

# Page 147



by

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*Collins stared down the barrel of the Glock. It quivered in Royenko's unsteady hand as he lined along the site with his one good eye. Sasha pressed her body up against Collins. She stared defiantly back at Khalid and Tannikov, but he smelled fear mingled with her perfume.*

*Suddenly, Paladin entered the room. He seemed jovial, almost jaunty, as he clicked his heels and bowed with a flourish.*

*"You!" hissed Sasha savagely.*

*"Yes, my lovely," replied Paladin with a smirk. "Me."*

*"I knew you'd sell us out," said Collins.*

*Paladin laughed gaily. "Oh, but my dear Mr. Collins, I have done no such thing!" He put his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a battered gray envelope which he tossed at Sasha's feet. "Go ahead. Open it."*

"Give me that!"

"No way."

"It's mine! Give it!"

"It's mine now."

"Mom! Mom! Mom!"

"Mah-yam! Mah-yam! Maah-yam!"

"Stop it!"

"Both of you stop it right now! Max. Max. Max!"

Max Garter looked up from *The Geneva Mandate*, the latest Derek Collins novel.  
"What? What is it?"

The family dinner table was in its usual state of chaos. Edward was holding a pink something high above his head in one hand, while fending off Harriet with the other as she strained to swipe it away. Louise stared him down coldly.

"What?"

"Would you please tell your son to give Harriet her diary back."

"Edward, give Harriet her diary."

"And tell Harriet if she wants to keep something private, don't bring it to the dinner table."

"You heard your mother, Harriet. The table is no place for books."

Max looked down again. Where was he? Right. Page 146.

*Sasha stared down at the envelope, her mask of defiance starting to crack.*

*"What is that," demanded Collins.*

*"Open it, and you shall see what you shall see," quipped Paladin enigmatically.*

*"More lies, Paladin?" snarled Sasha.*

*Collins bent down to pick up—*

"Ouch! Mom!"

Max looked up in time to see Harriet punch Edward's arm.

"Harriet! Don't hit your brother!"

"Give it to me, you bastard!"

"Harriet! Max, would you mind!"

Max took his cue. "Don't say that word, Harriet. It isn't nice. Edward. Give me that book. Right now."

He took the pink diary and set it in front of him. A relative calm settled over the table. Back to the story.

*Sasha stared down... skip ahead ... see what you shall ... skip skip. There.*

*Collins bent down to pick up the envelope. Tannikov's battered boot stamped on it.*

"So I took the Excursion in today. It needs new shocks."

"Okay."

*"Oh no, Meester Collins. Zis is not for you," he said and he wrapped the sausage-thick fingers of his oversized hand around Collins' throat.*

"You think it's okay it needs new shocks after thirty-thousand miles?"

*Out of nowhere, Paladin's walking stick came down with a CRACK! on Tannikov's arm. Collins seized the opportunity. Like lighting, he locked Tannikov's elbow —*

"All right. It's not okay."

*Like lighting, he locked Tannikov's elbow and twisted him —*

"I told you we should have gotten the Eddie Bauer edition."

*—twisted him to the floor, then slipped out the snub-nosed revolver from his shoulder holster. Collins took aim dead at Paladin's forehead. Khalid locked his Kalashnikov on him.*

"The suspension is exactly the same as the XLT. It wouldn't have made any difference."

*Like lighting, —blah blah—*

*Royenko's pistol was suddenly inches from his temple. The three-way stand-off was grimly silent, but Paladin laughed and applauded.*

"Well, it's just more money we wouldn't have to pay now, if you hadn't been cheap when we bought it."

"Okay."

*"Bravo, Mr. Collins! Simply brilliant!" declared Paladin. He unsheathed a long, thin blade hidden in his walking stick and held it under Tannikov's chin. "Now, Yuri. The envelope to Mr. Collins, if you please."*

"That reminds me, did you ask about the promotion."

"Not yet."

"And why not?"

*Tannikov spat at Paladin's feet, but dutifully handed Collins the envelope with his one good arm.*

Next page.

"Hold on a minute, please. Let me finish this page."

*Collins took the envelope, never dropping his aim from Paladin. He ripped it open with his teeth and pulled out a folded paper.*

"Max, I don't know how you think we're going to make ends meet without that promotion. The bill for Harriet's orthodonture just came in, and we're already committed to go in on the time share with Tony and Ellen—"

*It was a page torn from a Bible. Drawn in black on the page was an eagle clutching a scimitar. A passage was marked in yellow highlighter. Paladin quoted the verse unprompted.*

"—not to mention the Excursion—"

"And my rink fee."

"And the rink fees for Edward's hockey league. The school doesn't pay that, you know."

"I know. Hold on. This is the last page in the chapter."

*"Numbers, chapter 1, verse 40: From the descendants of Asher: All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, according to the records of their clans and families." Paladin smiled again, adding, "Though perhaps that should include the women, too."*

"Oh for heaven's sake, Max. What do you see in that trash."

*Collins steadied his aim between Paladin's eyes. "You have five seconds to tell me exactly what's going on here."*

"Didn't get to finish on the train. Almost done."

*"Oh, but it's such a convoluted tale... hardly to be even begun in such time. But I suppose I must try."*

"Sitting at the dinner table, reading some pulp novel. Honestly, it's just rude, Max."

"Uh-huh."

*Paladin continued. "As you may know, Mr. Collins, the lovely Sasha here was once married to the late renowned physician and humanitarian Dr. Carlos deVista. Prior to that, she had the maiden name of Lorenti—though few know that name was taken from her mother, rather than her father, Lord Wilfred Asher. As you may also know, Lord Asher was a British diplomat much prized for his role in many sensitive treaty negotiations."*

*"I'm starting to get bored," Collins snarled.*

"Yeah, dad. You should read something good. Like this."

At the edge of his vision, Max saw a pink blur slide away from him.

"Let's see now. Dear Diary—

"Stop it!"

*"Then I shall endeavor to pick up the pace. Aside from his diplomatic duties, Lord Asher had something of a passion for, shall we say, social engineering. He believed the exceptional few by right should rule the ignorant many—an opinion not without merit—*

"Today on the school bus—"

"Edward, don't you dare! Max!"

"Just a moment, dear."

"—I sat next to Tommy Wilkins."

"Shut up!"

*"—though sadly unpopular with the fad of democracy from the last century or so. In any case, Lord Asher began to find allies who thought the same and together they began to act."*

*"The Guild," said Khalid, and he spat on the ground.*

Yeah. The Guild. They were all over the last book.

"Oooh. Taahhhmmy Wilkins. He's soooo dreamy!"

"Shut up!"

"Edward enough! Max!"

*"Yes, quite," continued Paladin. "The Guild. Dedicated to the creation of puppet dictatorships answerable to a secret commission of exceptional thinkers with the vision and courage to forge a new world order, as pure and efficient as an ant colony. But even ant colonies have soldiers, Mr. Collins. And Lord Asher set out to train the finest. Perhaps his greatest achievement in that area was his own son, Winston—though I think you know him better by his nome de poignard. The Dagger.*

Right. The Dagger. From the last two books. He was one nasty son of a bitch.

*"But what you do not know, what no one has known until very recently is that The Dagger had a sister. A twin. The daughter of Señora Lorenti and Lord Asher. A woman no one knew existed until she surfaced in an operative training camp."*

Interesting. In *The African Gulag*, The Dagger said he had a sister just before Collins killed him. And Collins met Sasha when he infiltrated that terrorist camp. Holy moley.

"Oh, Tommy! Kiss me, Tommy! MMM! Mmm! Mmm!"

*Paladin took his blade and deftly slit open Tannikov's sleeve to reveal a tattoo of a black eagle clutching a scimitar.*

*"Very fashionable in Kyrgyzstan last year," he said.*

*"A filthy dog of The Guild!" screamed Khalid.*

"OOWWW! OW! Mom!"

"Oh my God! Harriet, what is wrong with you! Edward, are you all right! Oh my God! Max!"

Max looked up too late to actually see Harriet jab Edward with a fork, though the tableau he witnessed—Harriet holding a fork, Edward holding his arm, Louise looking furious—was confirmation enough. He dog-eared page 147, then took the fork from Harriet.

"Let me see, Edward."

Crying a lot more than Max thought any self-respecting 11-year should, Edward held his arm out for his father's inspection. Sure enough, there were four little holes. The first one had a tiny trace of blood, more like a scrape. The others were just dents.

"You're fine. It's nothing. Calm yourself. It's what you get for pushing Harriet like that." Max picked up the pink diary and handed it to Harriet. He reached down and turned the dog-ear back up.

"Excuse me! Did you or did you not just see your daughter stab your son with a fork!"

Max rightly reasoned there was no correct answer for this question.

"Harriet, don't you ever do anything like that again," he said as firmly as he could manage at the moment.

*Tannikov's body was perforated by AK fire. Four 9mm slugs slammed into Khalid's chest. A six-inch throwing knife embedded itself in Royenko's throat. Sasha collapsed to the floor, a bloodstain spreading over her shirt. Smoke rose from the barrel of the gun in Collins' hand*

Whoa. Did Collins just shoot Sasha?

"MAX!" Louise's voice was explosive.

"What!"

"In the name of God, I don't know what is wrong with you! You sit there with your face buried in that garbage while your family self-destructs. Never mind that you don't listen to a word I say. Never mind that you don't seem to care that you're failing to provide for our needs. But when you neglect your children like this and wonder why they act out—well, that's just the last straw. It has to stop, Max! I mean it. You have to step up and take responsibility for your life."

Max stood and slammed the paperback on the table, upsetting two glasses.

"My life? My life! Where the hell is my life? All I ever hear is what you want, what they need. All I ever do is provide for that. I never wanted this. Any of it. The orthodonture and the rink fees and the time share and the Ford-fucking-Excursion! We are living your dream. Not mine. And the least you can do—all of you!—is just give me a few goddamn minutes to escape from it now and then!"

The table sat in stunned silence. Max muttered one last profanity then picked up the book and sat down again.

*Collins looked down at Sasha. "Tell me, Sasha. Have you quit smoking yet?"*

*Sasha struggled to lift her head, as blood pooled on the floor beneath her. Grimacing with pain, she rolled up her sleeve and unveiled a large nicotine patch on her arm. Slowly, she peeled it away, revealing a black eagle tattoo. A trail of blood ran down the eagle's wing..*

*"I could have killed you at any time, Derek."*

*"And why didn't you?" asked Collins.*

*"That secret," whispered Sasha with her last breath, "is now mine to keep forever."*

Huh. So Sasha was Guild after all. Wild. Now it's just Collins and Paladin. Wonder what they're going to do about the chemical weapons smugglers.

Max closed the book and set it down. He took a deep breath and raised his eyes, preparing for the apology/explanation he would have to give. The table was empty.

"Louise? Kids?"

He got up and walked into the empty living room.

"Guys? I'm sorry I yelled."

He called up the stairs.

"Honey?"

There was a crunch of gravel outside. Max looked through the front window just in time to see the Excursion back out of the driveway and take off down the street.

— END —