

## CHAPTER 2

# BEFORE

Before *he* came, I watched my beautiful mother.

I watched her at the kitchen sink, her pale hands dipping in and out of steaming water as she washed the dishes, humming.

I watched her hang sheets from the line on the tiny balcony of our apartment, clothespins clamped between her teeth. I handed her more clothespins, two by two.

“Such a good helper, my Mishka, my little bear,” she always said.

Before, I sat in my grandmother, Babushka Ina’s, lap, and listened as she sang the old songs. She rocked me back and forth, back and forth.

Every morning Babushka Ina walked me down the hill to my school. My mother had to get to her job at the bakery long before the sun rose. At school, I sat at the wooden table and practiced my letters. I learned to sound out “cat” and “rat” and to not watch the birds out the windows.

In the afternoon, my mother and I walked back up the long, low hill to our apartment. Babushka Ina cooked my favorite cabbage soup while I practiced my letters and listened to my mother hum.

## THE DOGS OF WINTER

Before, it was Babushka Ina who slept with my mother at night. I had my special bed in the sitting room. My mother read to me every night from my book of fairy tales.

This is the way it had always been: me and my mother and my Babushka Ina. This was the way I thought the world would always be.