

Rawdy

Wallop! Red hair flies backwards. *Hard ground!* Air wheezes from lungs.

Dizzying eardrums.

Panting gasps to breathe again. Muscles shiver. Ears pop.

Faint screams in the distance. A siren is wailing.

What's happening? Lying flat! She feels her fingers. Her right arm taps her waist, then her legs. All there. *Trembling, but no pain.* Spattered with clingy dirt. *Yuk!*

Blurry vision. Gloomy grey daylight.

She rolls her head, side to side. Eyes adjust. Shredded trees. Debris everywhere. Walls on houses pushed inwards. *Stunning! Think!*

Oleg! Where's Oleg? She struggles to lift herself onto one shaky elbow.

At the end of the street, smoke rises from a blast site. *Not another one!*
There had been no warning.

Her safety bunker is on the other side of that crater.

This western town, near the Moldovan border, should be so safe from enemy attack – far from the fighting areas in the east. She shakes her head.

‘Rawdy! Dopomozhyē meni!’ a muffled voice calls. *Rawdy! Help me!*

Born with bright red hair, she has always stood out. She was called Anastasia at birth, but Rawdy – the slang name for a red-head – has stuck since her school days. Now, still in her teens, she carries a first-aid kit strapped to her hip and, in daylight hours, she moves between the cellars to care for the injured.

No longer teased about her difference, Rawdy knows she is valued for her tireless treatment skills as the suffering rises in a town of women, children, old men, wounded fighters and ... a scarcity of doctors.

Oleg? Oleg is twenty – handsome, charming. He has returned to recuperate from the fighting in the east. Damaged by shrapnel, he still limps from healing leg injuries but he has volunteered to help Rawdy today, if needed.

She sees him now, lying metres away – motionless, bleeding – under some broken timber.

She crawls on all fours to him. ‘Oleg!’

Oh, no! She shakes him; feels for a neck pulse – but he’s clearly dead; gaping rear skull wound. The siren wails on. *He was only trying to help!*

‘Rawdy!’

The cry is coming from nearby, beneath a semi-collapsed wall. Rawdy breathes deep and juts her chin. No time for weakness. She has a job to do.

‘Rawdy!’

She pulls herself up onto her jittery legs and stumbles forward, bent over, to the source of the familiar voice. Carefully moving the debris, she starts to uncover her relieved former schoolmate, Daria.

‘Spasibo, Rawdy.’ *Thank you, Rawdy.*

Daria is covered in dust, pinned by the legs, and blood is congealing on her forehead. She is a bunker-runner too, checking on the old people, bringing them food, water and comfort.

‘Oleg?’ Daria asks, glancing around. Only moments before, they’d all been together – catching up on any news to be relayed around the cellars.

‘Dead!’ Rawdy shakes her head with a steely numbness, as she slowly heaves a wooden door frame off Daria’s legs. ‘Where’s the pain?’

Daria, shuddering at yet another good life lost, manages to focus and say, ‘Left leg. How does it look?’

‘Broken probably.’ Rawdy feels for a break. ‘Not bleeding. There?’

Daria yelps. ‘Yes’.

‘I’ll find something for a splint, tidy your forehead and get you to our bunker. A visiting doctor is due there sometime today.’

Another explosion booms like thunder through the plaintive siren call.

‘Fuck those Russians!’

Rawdy supports the splinted Daria as the two stagger, searching for a way around the missile crater. Most pathways are too obstructed for a teenager with a broken leg.

The siren suddenly stops – then starts again, as if begging to be heard.

Round a debris pile, they stop – startled.

A small dust-covered girl – perhaps three or four years old – stands silent, wide eyes staring. Her thick red woollen coat is full of grime – the collar raised up to her curly dark hair. Her eyes quietly plead.

‘De Mama?’ Rawdy asks. *Where’s Mama?*

Even with Rawdy’s cuddle, the girl still makes no sound.

The now three hugging figures clamber on, over the shattered piles and round the crater, praying that those in the bunker will be found safe.

One entrance is clearly blocked by a fallen house wall.

They stumble their way round to the emergency entrance. Some rubble covers those downward steps, too. *Has the bunker survived this hell – with around twenty precious people inside, along with vital medical supplies?*

Daria sits cuddling the child while Rawdy removes the wreckage, one piece at a time, down to where the out-of-shape door is jammed by its buckled frame.

She bangs on the door and shouts to check for signs of life. A faint call and tapping is returned from inside. *How many are still alive, deeper into the bunker?*

The door will have to open inwards. Perhaps, it could be battered free from the outside. *Tools?* This needs more than one person.

Broken-legged Daria is comforting the four-year-old child.

Damn this war! Damn the Russians! Why, oh why?

‘Mama! Mama!’ Standing on the rubble pile, behind Daria, the child has called, pointed and started to slide down to the ground.

‘Anna,’ comes the answering call. Two new women rush toward the little girl. ‘Are you okay?’ The mother hugs her sobbing daughter. ‘Safe now!’

Smiling a gasp of relief to Rawdy and Daria, the panting mother says, ‘Caught heading to this bunker. Spasibo! What a blast that was. Bastards! I’m Sofia. This is Yulia and my daughter, Anna.’

Rawdy nods wearily and points, deadpan. ‘Need to batter the jammed door open. Can you help?’

Three strong women, wielding a solid timber strut, manage to bash part of the door inwards – after only thirty-seven exhausting blows – to the tired appreciative cheers of the bunker survivors.

‘We have more casualties,’ a survivor says. ‘We are waiting for a doctor!’

‘**I**m the doctor,’ Sofia says, wiping sweat from her brow. ‘We were trying to get here. Yulia’s my assistant. Let’s get to work.’

Why? Oh why is this madness happening?