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Opening Extract from...

Red Winter

Written by Dan Smith

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RED WINTER

Dan Smith



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1

The village cowered with doors closed and windows shuttered. The street was empty. The cold air was quiet.

Kashtan sidestepped beneath me, shaking her head and blowing hard through flared nostrils. I leaned forward and rubbed her neck. 'You feel it too, girl?'

There should have been voices. A dog barking. Women coming in from the field. There should have been children, but I heard only the wind in the forest behind and the murmur of the river before me.

I stayed in the trees and watched the village, but nothing moved.

'You think they're hiding from us?' I spoke to my brother. 'Or do you think . . . ?' I stared at the back of his head and let my words trail away. 'I promised to get you home, Alek. Look.' I raised my eyes once more and studied the log-built *izbas* across the river. 'Home.' But there was no light in any of the windows.

Kashtan moved again, something making her uneasy.

'Come on.' I nudged her forward into the water. 'Let's have a look.'

I knew I should have waited until dark, but I'd been travelling a long time. For days we had kept to the trees to avoid the colourful armies that had battled over our country in civil war since the revolution, and now the people from my dreams needed to be made real. I had to reassure myself that my family wasn't an illusion; that I hadn't imagined them just to give everything a purpose.

Somewhere a crow called into the darkening afternoon and I

snatched my head up in the direction of the sound. For a moment I saw nothing; then a black shape rose from the bare fingers of the tallest tree behind the houses. It wheeled and dived, skimming the wooden roofs before it passed over me and disappeared from view.

I took one hand from the reins and rested it on my thigh, close to the revolver in my pocket. The mare faltered, reluctant to enter the cold river, but I encouraged her into the shallows, where she struggled to find her footing on the stones below. I pressed her on until my boots were soaked through, but as the water swelled round my knees, leaching my warmth and carrying it away towards the lake, Kashtan tossed her head and stopped in the deepest part as if she had come to an unseen barrier. She wanted to turn, to be away from here. She had scented something that troubled her.

'What is it?' I said, looking at Alek, but he gave no answer. 'Come on, girl.' I spurred Kashtan into motion. 'Don't give up on me now.'

We came out onto the bank close to the windmill and passed beneath the sails, leaving a dark, wet trail in our wake. Kashtan's hooves were hollow on the hardened dirt of the track, and her breathing was heavy, the two sounds falling into rhythm as we walked between the *izbas* and onto the road cutting through the village.

Once there, we stopped and waited, the cold air biting at my legs.

'Hello?'

My voice was dead and out of place.

'Hello? It's us. Nikolai and . . .'

I waited a while longer, watching, but nothing stirred, so I swung my leg over and dismounted. The sound was abrasive in the silence, and as soon as I was down, I stopped still, listening. I scanned the houses, wondering if anyone was watching me from the hush behind the closed doors. I glanced back at the forest, the trees black against the bruised sky, and thought perhaps I had been too eager to leave its protection. I had spent many days in

there and now I felt exposed. But although it had hidden me well, the forest was a forbidding place that made it easy to believe in demons.

'Hello?' I called again, but still there was no answer. Doors and windows remained closed. 'It's Nikolai and Alek Levitsky.' My voice was flat and without echo. 'You can come out. We won't harm you.'

With a deepening sense of unease, I drew my revolver and led Kashtan to my home, moving slowly. I hitched the reins round the fence and put a hand to her muzzle. 'Stay here,' I whispered, before forcing myself to look up at Alek. 'I'll come back for you in a minute,' I told him. 'We're home now.'

The front door was closed but unbolted. It yielded to my first push, opening in to the gloom inside.

'Marianna?'

The click of my boot heels was obtrusive on the wooden floor. I took a deep breath, expecting the smell of home, but instead there was something else. Not explicit, but a faint smell of decay that lingered in my nostrils.

'Marianna?'

I had imagined the *pich* would be alight – the clay oven was the heart of our home, the place to cook, and the source of heat in winter. There would be bread baking in its furnace. Marianna would be smiling at Pavel, who would be playing with the little wooden figures my father had carved for me when I was a boy. Our eldest son, Misha, would be carrying logs in from outside. I had hoped for the warmth of a fire on an early winter evening, the faint lilt of a *garmoshka* being played in one of the other *izbas*.

But I found none of those things. No warmth. No life. Nothing.

The house was empty.

2

I stood for a long time in the half-darkness of my home. I called their names – Marianna's and the boys' – but no one came. The *pich* remained cold, and the house remained empty.

River water ran from me, dripping onto the floor, leaving a stain round my feet. The drips were the only sound and it felt for a moment as if this was another of my dreams. Perhaps I hadn't reached home at all but was still beneath some grotesque tree in the forest, sheltering from the weather under its twisted branches, hiding from those who would see me dead. Or perhaps this was only a nightmare of what I thought I might find when I returned home.

But I knew it was real. The cold told me that. The *fear* told me that.

The weak sun of approaching winter had dropped by the time I forced myself to move, so that only a grey, grainy light slipped through the windows as I went to the *pich* and put a hand to it, feeling the coldness of the iron door, which lay open, and the hardened clay that surrounded it. In the depth of winter, we often slept above the oven, all four of us sharing the benefit of its heat, but now white ash slumped in a heap inside where it had burned itself out. Beside it, cooking implements leaned against the wall, ready to be used. Sprigs of dried plants hung from a narrow beam over my head, and one or two leaves had been pulled free and lain on the wooden surround. A neat pile of fresh logs and kindling was stacked in the corner.

On the table, four plates lay in no particular arrangement, as if they were about to be set out. The underlying smell in the room

pointed to the presence of rotting food, but I saw nothing to indicate where the odour was coming from – nothing in the oven or on any of the plates – and the only food left in the cupboard was a handful of potatoes, some pickled cabbage and a few strips of dried pork.

In the centre of the table, a half-burned candle was glued with its own wax to a chipped bowl and I remembered how it was when the candle was aflame and voices filled the room. It was always warm and light, even in the deepest days of winter, when the *pich* was burning and my family was together.

As a soldier, I rarely had the opportunity to come home; my visits were sporadic and often came less than once a year. The last time I was inside this room was more than six months ago. It was early spring, and my unit was close, meeting with a larger force for resupply, so I took a week to visit home. Alek came too, and we sat at this table that first night and saw how Marianna and the boys coped with what little they had. Whites and Reds had been through the village more than once, taking what provisions they could find, leaving them with almost nothing, but I was thankful my wife and children had been left unharmed. Misha and Pavel were proud to show off the rabbits they had snared in the forest and the fish they had taken from the lake, just as Alek and I had snared and fished when we were younger.

Now I stared at the table and imagined them round it, as they had been that night, and I felt an overwhelming sense of what had been. The togetherness that had filled me was more than any sense of brotherhood I felt with my comrades-in-arms, and it confirmed my growing doubts about the war and all that it stood for. Being with my own children, my own wife, had brought visions of those who now lay wasted in the fields and forests and burned towns and villages of our country. And when our meal was done and the night had grown dark and the children slept, Marianna and I had come together in a way that made me want her more than ever. Lying with her, feeling her beside me, I had found myself longing for a means to leave the horror behind and return to the family she had held together so well. I had known

then that coming home was my only chance for redemption; my only chance to fill the emptiness.

My eyes drifted to the bent nails beside the door. I had put them there a thousand years ago, hammering the iron into the thick wooden wall because Marianna wanted somewhere to hang our winter coats, but now those coats were gone and the nails were naked.

I wondered what it meant. Had they taken their coats because they hadn't expected to return? Already the early winter winds had risen and the snow was not far away. Only a fool would leave without her coat when the land was preparing to sleep. With that in mind, I took the absence of coats as a good sign. Wherever they had gone, my wife and children had the foresight to prepare for cold weather.

Running the fingers of my left hand along the edge of the table, I moved to the door that stood open to the bedroom.

'Marianna?'

Shivering from the damp cold in my legs, I pushed the door open a little further and crept in. There was a heavy atmosphere; a sense that I should remain unnoticed. This was my house, yet I felt like a stranger – a thief stealing in during the night.

The beds were made and pushed against opposite walls, just as they had always been. The one below the window was the bed Marianna and I had slept in for years, the other for my sons, Misha and Pavel.

A translucent and frayed curtain hung from a crooked rail, allowing the last light of the day to filter through, and there was a rug hanging on the back wall, red and black, but faded with age. A chest of drawers painted white, and a small, round table with a piece of old lace thrown across to protect its surface. A single chair with a towel over its back. Above the table, a small icon hung on a nail. Everything was in exactly the same place as it had been when I left. Nothing had moved. It was as if, at any moment now, Marianna and the children would come into the house and life would return to normal. But something had happened here; I could *feel* it.

I went to the table where some of Marianna's belongings lay and ran my fingers through the teeth of her hairbrush, one or two hairs still caught there as if to prove her existence. They were long and golden, the colour of ripe winter wheat. It was a trait she had hoped for our children to inherit – fair hair and eyes as blue as the summer sky – but my own darkness had won over. Misha had her fine features, her narrow face, her mannerisms and her strength, but his hair was the colour of burned sugar, and he had dark and serious eyes. Pavel's colouring was lighter, with hazel eyes. His hair had the same hue as the acorns Alek and I used to collect from the forest floor when we were boys, and it always seemed to smell fresh and clean no matter what. I used to love putting my nose to the top of his head in the pretence of kissing him, just to breathe that smell. Pavel's temperament was closer to mine – he was more reserved than his brother – and I always understood him better than Marianna did.

I pulled the hairs from the brush, holding them between finger and thumb, hoping for a sense of closeness to my wife, but feeling no change to the empty silence. I picked up Marianna's *chotki*, the knotted prayer rope she tied herself from lambswool, and turned it in my hand just as I saw a flurry of motion from the corner of my eye.

A dark shape moving. The swish of material and a solid thump on the wooden floor.

I dropped the prayer rope and whipped round, raising the revolver and sinking to one knee to make myself low. My heart pounded and it was almost impossible to breathe. In a fraction of a second I had to choose whether or not to fire. It might be an enemy. It might be my wife. Or perhaps this *was* one of my dreams and it was something darker come to claim me for the terrible things I had done.

No more sign of movement from the shape behind the door. I relaxed my fingers and breathed deeply, keeping the revolver levelled at the object as I approached, seeing almost at once that it was not a person or anything more sinister. It was only a coat I

had dislodged from its hook on the back of the door. Just a black woollen coat.

I bent to take it in my fingers, and when I lifted it to the dim light from the window, my heart stopped. This wasn't just any coat. It was my wife's.

It was Marianna's winter coat. She must have hung it here, in the bedroom, but why had she not taken it with her?

I sat on the bed and leaned forward, holding the revolver so tight my fingers began to ache.

'Where are you?' The frustration was almost unbearable. 'Why aren't you here?'

I had come so far and risked so much, and all I had found was this.

When Alek and I had run, our unit had been moving north-east to Tambov, called to aid in the destruction of the peasant rebellion that had begun in August, rising out of the unrest caused by the harsh grain requisition laws and their heavy-handed implementation by the Red Army. Already the peasant militia was calling itself Blue and numbered more than fifty thousand fighters. It had even attracted defectors from the Red Army, so some units were ordered back from fighting the Whites in Ukraine to bring it under control and intensify the Red Terror that would subdue the masses. It was on that journey north-east, heading towards Tambov, that Alek and I had finally seen an opportunity to break away; to escape the endless progression of violence and horror that had become our second nature.

We knew that two men on horseback would be a target for the units hunting deserters, but we ran anyway, taking almost three weeks to travel the hundred or so kilometres home. We avoided the open roads and the steppes as much as we could, keeping to the forests even though it made for difficult travel and nights that were long and cold and lonely. We took hard feed for the horses wherever we could find it, stealing from farms, afraid to be seen. Any soldier would shoot us for the honour, and any peasant would betray us for a handful of grain or a little mercy, but we had stayed out of sight and it had slowed us down. Alek was

stronger than I could have imagined. As his wound worsened, I had wanted to take to the road, but he wouldn't let me, and now I couldn't help wondering if I should have done it anyway. We would have arrived sooner and perhaps Marianna would still be here. Perhaps . . . perhaps many things would be different.

I gritted my teeth and bowed my head. I needed my family. Only they could cast away the shadow that grew darker across my soul every day. They had to be here somewhere. I had to find them.

I closed my eyes and took deep breaths, forcing the emotions away. I placed the revolver on the bed and ran my hands across my head and face, rubbing life and sense into them.

'Pull yourself together,' I said aloud, finding comfort in my own voice.

With fresh purpose, I strengthened my resolve and went to the chest of drawers to rummage for fresh clothes, which I laid on the bed beside the revolver. Shucking off my boots, I dragged the wet trousers from my legs and used the towel from the back of the chair to dry. I had to take care of myself before anything else. Damp and cold and driven to madness, I was useless.

Redressed, I fastened my coat and pulled on my cold, wet boots, collecting the revolver before heading back to the front door and pulling it open to the night. The sky was clear of cloud now and any last traces of warmth were stolen away. The countless stars looked on, and the half-moon washed everything in silver.

Kashtan nickered and snorted as soon as she saw me, and I scanned each way along the street, listening, before I stepped out and went to her. She nuzzled my chest and I put a hand to the blaze on her face.

'A moment longer,' I whispered, putting my nose close to hers and feeling the heat of her sweet breath. 'I'll get you out of sight. Somewhere warm. Find you something to eat if I can.'

I patted her neck and moved round her, casting my eyes to the black shape of the forest on the other side of the river. Among the trees, the night was dark, and after a while it played tricks on even

the strongest mind. I would be glad to sleep under a proper roof tonight and thanked my luck for that small mercy.

'You did well,' I told her. 'You've been brave.'

She had been in battle, she knew the smell of blood, but it had still frightened her to have Alek on her back. Without Kashtan I never would have made it home. She was a good friend.

I loosened the binding that had kept my brother from falling and pulled him towards me, dragging him over my shoulder as I took his weight. I carried him into the house and leaned him against the wall by the *pich*, collapsing beside him, breathing heavily from the effort. We sat side by side as if we'd settled for a cigarette and a talk about old times.

'You're home,' I told him. 'More or less.'

Alek didn't live with me; he lived in the house next door with his wife, Irina, but she had died childless the year before the revolution, and this was where he spent much of his time when he was here in Belev, so it was more of a home than anywhere else. And this was the house he had grown up in, the house Papa had built himself and that Mama ran with a firm hand and a warm smile, the house we had played and argued and fought in as boys; the house he had left to be with Irina, the beauty of the village. Everyone said she'd marry Semyon Petrovich, but she'd never been interested in anyone other than Alek. He once said to me that Irina loved the way he played the *garmoshka*, that's why she had married him, but I told him it couldn't be true. His playing was tuneless, and his *garmoshka* was so worn and shabby it wheezed like an old man smoking his last pipe.

I stared at his sturdy boots, then looked down at my own – cold and damp and uncomfortable. 'You don't need them now,' I whispered, and sat up to tug them from his feet.

Leaving my own in a heap by the *pich*, I felt a wave of sadness as I pulled on Alek's socks and boots, but they were a better fit than my own and were of no use to a dead man. He would want me to have them.

'Wait here for me,' I said, unable to look at his face.

Back outside, I unhitched Kashtan and led her to the

outbuilding at the back of the *izba*. In the past, we had used it for storing grain and livestock, but now I was beginning to wonder if there might be something else in there, and as I came close to the door, I imagined I would open it to find the bodies of my children hanging from the rafters, with nooses tight about their necks. I'd seen such things already on my journey home, and the darkness of those images had been a constant passenger in my thoughts, but I had not expected that I would find such things here. I had only seen hope and warmth when I thought of home, and now I tightened my jaw and tried to push away the ghosts of my more recent memories. But those bleaker images crept into my thoughts like shadowy apparitions, smothering the light I longed for.

I passed my old two-wheeled cart and swallowed hard as I prepared for the worst – if it was even *possible* to prepare for the terrible things I could imagine. I took a deep breath and braced myself, but when I put a foot to the door and pushed it open, raising the revolver, I found the outbuilding to be as empty as the house.

I stood for a while and allowed my breath to escape me in a long sigh, forcing my fingers to relax as I lowered my arm. A wave of relief washed over me with a suddenness that brought with it the surprise that I could have felt so much more afraid and helpless than I had realised. But that relief was tempered with something else; this time, at least, my fears were unfounded, but the absence of my family here was both a blessing and a curse. They were still missing and I damned the experiences that now sent me visions of the worst.

Any livestock that had once been kept in the outbuilding was long gone, but the scent of animals remained. The fenced-off section to the left of the door was bereft of any food stocks and I assumed the requisitions had been as harsh here as anywhere else. Perhaps Marianna and the children had moved on to find a place where they could feed themselves better. Or perhaps they had forgotten me and run from the war, looking for something safer.

But there was the coat. Marianna would never leave without her coat.

The floor was covered with straw, and there was a small pile of hay at the far end beside a shallow trough containing a few inches of rainwater that fed in from a pipe coming through the roof. When I led Kashtan in, she followed without trouble, going straight to the hay.

I removed the few pieces of kit I had collected on my journey and slipped the saddle from her back, dumping it on the ground by the door. There were surface scratches across her flanks, ragged scrapes from our ride through the forest. She'd been reluctant to go where the trees grew so thick – the closeness of them had spooked her, and the scent of wild animals had troubled her – but she'd gone on. She'd been brave and I owed her for that.

I took a rag from one of my saddlebags and soaked it in the trough before cleaning the dried blood from her skin, drying her and leaving her to the warmth of the outbuilding. I closed the door behind me and stood in the silence of the night, looking across at the field where the moonlight washed over the regular wave of the unplanted furrows.

The beginnings of a frost crunched beneath my feet as I slipped to the other end of the yard and climbed over the fence into my brother's property. Holding the revolver ready in front of me, I tried to block the emotions that had plagued me when I was alone in my family bedroom. I had to forget the sadness and the worry and the anger. I had to do what I did best and subdue my emotions, empty myself, leaving only what I needed. And when they were gone, there was just fear; and it was fear that kept my senses keen as I moved in the shadows, heading to the outbuilding behind Alek's house. Finding it empty, I passed along the line of houses, checking each outbuilding in turn and finding no livestock, no grain, nothing.

On this side of the road, there was a line of nine *izbas*, built with enough space between each to prevent the spread of fire. I

checked every yard and outbuilding before moving on to the road that ran between the houses.

I listened for a while, shivering as the temperature dropped and my breath misted around me, then moved from home to home, summoning the courage to enter each one but finding them all empty. I headed across the road and searched the windmill, the church, and the houses that backed onto the river, but found nothing other than what I had found in my own home. There were plates on tables, a few bits and pieces of food in cupboards, and all the signs that people had been going about their business, but the people themselves were missing. It was as if they had been plucked from their homes by invisible hands, or left in a hurry without time to do much more than pick up their coats. Except it was only the *children's* coats; wherever they had gone, the adults had not taken their winter coats with them.

As the night matured, the cold bit harder and the wind played among the highest branches in the forest, teasing the sails of the windmill so the air was filled with the creak and groan of old wood.

I returned to check on Kashtan one last time and took my supplies back to the house, but even when I closed the door and pushed the bolt across, it felt as if the forest demons had slipped inside with me. After jamming a chair under the door handle, I went to the windows and considered drawing the curtains but decided against it. If anyone came in the night, they would bring lights, and I wanted to be able to see them.

Eventually I went to my brother and slumped beside him as before.

'There's no one here,' I whispered, staring at the door, feeling more alone than ever. 'They've all gone. *Everyone*. Where the hell are they? What's happened to them?' I couldn't bring myself to look at him, to remind myself that he had gone too.

I placed the revolver in my lap and concentrated on the significance of the winter coats. It bothered me that the children's were missing but not the adults', and I couldn't think of a good reason why it would be so. I went over it again and again, but I was worn

out and my thoughts began to blur and swim. I told myself I would look again tomorrow, try to find an explanation.

Somewhere in the night, exhaustion overcame me and I slept a while beside my dead brother. I woke when I thought I heard my wife's gentle laughter and I sat up, forgetting where I was.

'Marianna?'

But then there was the emptiness of remembering she wasn't there, and I leaned back and rubbed my eyes.

The wind had strengthened further and it probed the house, searching for a way in, plucking at the windows, shaking the door and rattling the bolt. I wondered if it might be safe to light a fire. No one would see the smoke in the dark, and I could keep the oven door shut, pull the curtains across the windows. The warmth would be a welcome relief.

I stood and rubbed the stiffness from my neck before going to the range, breaking kindling and arranging it in the oven. Reaching for the bundle of matches and taking one from the roll, though, something stopped me from striking it. A voice whispering in my head. Whatever had taken the people of Belev might come for me too, and how would I ever help them then? What use would I be to my wife and children if I were to disappear the way they had?

I replaced the match in the roll of cloth and put it on the table, my fingers reluctant to let it go. I wanted that fire so much my heart sank at how close I had been to having it; how close I had come to that one small comfort. A huge sadness welled inside me – for the loss of my brother, for Marianna and the boys, for everything I had done and seen. It surged in a great wave and I squeezed my eyes shut, pressing my fingers against them.

Standing like that, I prayed for my family. Prayed for some sign of them.

But my prayer was disturbed by a scraping and shuffling from deeper in the room. At first, I thought I was imagining the noise, but when it came again, I opened my eyes and turned back to my brother. My vision was impaired, blurred because I had been rubbing my eyes, and I thought it was playing tricks on me when

I saw a dark shadow rising in the room. The spectre was taking shape, emerging from the ground in the murky darkness, as if Alek had woken from the dead and was standing to greet me. I tried to tell myself it was my imagination. It was nothing more than an eerie mix of light and dark. As my sight cleared, however, I knew it was no trick. Someone or something was there.

I was not alone in the house.