

Turn the page for an exclusive look at

DEAD FALL

Coming soon from Emily Bestler Books

PROLOGUE

KHARKIV OBLAST, UKRAINE

The children ran for their lives. Those who could, fled into the woods. Those who couldn't—the smaller and the sickest among them—were forced to take up hiding places inside. The adults tried to convey calm, but it was wall-to-wall panic. And rightfully so. *The monsters were coming.*

In the basement of the abandoned Soviet-era tuberculosis hospital, via a decrepit passageway punctuated by broken light fixtures, rusted pipes, and puddles of fetid water, was the kitchen. And in that kitchen was the best answer the orphanage had been able to come up with for its most complicated problem.

An old pantry had been outfitted like a chicken coop. Its shelves had been taken over by wooden nesting-boxes pre-staged with bedding. The few blankets that could be spared had been tacked to the walls to help deaden any sound. A run-down refrigerator with a false back hid the entrance of the pantry from view.

Each of the infants inside had been given an emergency ration of formula. The toddlers, many of whom were suffering from colds and flu, had been given small pieces of bread soaked in tea and dabbed with a little bit of honey. Anything to keep them quiet. It was imperative that they maintain absolute silence.

With all able-bodied men at the front, the entirety of

the orphanage staff, save for its eighty-year-old custodian, was female. There was no one available to fight for them. They would have to look out for themselves.

Weeks' worth of discussions over what to do if this moment ever came had given birth to a plan. Everything about it—the running, the hiding—*all* of it, was extreme, but absolutely necessary. One of the vilest tendrils of the war was about to slither in and wrap itself around their throats.

The children had practiced taking deep, quiet breaths. Those with respiratory issues had been given pillows to cough into, but only as a last resort. Their hope for survival now rested not in their numbers but in their ability to remain invisible.

Anna Royko, who had been at the orphanage for only a few months, had insisted on taking watch. She was an American of Ukrainian descent.

Born and raised in Chicago, the twenty-five-year-old had been deeply affected by the suffering she had seen coming out of Ukraine. When news broke that the Russians had bombed a children's hospital and maternity ward in Mariupol, she could no longer sit by. She had to do something.

After emailing her resignation to the law firm where she worked, she booked a one-way ticket to Poland, as martial law had been declared in Ukraine and commercial air traffic had been suspended.

She spent a week knocking on doors and visiting various aid organizations across Warsaw before one finally took her onboard.

Though she had zero experience working for an NGO and even less experience operating in a war zone, it was her fluency in Ukrainian that proved too valuable to pass up.

The group that hired her was a small humanitarian

organization focused on getting much needed supplies to the hardest-hit orphanages throughout Ukraine. The position paid next to nothing, would require grueling hours, and was extremely dangerous. So much so, that there were reams of waivers she was required to sign.

The good they were doing was unquestionable, and so, keeping her inner lawyer in check, she moved rapidly through the paperwork. Signing and initialing where indicated, she started work the very same day.

What Anna saw on her first trip into Ukraine ripped her heart out. The misery, the desperation, the horrific conditions the children were living in . . . all of it. The only thing that gave her hope was the heroism of the adults who were risking everything to take care of them.

As the war ground on, the situations at the orphanages grew more dire. No matter how quickly she and her colleagues returned with supplies, there was never enough. It was like showing up as the *Titanic* was slipping under the icy water only to toss out pool noodles. Watching people slowly die, especially children, wasn't why she was there.

She had come to Ukraine to help ease people's suffering, if not to somehow reverse it. But when she and her team arrived at an orphanage for special-needs children in the southern city of Mykolaiv—halfway between Odessa and Kherson—something inside her snapped. The building had been bombed and completely destroyed.

As badly as the supplies from Poland were needed, being a glorified delivery driver was no longer enough for her. She had to do more.

Remembering a dilapidated orphanage in an old tuberculosis hospital in Eastern Ukraine, and the tirelessly dedicated women who ran it, she decided that was where she could make a difference. By focusing solely on

that location and the children within it, she could have the greatest possible impact.

Once she got to Kharkiv and had finished distributing supplies, she bid her stunned NGO colleagues goodbye.

As she walked across Freedom Square and disappeared from view, she tuned out their voices, which were begging her to reconsider, as well as warning that she was making a grave and likely deadly mistake. Anna didn't care.

At that moment, she had no clue how she would reach her newly decided upon destination, nor whether they would even accept her help. All she knew was that it was where she was being called to be.

When she finally made it to the orphanage's front doors, the pack with everything she owned slung across her back, everyone inside was shocked to see her.

Despite desperately needing an extra set of hands, they tried to discourage her from staying. They felt that by taking her in, they would somehow be depriving the other orphanages that had grown so dependent on her. Anna, however, would hear nothing of it.

Allowing her inner lawyer to come out, she informed the women that she knew they needed help and that she wouldn't take no for an answer. The staff was stuck with her, whether they liked it or not. Truth be told, they were thrilled to have her.

She was a breath of fresh air. The children loved her. And as the youngest member of the staff by at least fifteen years, Anna had reservoirs of energy that none of them could match. With so many children, so few resources, and such an old building, there was always something that needed doing. No matter what the task, she was always the first to volunteer.

Which was what had brought her to the present moment—acting as the orphanage's official lookout.

In each of the designated hiding places, the children needed at least one adult with them. Since Anna knew the building like the back of her hand, was a runner who worked out daily, and could move from room to room and floor to floor quickly, everyone knew she was the best choice. She was also, the staff believed, fearless.

In their minds, based on the characters they watched on TV, most American women were fiercely independent and didn't take shit from anyone. Throw in being an attorney, and it took Anna's badassery in their eyes to a whole different level.

But it was one particular incident that had cemented her reputation at the orphanage as someone that you didn't want to mess with.

Shortly after her arrival, a group of three men had shown up in the middle of the night attempting to "secure" the building's generator for the "war effort." Not only were they wearing track suits and gold jewelry, but they were also remarkably drunk.

The most likely explanation was that they were a mafia contingent, roaming the region, stealing whatever would fetch a good price on the black market. Anna had been determined not to let that happen.

When one of them tried to intimidate her by pulling a knife and saying that he was going to rape her, she kned him in the groin, grabbed a fistful of his hair and pressed her own knife—one she had been carrying since arriving in Ukraine—against his throat.

His cohorts were shocked, knocked off balance by how quickly she had taken control. It lasted for only a moment. Soon enough, the duo had regained their composure and were gaming out their next move. The men didn't believe she'd harm their associate.

When they advanced, however, Anna didn't waver.

She pressed the blade deeper into the man's fleshy neck and kept going, even after she drew blood.

As the front of his shirt began to stain a deep red, the other men froze, once again unsure of how to proceed.

Anna told her captive to drop his knife, which he did, and she kicked it to the side.

There was only one message she wanted to get across to these scumbags—that this orphanage was more trouble than it was worth and that they shouldn't ever bother coming back.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the custodian, who lived on the edge of the property, had shown up, shotgun in hand.

With backup on scene and her message delivered, Anna released her captive, giving the thug a shove in the direction of his comrades.

Watching them back off toward their vehicle, she offered one last piece of advice—that they find their man a hospital with a staff who knew what they were doing. None of the local butchers would be able to sew up the wound she had carved into the man's neck. If they didn't quickly head for one of the bigger cities and get him properly taken care of, the artery was going to rupture, and he was going to bleed out.

It was a lie. Bluster. She hadn't cut him anywhere near his artery. But all that had mattered was that the would-be thieves believed it. And by the looks on their faces, they had. The men left and never came back.

Fast-forward to now and the orphanage was dealing with a whole new threat. Russian soldiers had been spotted on the outskirts of town.

They were moving from house to house. Scavenging. The stories of their looting were legion. Microwaves, winter clothing, washers and dryers . . . there had even been reports of the soldiers' removing the bal-

listic plates from their tactical vests and inserting laptops and tablets they had stolen along the way. Their thievery, however, wasn't the worst of the conduct they had become known for.

Kidnap, rape, torture, and murder were what Ukrainians feared the most. Anyone was fair game for the Russians—not just women and girls, but men and little boys as well. They were barbaric.

The evil flowed straight from Moscow. Russian soldiers had not only been encouraged to commit sexual assaults, but they had even been issued Viagra.

The Russians were known to raid a village and stay for days, carrying out their horrors via round-the-clock shifts. The word *nightmare* didn't even begin to describe the abominations they so zealously perpetrated.

These terrors had become the orphanage staff's worst fear—that the children, whose care and protection had been entrusted to them, might be subject to such unspeakable crimes.

It was why they had worked so hard to develop their plan—the children who could run, would run. The rest would hide. And then everyone would pray. Everyone that is, except Anna. She didn't have time for prayer.

Someone had suggested that they make the orphanage look deserted, as if it hadn't been occupied in years, but it simply wasn't feasible. The best they could hope to do was to make it look like everyone had fled. And the final touches of that plan fell to Anna.

After making sure that the remaining children and adults were secreted away in their hiding places, she moved hastily through the building, ticking off her checklist.

All the lights needed to be shut off, along with the boiler. Any remaining coats or boots near the front doors needed to be hidden. What little medicine and first aid

supplies they had needed to be gathered up and tucked away for safekeeping.

Her sweep through the facility didn't have to be perfect, it just had to be convincing.

The Russians were used to people fleeing in advance of their arrival. So long as that appeared to be what had happened here, everything—the orphanage staff hoped—would be okay.

Moving from room to room, her heart pounding, Anna focused on what she had to do.

Contrary to how her colleagues saw her, she wasn't fearless. Only stupid people were fearless in the face of danger. She was, actually, quite afraid, but the orphanage had become her home and all the souls within it her family.

She often thought of one of the quotes her sixth-grade teacher in Chicago had taped to the wall behind her desk. It was from Winston Churchill. "Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision."

And so, as she had on the night of the attempted generator theft, Anna had made a decision. Though she was scared, she would exhibit courage on behalf of the people and the place that she had grown to care so deeply about.

With the dark brown hair of her ponytail bouncing against the back of her neck, she hurriedly completed her check of the building and then moved to the window that would serve as her lookout position.

It killed her that they hadn't been able to hide all of the orphanage's food. Once the soldiers had discovered the kitchen, they were going to abscond with quite a bounty. There was no telling how the staff would ever replenish their stocks. So many of the items they depended on had gone from scarce to absolutely nonexistent. Even once everyday items like butter and eggs had become luxuries.

Peering out the window, Anna focused on the bare

branches of the perfectly spaced trees that lined the driveway up to the former hospital. The contrast between the ugly Communist architecture and the facility's thoughtful grounds had fascinated her from her very first visit. Even under the brutal yoke of the Soviets, the Ukrainians had still found opportunities for artistic expression and ways to quietly nourish beauty.

Sadly, that was no longer the case. Ever since the Russian invasion, Ukrainians had been focused on one thing—survival.

Anna's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by bursts of machine-gun fire, which drew her attention toward the village.

Peering through a pair of cracked binoculars that the custodian had scrounged up, she could see a column of three military vehicles approaching. Each of them had been painted with a large, white "Z."

Many Russian officials claimed that the letter was an abbreviation of the phrase "For victory," while others—with a straight face—said that it was meant to represent the expression "For peace." The Ukrainians, however, had their own definitions.

In Ukraine, the Z symbol was referred to either as the *Zwastika*—a reference to the Nazi swastika—or as the *Zieg*, a play on the Hitler salute, *Sieg Heil*.

As the column moved through the village, the men in the vehicles kept wildly firing their guns. What they were shooting at, Anna had no idea. She couldn't see a soul. Anyone in their right mind had either fled or was in hiding.

The hope at the orphanage was that the men would just keep moving, but as soon as Anna saw one of the vehicles peel off and head up the hospital's driveway, she knew that wasn't going to be the case. It was time to relay the situation to the others.

Moving rapidly through the halls, she used a wrench to tap on the pipes to transmit her message.

All the staff, along with all of the children who were old enough to understand, now knew that the men had arrived and that no one must make a sound until Anna had given the all clear.

Slipping into her hiding spot, it was finally Anna's time to pray, which she did, fervently.

She asked God to protect everyone in the building, as well as the older children who had run off to hide in a cave deep within the woods.

Once her prayers were said, all she could do was wait and hold her breath. As it turned out, she didn't have to wait long.

Six horrifying men entered the building. Their heads were shaved and their faces had been painted to resemble skulls. They carried hatchets and long, curved knives that looked like something butchers might use.

Because the building had obviously been a hospital at one point, their first target was the dispensary. They wanted anything they could get their hands on—morphine, amphetamines, barbiturates, it didn't matter. The dispensary, however, turned out to be a dry hole. Every cabinet and every drawer had long been cleared out.

With no drugs to be found, they swept the offices, searching everywhere for bottles of alcohol or anything else of value. Once again, they came up empty.

Moving deeper into the building, they eventually discovered what the old hospital was currently being used for. Next to drugs and booze, their favorite spoils were women and children.

Running through the halls, the ghouls began squealing like little pigs and singing a Russian folk song, *Oysya, Ti Oysya*.

“I won’t touch you,” the deviants sang, “don’t worry. Oysya, you Oysya, don’t be afraid of me.”

From her hiding spot, Anna could hear them getting closer. And even though she didn’t speak Russian, the singing made her blood run cold.

At some point, the pack decided to split up and fan out in different directions. A man coming toward her started howling like a wolf. He was either high or insane. Perhaps he was both. Anna didn’t care. She just wanted them gone.

Frozen in place, she listened as he scuttled past. The scent of body odor wafting off him was so rancid that she almost gagged and gave herself away. Thankfully, she kept it together.

Straining her ears, she waited for the man to turn down the next hallway, but he didn’t. Instead, he came to a stop. She could feel that he was looking at something, studying it. Intuitively, she knew exactly what it was.

In front of the main staircase leading down to the kitchen, Anna had shoved a bookcase. Around it, she had strewn trash and a few pieces of broken furniture. It was a less-than-optimal camouflage job, but it had been the only thing they could come up with.

A few seconds later, she heard the bookcase being scraped across the floor. *The fiend was pushing it away from the wall!*

It was followed by the sound of his footsteps bounding down the stairs two at a time. *He was headed for the kitchen.*

Soon enough, a series of loud crashing and banging sounds began. She could hear the invader overturning baker’s racks and shelving units. It sounded like nothing more than wanton vandalism—destruction for destruction’s sake. *Or was it?*

As another terrible thought entered her mind, her

blood once again ran cold. *Could the bookcase at the top of the stairs have given him reason to believe that something else might be hidden in the kitchen?*

She had no way of knowing, but the fear gripped Anna so tightly that she could barely breathe. The bookcase had been *her* idea.

Regardless of what his motivation was, if this savage was intent on tearing the kitchen apart piece by piece, the odds were that he was going to uncover the infants and other children hiding in the pantry.

She couldn't let that happen. And while she knew it was insane, beyond insane, actually, she *had* to do something.

Against all the advice she had given her colleagues regarding *not* leaving their hiding places until after the threat had passed, she left hers.

Careful not to make any noise, she moved through the hallway and crept down the stairs, her knife clasped tightly in her hand. She had no idea how she was going to handle the situation, only that it needed to be handled, and there was no one else but her.

With the sound of each broken dish or smashed cabinet, she flinched, but kept going. She had never been so terrified in all her life.

Drawing nearer to the kitchen, she took a deep breath and paused. *This was it.* Exhaling, she peered around the edge of the doorway into the kitchen. There, amid the destruction, she could see the Russian beast.

He had laid his hatchet on the counter and was focused on the old refrigerator, which was obscuring the entrance to the pantry. *Had he figured it out?*

If he hadn't yet, Anna was certain that he was about to. And once he had discovered the children and staff hiding on the other side, there was no telling what horrors he would unleash.

She had to come up with a plan—right now, right here—before any of the other monsters joined him in the basement. She was going to get only one chance.

She didn't want to tangle with the man, not physically, not if she didn't have to. There was no telling what kind of psychotic tricks he might have up his sleeve. She had heard the grisly tales of Russians carrying straight razors in order to disfigure their victims once they'd had their way with them. She had no intention of becoming a victim.

The key to successfully overcoming the soldier was to use the element of surprise to her advantage. At the same time, she needed to keep as much distance between them as possible. Doing a fast scan of the kitchen, she locked on to an idea.

The only question remaining was whether she could fully launch her attack before the ghoul had a chance to react. There was only one way to find out.

Taking a final, deep breath, she counted down from three, slid through the doorway and into the kitchen.

What she wouldn't have given at this moment for a gun and the knowledge of how to use it. Instead, she would have to rely on active shooter training she had received at her law firm back in Chicago.

The instructor, an ex-Green Beret, had based his workshop on the Run, Hide, Fight formula and had spent most of his time focusing on the Fight component. As Anna crept toward the fire extinguisher, she was grateful for everything the Special Forces operative had taught her. She only wished she had heeded his advice about regularly checking to make sure the extinguisher was up to date.

Not that it would have mattered. With all the bombs and missiles that had been falling on Ukraine, fresh fire extinguishers were simply another unicorn of the war—something rumored to exist but impossible to find.

With her heart thumping in her chest, she chose her steps as carefully, as quickly, and as quietly as she could. She made her way across the side of the kitchen and successfully removed the extinguisher from the wall. Pulling the pin, she headed toward the man who was still, thankfully, preoccupied with the fridge.

She was almost on top of him, when something caused the Russian to spin. The moment he caught sight of her, he lunged for his hatchet.

Anna had no idea if she was close enough to blind him with the fog of the extinguisher, but she had no other choice. The moment had arrived, and she squeezed the handle, deploying an enormous cloud.

Though the extinguisher was seriously out of date, there was just enough pressure to do the job.

While the demon couldn't see, Anna had pinpointed his location and knew exactly where he was standing.

Raising the extinguisher, she charged and used all of her strength to bring the cylinder crashing down against the man's head.

It was a death blow. Anna had succeeded in cracking open the ghoul's skull and spilling his brains onto the kitchen floor as his lifeless body collapsed.

The mixture of fear and adrenaline only made her heart pound harder in her chest. There was no time to catch her breath or reassess the situation. There was only time to act. At some point, which she had to assume would be sooner rather than later, the monster's colleagues would be looking for him. Eventually, they would make their way to the basement. She now needed an entirely new plan.

But before she could react, she heard someone step into the kitchen and cock a pistol.

