all that. If I may ask, how much have they taken you for?"

"Six and a half million euros, more or less. Small compared to our revenues, but it's the principle of the thing." He watches Brusin butter a roll. "For a while, we thought it was you."

Brusin's head shoots up. "I would never. I don't need to. Between the corporate accounts I process and the black ones for your executives, I have more than enough business from you." He takes a generous bite from the roll and sighs. "Tastes like a cloud. So, what do you need from me?"

The splashing and laughing and short, sharp cries keep tempting Grebnev to watch the pool action, but he resists. He's

never been part of this kind of scene, and he doesn't need to waste brainspace wondering what he'd say if Brusin (or the striking blonde) asked him to join them. "Our cybersecurity team traced the hacking activity's origin to this area. It apparently moves from time to time. Several other firms in our commercial space have noticed the same kinds of intrusions. Normally, we'd deal with the problem ourselves, but...well, I'm sure you saw the news reports about that disaster in Riga last year."

"I did. I was embarrassed for you all, truly." Brusin sets down his fork, leans back in his chair, and folds his hands in his lap. "Were you...part of it?"

Grebnev hesitates. "I was there. I wasn't in command." That was Ivlev, then the company's Director for Physical Security. The stupid bastard who Grebnev replaced after the purges ended. That inescapable news photo of the two dead women shielding the dead baby under their bodies still haunts him.

"Well done." Brusin spreads his hands. "I don't have an army like Zapadneft does. What use can I be in this?"

"Someone in the hacker group going by the name 'Sonia' is engaged in some low-rent drug dealing on the side. It's surely an alias. We know that some of your clients also operate in that space. We'd appreciate it if you could convince one to eliminate the competition." He finishes the espresso in his drink, leaving the condensed milk mostly untouched. "It should be easy. Hackers aren't usually hard targets in the physical world. Your client would benefit from it in market terms, of course. One less rival in a crowded field. That may lead to more money for them and larger fees for you."

Brusin chuckles. "And Zapadneft comes out ahead. You have your hacker problem solved for you without getting your hands dirty. Clever." He sips from a tall tumbler of intensely red liquid. "As it happens, I have clients who may be just the thing for your scheme. An up-and-coming Catalan group trying to expand into the Costa del Sol. They're certainly not afraid to break eggs to get what they want." He raises his glass to Grebnev in a mock toast. "This could be very interesting for us all, yes?"

CHAPTER 4

MARBELLA, SPAIN

Carson arrives in Marbella after ten and a half hours overnight on Lufthansa via Frankfurt, then over an hour driving from Málaga. It's well past one in the afternoon by the time she checks into the beachside Hotel Fuerte Marbella. She staggers onto her private ocean-view balcony on the fourth floor, still buzzing from the lack of sleep and traffic she hadn't expected.

She closes her eyes, lets her head fall back, and takes three deep, slow breaths. At least it doesn't smell like rotting kelp or an oil spill. *Finally here. This will be fun.* She doesn't believe it, but she hopes that thought borrowed from Brianna will come true.

Three days ago, Bri made her promise to not look for Viktoriya for the first day after she arrives. Because she promised and takes promises seriously even when they suck, Carson doesn't take her phone off airplane mode. No calls from Rodievsky; no Insta posts from Viktoriya. After a quick shower and change of clothes, she goes out to recon the area.

Marbella is like two different cities. Above the four-lane Avenida Ramon y Cajal, the main east-west road running through town, is the Spanish city she'd expected—narrow, twisting streets, tiled walkways, whitewash, wrought iron, pastels. Every other door leads into a boutique with a name like “Bily Bily Baby”; every fourth door fronts a small hotel or restaurant. Unexpected courtyards pop up randomly. There's not a single feral dog, trash-barrel fire, or burned-out car to be seen. Trees, pretty flowers, fountains, sunny, 25° C; it would be a pleasant walk if it wasn't jammed with tourists.

An unexpectedly leisurely lunch at a café on the Plaza de los Naranjos—a lush courtyard surrounded by orange trees—gives Carson a chance to confirm that the tap water's drinkable. At the next table over, a young guy in flashy clothes and neck tattoos has

three cell phones lined up next to his plateful of animal protein while he mutters some Balkan language into a fourth. She knows his type: a drug dealer or low-level distributor. *Hub—right in front of City Hall.* Bri didn't tell her about this part of Marbella.

Afterwards, she heads below the main drag into high-rise hell: hotels, condos, and office buildings smashed shoulder-to-shoulder, blocking any view of the Mediterranean until she reaches Avenida Duque de Ahumada, the pedestrianized beachside street that stretches the length of Marbella.

And more tourists.

The beach is jammed with hundreds—no, thousands—of sunbeds and umbrellas. Bodies as far as she can see. The people who aren't roasting themselves on the sand are in front of her on the *paseo*, shuffling along slower than crippled snails. Outfits range from caftans to nearly nonexistent swimsuits; bodies run the gamut from magazine-spread ready to please-God-strike-me-blind. She hears far more British English than Spanish.

The way Brianna had talked about this place, Carson expected nonstop beautiful people cruising quiet streets in their Rolls-Royces. Because she rarely goes to tourist spots when she works for Rodievsky or the DeWitt Agency, she didn't realize that when northern Europe shuts down in August, it's because those people are all down here. In a way, she's glad. She's in the middle of the pack as far as physical attractiveness goes, and her brand-new navy-blue shorts and blue-and-green floral sleeveless top fall about midway on the local fashion spectrum.

She steps down to a beach, pulls off her runners, then walks into the water up to her ankles. The Med is like a once-hot bath left to sit for a while, still warmish but not what she'd choose for a shower. Still, she walked on a beach and got in the water. Brianna will be proud of her.



By the time Viktoriya drops her first Insta post of Friday morning, Carson's already had breakfast and finished a truncated version of her usual three-hour workout in the hotel's gym and the larger of the two swimming pools.

Viktoriya's draped over a sunbed, wearing a sheer white cover-

up open over a gold-belted, one-piece white swimsuit with a plunging neckline. Gold drips from her ears and neck. She looks amazing (the bitch). She's holding a half-full Champagne flute next to her face. Below is a caption:

Marbs brekkie @ noon where
better? #purobeachmarbs
#virginiamacari
#queen_of_queens_marbella
#beachlife #beauty #summer
#marbella #spain #españa #fashion
#fashionista #looksoftheday #glam
#look #style #marbella2016
#beachwear #outfit #outfitoftheday
#collection #styleoftheday
#myoutfit

Carson had to read dozens of these before she could decode the hashtags. Viktoriya always leads with where she is (Purobeach Marbella, a beach club about twenty clicks west of the hotel), then follows with what she's wearing (Virginia Macari swimsuit, Queen of Queens robe). The rest is fluff.

While she was locked in German airliners, Carson paid the exorbitant fee for the in-flight Wi-Fi so she could drag through a year's worth of Viktoriya's drivel and try to establish patterns for her. She posts most everywhere she goes, including the washroom (at least four bathtub shots, extra bubblebath). She makes the rounds of all the hotspots in the western Med: Lagos and Faro in Portugal; Marbella, Málaga, Alicante, Valencia, Barcelona, Ibiza, and Mallorca in Spain; Marseille, Cap d'Antibes, and Cannes in France; and some places in Morocco Carson's never heard of. It's a regular cycle. She showed up at ski resorts a few times last winter, then always fled to #beachlife again. Clubs, shops, bars, restaurants, beaches, mansions, boats, pools, gyms (full makeup on the Peloton, of course). She guzzles Champagne by the barrel. She works off the fancy lunches and dinners with sailboarding, swimming, hiking, snowboarding, and roller skating. About half the photos are selfies (like this latest); the other half are clearly assisted, though she never mentions who's pushing the button.

Carson hates her guts. She'd bet Rodievsky's fifty grand that

Viktoriya's never been to Bratislava, far less the Donbass, and probably wouldn't survive her first day in either.

Anyway, Carson has to get to Purobeach Marbella to interrupt Viktoriya's brekkie.

Except Viktoriya's not there.

Carson pays €45 for a pool sunbed and tries to cover the entire pool area without race-walking. Despite what the YouTube videos implied, not everybody is young, pretty, and tan...just most everybody. Carson's very aware of her pasty Canadian winter skin and how her tank swimsuit could belong to the mothers of some of the young women decorating the sunbeds. At least it's black. She also appears to be the only woman wearing deck shoes—espadrilles with improbable wedge soles are popular, as are gladiator sandals.

Since it's almost two and still far too early for people to be eating lunch, Carson scores a table under an umbrella without a fight. The chillout house music brings Carson's blood pressure down. A couple of beers help.

Where the fuck is Viktoriya?

Her last post arrived as Carson ordered lunch; she should still be here. Carson even found where Viktoriya shot the picture, with Morocco's Atlas Mountains drifting far in the background. But she's gone. *How did I miss her?*

So Carson has lunch and waits for the next Insta bomb to fall. The Spanish-Asian fusion food is actually good. The waiter—a youngish guy who could be Chadwick Bozeman's more handsome brother—isn't bad to look at, either.

Viktoriya's next post happens at three-thirty.

Watching cute guys with big
sticks play games. #santamariapolo

By four-fifteen, Carson's parked her SEAT two-seater between a Bentley and a Range Rover and is combing the sidelines of the Santa Maria Polo Club in Sotogrande, about fifteen clicks southwest of Purobeach. She works her way around the field—the size of nine football pitches—trying to find Viktoriya's loose, white-lace dress and her colorful folk-art bracelets. It's not the flesh market that Purobeach was; comfortable-looking men in khaki and golf shirts sit with well-kept women in respectable resort wear.

Once again, Carson finds where the photo was taken, but

Viktoriya's not there. If she is, she's doing a helluva job hiding. Then she notices something. A polo player was riding behind Viktoriya when she snapped her photo. He wore a green shirt with white stripes.

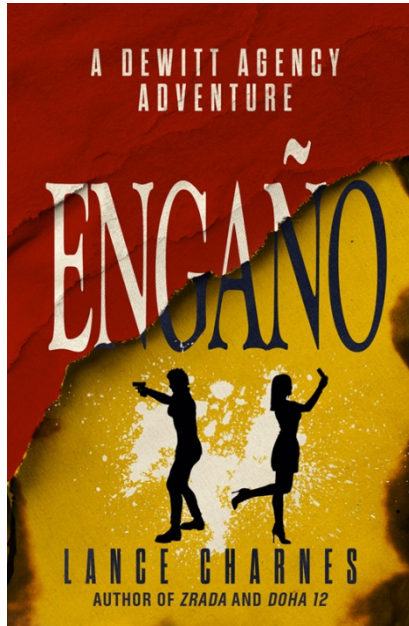
The players on the field now wear either navy-blue or yellow shirts.

And the match started at four, not three-thirty.

What the fuck?

Like what you saw?

Want to read the rest?



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