

The Peace Thieves

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

THE D E A V E S



BRENT VAN STAALDUINEN

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For those who answer the call,
and for those who love them.

PREVIEW

Francis

THE SPRING PASSES QUICKLY AND DISSOLVES INTO SUMMER, the days full of stress and boredom and danger and laughter and dirty jokes and clandestine masturbation in the sleeping bags we call Fart Sacks. We get ordered elsewhere along the line of separation by the French Big Dick, who has a thing for our battle group. Sector South in the Krajina is hotter and more rustic. We establish a unit medical station in an abandoned farm complex south of Medak. More sandbags and field rations and unpleasant places to take a shit.

Mackey and I carry on and crawl all over the countryside, helping Buddy and Buddy and Buddy with whatever medical needs present themselves. Blisters and jock itch and dehydration. Sprains and strains. Infections and suspicious burning sensations. Splinters and lacerations we talk about for weeks. The country continues its rolling boil all around us. We get shot at a few times.

One day I get called onto the boss's carpet and am formally charged with a couple things related to the incident with the cow. Finally. Mackey filed a report the day of, but it took a couple months to move through channels. Captain Byrne reads the charges aloud. He's a small man, one of the handful of doctors running the medical show. There's one for the unauthorized discharge of my weapon against the rules of engagement and one for the wasted ammunition. Oddly, the ammo thing seems to have more weight. I imagine a court martial and long stints of hard labour in Edmonton. I'm given a chance to explain my case, which doesn't take long.

— She was in pain, sir, and the Serbs were abusing her. I don't think those rounds were wasted.

— That your final statement?

— Yes, sir.

He sighs and reads out the consequences of my sins, something about reduced pay and a bunch of extra duties. I listen and respond as needed but am distantly comforted by the fact that the punishment was already written. This was going to be the result no matter what I said. Small victory for me. Penance is as predictable and boring as the rest of the administrivia we do. I'll be busier and more stressed out but not sent home. They need my delinquent ass here.

— You need to think about staying straight if you want this to work out, he says after closing the file. Careers get ruined by shit like this.

— I understand, sir.

— Your old man would know.

This I don't respond to. Seems about right that the army thinks of mercy bullets as a mistake rather than a kindness. Bringing Senior into this an unknowing irony. I don't know why the army holds him so high—he's never told me, and what soldiers say about other soldiers can be hard to stand on—but he was the last one to shy away from getting in trouble. Seems like he was always getting in trouble. Left to him, war stories would never be about the hard stuff but would always involve groups of men getting into mischief to amuse themselves, fuck the consequences. Ask him if he ever saw action

and you'll get a blank, hard stare, but when one of his buddies stops by the bar to reminisce, stay tuned for all the grab-ass and pranking your heart can handle. You'd think that Korea had nothing to do with violence between nations but was actually about him and his buddies doing crazy things to piss people off.

So for me it's back to work. Hurry up and wait and all that. We dig in and do what we do. Fix a few soldiers, drive a few others north to the American surgical unit at Zagreb when Buddy's beyond our help. Fill sandbags. Eat. Shit. Get a few hours' sleep when we can. The dance of an army that holds no ground but that stands between armies that do. The Croats have pushed a thumb of territory into Serb land we call the Medak Pocket. Our rifle companies are spread along the line of separation and the rest of us are in the rear, hoping our reputation is enough to hold the peace. We're more tolerated by the Serbs because we're mostly protecting their gains from earlier in the war. The Croats show their disdain for us by sniping and occasionally dropping artillery rounds on our positions. They want this land back and are coming to get it no matter who's in the way, but we're ordered to ignore the threat and soldier on. Told nothing. We're mushrooms, fed shit and kept in the dark. Still expected to glow bright as marbles in the sun, though.

The summer heat settles in like a dictator with a lifetime self-appointment. Forty-degree temperatures pushed upwards by humidity left over from the downpours that saturate the ground and set the soil to steaming when the sun returns. There's a profound lack of wind. Everything gets greener without farmers and citizens to clear the ground. We can't help but see the beauty in the Krajina, lush orchards and forests, jewel lakes the war doesn't seem to touch, white mountains skirting the whole length of the valley. How nice they are. How nice it would be to vacation here if it weren't for the landmines and all the death. We dream about food other than rations, sweat through everything we own, and sleep poorly each night on grimy army cots. Nothing ever feels dry. Or rested.

Mackey and I return to base after a medevac run north. A few of the guys meet us in the yard as we pull in, and Mackey hands

out packages and contraband he's sourced from the Americans. The American supply chain is a well-oiled machine full of illicit potential. We've become the go-to guys for the evac trips, Mackey somehow engineering favour from the boss so he can expand his scrounging empire. You can never get enough Marlboros or porn in a war zone. Mackey hefts his bulging duffle bag of goods over a shoulder, grabs his rifle, and disappears without a word. As always, I take care of the miscellany required of us after we drive anywhere. Shutdown lists to check off, logs to annotate, hoses and seals and tire pressures to check. The yard is empty. Even the alert ambulance is gone. Busy day.

There's an upswelling of angry voices beyond the gate. A line of locals, men and women, have lined up along the road, looking for work. On the way in, I had to slow to almost a crawl to avoid splashing them with mud from a soggy tire rut, adding to their misery. Buddy on sentry duty has tried to explain that we're not set up to hire anyone, that we're living rough, but the people have already fed on hope.

One of the clerks, a private, comes out holding a clipboard against her chest. She's tiny, maybe five-four and ninety pounds soaked through, her body armour comically large. Her short-cropped, espresso hair and light brown skin can't hide the fatigue under her eyes.

— Kloet. Two things. First, you got mail.

I'm surprised enough to lose my words for a moment as she unclips a flimsy airmail envelope from her board and hands it to me. It's creased and stained from its journey but the thin blue paper and red and blue hashes around its edge are oddly hopeful against the mud and sunwashed surroundings. The faded Hamilton return address is as familiar as home but beginning to feel as distant as Siberia. Mother's handwriting, too.

— First time for everything, the clerk says.

— Huh?

— You getting mail.

— Oh. Right.

— Maybe you won the lottery. Enough to get the rest of us out of here...?

— Dream on, Private.

— Can't let go of your dreams, Corporal.

I fold and slide the envelope into my pocket. She seems disappointed.

— And the second thing?

— Hmm?

— You mentioned you had two things for me.

— Right. You have visitors.

— Who?

— Two very impatient and stubborn visitors. Snuck in somehow. Inspection room.

— Why me? Where is everyone?

— Out.

— Everyone? Even the—

— Get rid of them, Kloet. The old man will have a shit if he finds civilians when he gets back.

— Private . . .

— Sorry. Get rid of them, *Corporal Kloet*.

She rolls her eyes, a subtle pushback against the pedantic reservist. *Make it right*, I can hear Mother say.

— Sorry, no, I meant to ask who else could—

But the clerk walks away before I can fix the misunderstanding.



Brent van Staaldhuizen is the award-winning and bestselling author of the novels *Unthinkable*, *Nothing But Life*, *Boy*, and *Saints, Unexpected*, and the story collection *Cut Road*. His stories have won numerous literary prizes and have appeared in journals and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. A former army medic and recovering high school English teacher, he now lives in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada with his wife and two daughters, and when not writing or teaching writing to aspiring undergrads, he often finds himself looking for excuses to use his power tools or wandering city streets looking for stories. Find out more at www.brentvans.com.

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