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The Child Thief

Written by Dan Smith

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THE
CHILD
THIEF

DAN SMITH



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Winter 1930

Village of Vyriv – Western Ukraine

1

The distant figure was little more than a dark smudge on the steppe. The land was flat and white and cold; a vast sea of nothing with just that single blemish on the landscape, drawing the eye. During the war, an imperfection on the horizon would have halted a company in its tracks. Boots would have ceased their struggle, and the chatter of rifle slings would have fallen silent. Fear and curiosity would be felt in equal measure.

And in that silence, would be the long wait to see what might come of the lonely fault in the otherwise faultless beauty of the steppe. A single stain that could multiply into an army, bringing with it only violence and ferocity and death.

But the war was over, and red had crushed all colours that stood in its path, yet the blurred stain in the distance still brought fear and curiosity. It shouldn't have been there.

Staring against the wind, bitter tears welled and clouded my sight. I wiped them away and squinted against the few flakes that had started to fall. I contemplated the figure, watched it shift and blur, then I moved to the edge of the tall grass, wading through snow as deep as my calves, dropping to one knee and resting my elbow on my thigh. I blinked hard, touching a cheek to the cold stock of my rifle, and brought one eye close to the scope.

Magnified as it was, the dark spot was still just a stain on the brilliance of the drift, but I could see it moving towards us as the wind blew across the surface of yesterday's fall, whipping the soft snow into a powder that floated in a swirling mist.

‘You see something?’ Viktor said.

My sons moved behind me, but I kept my eye to the scope.

‘What *is* that?’ Petro asked, coming alongside. ‘Some kind of animal?’ His face was almost hidden, his hat pulled low, and only his eyes were visible above the scarf that covered his mouth and nose. Petro was just a few moments younger than his brother. Two boys, seventeen years old and almost men; born together, raised together but as different as the seasons. Summer and winter. One coarse and hardened, with an outlook that saw no subtlety. The other younger, more complex, more in tune with who he was.

‘Could be.’ Breath clouded around my face as I spoke, misting the scope lens. I wiped the glass with a finger of my glove.

‘Let me see.’ Viktor slung his own rifle over his back because it was without a scope and useless at this distance. He squatted beside me, his thick coat moving against mine.

I nodded, letting him take the rifle, and Viktor remained silent as he watched the magnified shape.

‘What’s it look like to you?’ I said. ‘An animal?’

‘Hard to tell. The wind’s picked up again; it looks like there’s a storm coming.’ He took a breath and steadied the rifle as the icy wind gathered strength, making him shiver despite his thick clothes. ‘No, wait. I think it’s . . . yes, it’s a man. I’m sure of it.’ He took his eye from the scope and stared out into the oncoming blizzard. ‘Someone’s coming,’ he said.

‘Who?’ Petro asked. ‘You think it might be activists? Red Army?’ It was the threat hanging over Vyriv: that one day the activists would come with soldiers to our village and take everything we had.

‘There’s just one person,’ Viktor said.

‘Give me that.’ I took back the rifle and scoped the figure once more.

It was closer now. Not just a dark stain, but a person; the movement was clear. A shambling gait, head down, shoulders hunched, bent at the waist. A solitary figure without an army to

follow it, but I eased back the rifle bolt and reassured myself that a cartridge was pushed home.

‘Petro, I want you to go back,’ I said. ‘Warn your mother first. Then tell the others.’

‘What about you?’

‘We’re going to wait here. See who’s coming.’

Petro didn’t want to go, but he knew argument was useless, so he went without another word, raising his knees high as he lifted his feet from the snow.

I watched him until he was gone, disappeared below the lip of the hill, then I turned to watch the figure once again.

‘Take this.’ I handed my rifle to Viktor, knowing the rare scoped weapon would be more effective to cover me from a distance. ‘I’ll use yours. Watch from the trees.’ I nodded in the direction of the forest which grew along the steppe to the right. A line of leafless trunks, dark and barren against the grey sky. Their crooked fingers were heavy with icicles which glinted in the rare days of sunshine but now hung in shadow. The uppermost branches of the trees at the periphery were filled with the black spots of clumped twigs and forest detritus the crows had used to build their nests.

Viktor didn’t take the rifle. He looked across at the trees, then back at me, indecision in his expression.

‘You’ll be safe,’ I told him. ‘Stay at the edge of the forest, that’s all.’

‘I’m not afraid. I just don’t want to leave you alone.’

‘I won’t be alone. You’ll be watching me with this.’ I put the rifle into my son’s hand. ‘Do as I ask, Viktor. I need you to watch for me.’

Viktor sighed and nodded before he turned away and struck out for the edge of the trees.

When Viktor was gone, I adjusted my scarf and took up my son’s rifle. To the right, crows shifted in the trees, snapping their bleak cries into the afternoon as Viktor approached, but it was cold and they were as embittered by it as we were. Once they had

voiced their displeasure, they became quiet, and the only sound was the wind against the wool covering my ears.

Out on the steppe, the figure approached.

2

The progress of the figure was sluggish. His legs dragged through the snow, barely lifting, and his head hung like a beast of burden. His body was bent almost double, his arms hanging limp at his sides. He was like a walking corpse, kept alive by nothing more than the determination to push on.

Swathed in thick clothes and with his face covered, he wore a stout rope around his waist, running out behind him to a sled covered with a tarpaulin thick with ice and snow. When I called out for him to stop, the man kept coming, stopping only when his head was just a few inches from the barrel of my gun. He spoke one word before dropping to his knees. He said, 'Please.'

I followed the man's movement, keeping the weapon pointed at his head, but the stranger remained as he was, as if in prayer, with his head bowed and his shoulders slumped.

When he finally looked up at me through the narrow gap in his coverings, I could see there was almost no life in his eyes.

I lowered the rifle a fraction and the man spoke again. 'Thank God,' he said, and fell face first into the snow at my feet.

I waited for a moment, then released my finger from the trigger and prodded the man's back with the rifle barrel. There was give in his clothing, as if the man beneath was thinner than he appeared to be. I shoved him again, but he didn't move, so I raised a hand to Viktor, hoping he could still see me despite the fall of snow in the air.

I turned the man onto his back and worked my fingers through his clothing to find the skin of his neck so I could feel for a pulse.

‘Is he dead?’ Viktor asked when he arrived at my side.

I shook my head. ‘Not yet. Check the sled.’

Viktor went to the sled while I put my hands under the man’s armpits and prepared to drag him.

‘Anything?’ My voice was almost lost to the wind when I called out. I looked back to see Viktor standing with a corner of the tarpaulin in his fingers, lifted so he could look beneath.

Viktor spoke without turning in my direction, his shrouded face angled down towards what was concealed beneath the waterproof covering. His voice was muffled. ‘I think you should see this.’

I released my grip on the stranger and went over, stopping as soon as I saw the children lying on the sled. Immediately I looked away, lifting my eyes to the barren trees. But I didn’t see the black branches. Instead I saw the image of the children fixed in my mind, as if they had been burned into my thoughts. It had been a long time since I had seen anything like it, and it probed at my darkest memories like the tip of a hot needle.

I took a deep breath and hardened myself, prepared myself to look once more. And when I was ready, I turned back to them.

The boy’s hair was as black as the winter night that moved through the trees, and his head was turned so that, were he alive, he would have been looking to the right side of the sled. But this boy saw nothing because his eyes were dry and dead and stared at only whatever comes after death.

Accompanying him on the sled was a girl. Her hair was long, frozen hard against her face and neck so her features were less visible. She was lying on her back, staring wide-eyed through the stiff strands of tangled hair. Her small, undernourished body was naked and pale, and I estimated she was no more than ten or eleven years old, just a few years older than my own daughter. There was a long and wide laceration from the top of her thigh to just above the knee. From one side to the other. The whole of the front of her thigh had been removed so the white of the bone was visible.

I had seen many wounds, but few like this. Wars did not

fashion violence in this way. I was accustomed to the ragged shredding of explosions and the punctured flesh left by bullets, but these cuts were clean. Precise. And whenever I had seen injuries like these, they had been made with much darker intent than that of soldiers fighting soldiers.

‘Papa?’ Viktor’s voice cut into my thoughts. ‘What happened to them?’

I glanced at my son and shook my head.

‘So what do we do?’

I went back to the man lying in the snow and crouched beside him, staring down into his face, wondering who he was and why he had come here. ‘This man is dying,’ I said. ‘He needs our help. We should get him back.’

‘You mean take him back to the village? Is that safe? He might—’

‘If we leave him here he’ll die. Do you want that?’

‘And what about them?’ Viktor inclined his head towards the children. ‘What do we do with them?’

‘We take them with us.’

Together, we pulled the man aboard the sled, mindful of the terrible cargo hidden beneath the tarpaulin. I hitched the reins around my waist and leaned my weight forward as we began the trek home. Soon my legs were burning with fatigue. I wasn’t getting younger, and my muscles were weakened by age and circumstance. I had lived just less than half a century and my bones and muscles were feeling the strain of the wear I’d forced on them.

Once we peaked the summit of the low hill, we could see Vyriv nestling in the shallow valley below, and as we began to descend, we saw smoke trailing and could already feel the warmth and the light the homes held within.

We moved into the village of only twenty or so buildings, many of which were now unoccupied. Some people had left because they couldn’t cope with the hardship, thinking life would be better in the cities, and some had moved on to Karkhiv

or Kiev, others hoping to enter Russia. And there were those who had gone west, looking for Poland, going back to the place where I had fought not fifteen years ago when General Brusilov led the Russian army into disaster in Galicia. But now the country was being closed off. There was no way out.

Last year the government introduced collectivisation, and defined the kulak. The use of labour, ownership, the sale of surplus goods – these were all signs of a kulak. Any man who could afford to feed himself and his family was to give his property over to the state, and when people resisted in numbers, Stalin declared war on us and his great machine swept across the country, liquidating, collectivising and appropriating. Homes and possessions and people all now belonged to the state, leaving only three fates for the kulak – death, deportation or the labour camp.

It was as if we were simply waiting for execution or the march to the trains. We lived in constant fear of the soldiers' arrival; of being forced into wagons and taken north to Siberia, south to Kazakhstan, packed so tight our feet wouldn't touch the wooden floor. And already there were signs of hunger like there had been before the famine of 1921.

For those of us who still lived in Vyriv, there was nothing left but a slim hope of survival; a small chance to avoid starvation if we kept our heads bowed and remained there, unnoticed in the valley for as long as possible.

'What do you think?' asked Viktor as we walked. 'Where's he from? I mean, there's nobody close. Uroz is the closest and that's more than a day's walk in this weather. And what do you think happened to *them*?' He looked over at the shape of the tarpaulin. A range of hills in miniature, hiding something unspeakable beneath. 'You think some kind of animal did that?'

'Some kind.' I kept my head down, staring at the ground beneath my feet.

'Wolves?'

'No.'

Viktor sighed, his broad shoulders rising high as he drew air

into his lungs. ‘You think a person did it, don’t you? I’m old enough to know the truth.’

I lifted my head and stared at my son, and Viktor stared back as my equal. Viktor was wilful and determined, like me. He had inherited my obstinacy and, as he grew older, he was learning to apply it. ‘Yes, I think the wounds are man-made.’

‘It looks . . . well, it looks like an animal.’

‘That was no animal. The cuts are too clean.’

‘No. I mean it looks like when you butcher an animal. When you take off the meat.’

‘I’ve seen something like this before.’ I swallowed hard. ‘There are people,’ I said. ‘Desperate people who’ll do anything to survive. Hungry people. There were times – during the wars and the famine – when people would eat whatever they could. And there are bad people too, Viktor; people who’ve forgotten what it is to be human.’

Viktor shook his head and ran a hand across his mouth. ‘You think that man did that so he could . . . ?’

‘I don’t know. Him, someone else, I don’t know.’

‘But they’re *children*. Is it safe to take him with us? What do you—’

‘I don’t know,’ I cut him short. ‘Wait until he can tell us himself.’

3

The heart of the village was a circular area now covered with snow that had drifted into the shallow valley on a bitter wind. And in the centre an oak stood old and hard and dark, unclothed for the winter. I had no idea what this village elder had witnessed through the years of war and revolution, but I knew this small collection of houses, close to nowhere, had seen little of the bloodshed. The fighting on the eastern front had been far enough from here, and the revolution had happened in another world. The civil war had ridden past Vyriv, not noticing the tiny village crouched in the dip of the land. I had passed it myself without realising; marching down to the Crimea, the Black Army advancing to defeat another that called itself White. Even the famine of ten years ago had barely managed to rake its fingers across this small village. It was as if God turned the heads of men who passed it, so they looked away to the horizon. But the clouds were darkening now, and our great leader had dispatched his eyes and his ears to scour the land, and perhaps even God wouldn't be able to blind those eyes.

For now the oak stood silent, refusing to give up its secrets, and as I passed it a thin memory of the summer came to me. A *bayan* accordion and a violin playing together, music drifting in the warm air. The women in their best dresses, singing to the breeze.

Close to the centre of the village, my home stood with open wooden gates hinged to a broken fence erected to define ownership in a past that allowed it. In more recent times it had become something to fall into disrepair or else it might denote the presence of a kulak.

As we made our way through the gate, dragging the sled, we saw shutters opening and cracks appearing in doorways as curious eyes looked out into the oncoming night.

We went to the front of the house and I unhitched myself and banged hard on the front door. 'It's us.'

Bolts were drawn back, and the door opened.

Natalia's cheeks were red and her dark eyes were worried. 'What's going on? Are you all right? Where's Viktor?' Petro was standing behind her, holding a knife. My daughter Lara was by the table, her cousin Dariya beside her. Both girls looked excited and afraid at the same time.

'Everything's fine,' I said, pulling down my scarf. 'There's a man, though; he needs our help.'

'A man?'

'We need to get him inside.' I looked over Natalia's shoulder at my daughter and her cousin. 'What's Dariya doing here? She should be at home.' Dariya was a year younger than Lara, just eight years old, but she was bold and inquisitive, not afraid to speak her mind.

'And miss this?' Dariya said, coming forward. 'It's the most exciting thing to happen in years. Everything's so boring.' She was a little taller than Lara, despite being younger, and her manner was more confident. She had dark hair braided on either side, the plaits reaching her shoulders. She wore them so they fell across her chest.

'Boring is how we like it,' Natalia told her. 'Boring is good.'

'Boring is boring,' Lara said.

'You've been listening to your cousin too much.' Natalia nodded to me and beckoned with her hands, telling me to bring the man into the house.

So Viktor and I lifted him between us and carried him to the door while Natalia snatched up some blankets and cushions and put them by the fire.

'Put him here,' she said. 'It's the warmest place. There's a little food; you think he'll eat?'

‘I don’t think he’ll do much of anything.’ We put him down and watched Natalia cover him with blankets.

‘Who is he?’ Dariya asked, squatting beside the man and peering into what she could see of his face. She put out a finger and poked him, but Natalia caught her hand and pulled her away.

‘Did you bring meat?’ she asked. ‘We have some mushroom soup, a little milk and oats, but, like this, a man needs meat.’

We set our rifles by the door and Viktor went for the rabbit we’d snared, coming back and handing it to his mother, holding it up by the ears.

‘This is it? A small rabbit? I send my husband and twin sons to find meat and they bring me one small rabbit and another mouth to feed?’ She took it in her fist and held it up to inspect it. ‘How do I feed a family with one rabbit?’

‘We have potatoes,’ I said. ‘A few beets.’

‘And not much else.’

‘Be thankful. The activists come here, we’ll have nothing.’

‘One rabbit.’ She shook her head and turned her attention back to the man.

‘Petro, stay with your mother.’ I touched Viktor’s shoulder, indicating he should come with me.

‘I can help you, Papa.’ Petro came forward but I shook my head.

‘I said stay with your mother.’ I looked at Petro for a moment, softening my expression, but my son tightened his jaw and turned away. I sighed and stepped outside, pulling the door closed.

There were one or two men standing by their homes now, armed with pitchforks and sticks, and I knew they’d be worried about Petro’s warning, wondering if men had finally come to take their belongings. Sticks and farm implements would be no match for the rifles of a Red Army unit, but some of the men would fight with their bare hands if they had to.

I told Viktor to let them know everything was safe. ‘But don’t mention what’s under there.’ I glanced back at the sled. ‘Don’t tell them what else we found.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t want to scare them. They’re scared enough already.’

Viktor nodded, and when the men saw him approach, they began to wander out to meet him. I waited until there was a group of them, clustered in the twilight, then I went back into the house and closed the door behind me.

The room was small but it was large enough for one family. There was a table and a *pich* – the clay oven where Natalia did her cooking. There was a woven mat in front of the fire, a couple of chairs to soak the heat, and above the fire an *obraz* hung on the clay wall. The icon was unremarkable, just paint and wood, an image of the Virgin embracing her child. It had been in Natalia’s family for as long as she remembered, and the last time it had been taken from its position was when her mother lay dying, outliving her husband by just a few weeks, and she had held it in her fingers while she breathed her last.

The *rushnyk* draped over the top of the icon had also been in its place for many years because we’d had no reason to take it down. Before the revolution, the *rushnyk* was always on the table, put out to welcome guests. The colour of the embroidered flowers on the towel was a rich and deep red, and the family would display it with pride and put out bread and salt as an offering for visitors. But now it gathered dust and the flowers had faded. No one visited any more. No one trusted anyone now.

Already, Natalia had discarded the man’s scarf, opening his jacket and removing the clothing that would become damp now he was inside where it was warm. What I could see of his face was bright red, the blood resurrecting in his veins, but his cheeks and his chin were covered with a thick matting of beard that hid his mouth from view. The hair was clotted together in places, twisted and clumped.

‘I’ll have to take everything off him,’ Natalia said, looking up when I came in. Petro was standing beside her, still holding his knife, reluctant to let it go. Lara was sitting in one of the comfortable chairs, squeezed beside her cousin Dariya, both of them watching the man with curiosity. Lara jumped down and

came over to me, putting her arms around my waist and holding herself tight against me. I leaned down to kiss her hair.

‘Who is he, Papa?’ she asked.

‘Is he one of *them*?’ Dariya said. ‘A twenty-five-thousander?’

Natalia and I shared a glance over the top of Lara’s head.

‘Where have you heard that?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. Someone was talking,’ Dariya said. ‘Some of the men.’

‘And you were listening in? There’s a word for children like that,’ Natalia told her.

‘They said they’re coming to take our land, is that right?’ Dariya asked.

Word had reached the village about the party activists. Twenty-five thousand young communists dispatched by Stalin, bringing with them the ranks of the Red Army and the political police, spreading out across the country, searching for anything of value, anything that could sustain life. Already there had been word of other villages garrisoned and occupied, families broken.

‘That’s not for you to worry about,’ I said. ‘You let the adults think about that.’

‘But when are they coming?’

‘Perhaps they won’t come at all,’ Natalia told her. But we knew they would reach Vyriv eventually. It was inevitable that some time soon the soldiers would look down into the shallow valley and see the smallholdings, and the purge would come.

‘But Papa said—’

‘Enough, Dariya,’ Natalia stopped her. ‘We have other things to think about right now.’

‘You need to go home.’ I went to where Dariya was sitting and squatted in front of the chair. ‘Your mama and papa will be worried about you.’

‘Please, Uncle Luka.’

I shook my head.

Dariya pouted, but when I tickled her ribs she laughed and knew she was beaten. I went to the door with her and waited for

her to put on her boots before letting her out. 'Straight home,' I told her as she ran out into the cold.

I watched her go, then closed the door and headed to the room where we slept.

It was dark in there, but I could see well enough to find the chest of drawers that had once been white but was now a greyish colour. I opened the bottom drawer and looked at the few clothes folded into neat piles. Lara had one dress, the one she was wearing now, and there was another in here, ready for her when she grew into it. Beside it there were some clothes my boys had outgrown long ago, in a time when I hadn't even known their faces; a time of bloodshed and filth.

I picked up a shirt, the material worn so thin I could barely feel it between my hardened fingers. There was still use in the clothes, but I needed something and they could be spared, so I took a pair of trousers to go with the shirt, tucked them both inside my coat, then slipped back into the adjoining room.

As I headed to the front door, Natalia spoke to me, asking, 'Where are you going?'

She was leaning over the man by the fire. Lara was beside her, taking his clothes as her mother passed them back to her. He was wrapped in many layers, each one a surprise, as if, when they had all been peeled back, the man beneath would be nothing but a skeleton robed in slack skin and matted hair.

'I have something to do,' I said. 'Outside.'

Natalia continued to watch me for a moment and I looked away so she couldn't read me. When our gaze met again, I knew she had seen something in my eyes, stored it in her memory, ready to bring it out at a more appropriate moment. I nodded once to her, an understanding passing between us, then forced a smile and turned to the front door.

Outside, I dragged the sled around to the small barn behind the house. The sky was heavy with cloud, the moon failing to do much more than break the odd patch, but the ground was white and reflected what little light there was.

Pulling the barn doors wide, the smell of animals came out on

a waft of warm air, and I hauled the sled inside. The cow watched from its stall, its dark eyes like glass.

I studied the tarpaulin, seeing its shape, knowing what was beneath the ice-encrusted material.

‘I can help,’ Viktor said, surprising me.

‘I didn’t hear you coming. You better close the doors,’ I told him.

While Viktor pulled the doors shut, I lit a lamp and hung it from a nail on one of the supports. ‘You spoke to the others,’ I said.

Viktor came back and pulled down his scarf. ‘They wanted to see him, but I told them to wait until tomorrow.’

‘And they listened to you?’

‘Of course.’

I showed my son a rueful smile. ‘They listen to you. It’s good.’

Viktor gestured in the direction of the sled. ‘What are you going to do?’

I replied by taking the clothes from beneath my coat. ‘I need to cover her.’

‘You want me to do it?’ Viktor asked.

‘We’ll do it together.’

Viktor hesitated before reaching down to take the corner of the tarpaulin and peel it back. I took the corner nearest to me and did the same, both of us moving the length of the sled so we could draw back the covering and whip it off.

I had to force myself to look at what lay beneath.