

**DON'T
TELL
THE
NAZIS**

A novel by
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**THIS NOVEL IS DEDICATED TO KRYSTIA,
WHOSE BRAVERY TAKES MY BREATH AWAY.
—M.S.**

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CHAPTER ONE

THE END OF THEM

June 28, 1941, Viteretz, Ukraine

I huddled close to my sister under the comforter and prayed that we'd live through the night. At any moment the door might burst open and we could be dragged from our beds.

Another gunshot. Running footsteps. Screams.

A low, growling *boom*.

The bedroom flashed bright for one brief moment and I saw the terror on Mama's face as she pointed the pistol toward the closed door. The room plunged back into darkness.

Silence. Moments passed.

"Krystia and Maria," whispered Mama, "try to sleep. Maybe the Soviets will be gone by morning."

How I longed to get back to what it was like before the war—with enough food to eat and without having to walk

with my eyes cast to the ground, afraid to speak to a friend for fear of being arrested.

I lay back down on my pillow, listening for the next volley of gunfire.

We had all heard that the friendship between the Germans and Soviets had fallen apart, and that the Germans were pushing out the Soviets. But as that happened, the Soviets were like angry bees, attacking us *civilians* and stealing all they could as they fled.

As the minutes ticked by, Mama and Maria both drifted into sleep, and their rhythmic breathing muffled the sound of explosions—more distant now—but I could not relax. I tried to breathe slowly to lull myself to sleep.

A low squeak of rusted hinges.

I bolted up. It sounded like someone opening the door of the cowshed alongside the house. I climbed out of bed, crept to the main room, and pressed my ear against the wall.

A faint *thump* and then the crunch of straw. Someone was definitely in our hayloft. Was it someone fleeing from the Soviets? If we were caught hiding a runaway, they'd punish us.

If I were brave, I'd go there now and find out who it was, but I was too frightened to do that. Instead, I got back into bed and closed my eyes, praying that whoever was hiding in the shed would be gone by morning. I hoped Mama

wouldn't wake up and investigate the noise. What if the runaway got scared and shot her? With Tato already dead, I couldn't bear the thought of losing Mama too. I forced myself to slowly breathe in and out, and prayed that the runaway would leave before we had to figure out what to do.

Somehow, I slept.

Beams of daylight through the bedroom window woke me. All was silent. Mama slept, her pistol resting on her chest with one hand flopped on top of it. Even though I didn't feel all that brave, I was the older daughter, so it was my responsibility to protect what was left of our family. I got out of bed, careful not to wake Maria, and slid the pistol out from under Mama's hand. I put it into the pocket of my nightgown, then tiptoed to the big room.

With my ear against the wall, I listened, but now the only sound from the cowshed was Krasa's familiar breathing. I peeked out at the road from behind the curtains. No soldiers. I grabbed the milking pail, opened the front door, and stepped out.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE LOFT

It was almost too quiet. Across the road, the Segals' house was dark. Beside it, St. Mary's Ukrainian Catholic Church stood boarded up and silent, but there was a flicker of a curtain from the window of Father Andriy's house just beside it. Was his wife checking to see if it was safe to go out yet?

I stepped into the shed and put the pail down, then held the pistol with both hands and twirled around. No one was there—except for Krasa—and she was looking spooked. She stomped one hoof as if she were agitated from last night's explosions and gunfire. Any intruder would have made it that much worse.

I held the gun behind my back and put my face up to hers. "Shhh," I whispered, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

I climbed the wooden rungs to the loft, holding the gun in one hand. When my head was just below the hole

in the floor, I counted to three and burst up, trying to steady the pistol with one hand. “Don’t move!”

A scrabbling noise from the far corner. I pointed the pistol.

“Krystia! Put the gun down, it’s me.”

“Josip?” I climbed up the rest of the way. My cousin sat cross-legged in a nest of straw beside our stash of goods from Auntie Stefa in Toronto. Josip looked exhausted.

“The Soviet secret police nearly caught me last night.”

“Why would they be after *you*?” I asked.

“The NKVD are always after someone. Right now they seem to be rounding up educated Ukrainians.”

“Where’s Borys?” I asked. My cousins were usually inseparable.

“There’s a good place in the forest. A lot of us have taken refuge there. I’m hoping Borys found it.”

“Is that where you’ll hide too?”

He shook his head. “The NKVD could follow me there.”

“You can stay here . . .”

“That would put *you* in danger.”

“But where will you go?”

He shrugged. “I’ll have to see.”

I crawled over to where Josip sat and rested my head on his shoulder. “I’ve really missed you since you’ve been off to university.”

“I miss you and Maria too,” he said.

“Can I visit you in Lviv after the Soviets leave?”

“I’d like that,” he said. “And I’m hoping that you can attend university yourself one day.”

“Maria too?”

“Of course.” He rested his hand on top of mine and I noticed his familiar crooked baby finger. Once, when we had been playing hide-and-seek, he’d got his finger caught in a door (it wasn’t my fault) and it ended up healing with a permanent bend.

“Why don’t you slip into the house by the bedroom window and Mama will make you breakfast?”

“That’s too dangerous, Krystia—for you and for me,” said Josip. “And I need to be on my way.”

“What about some milk from Krasa, then?” I asked.

“That sounds good,” said Josip. “And it will be quick.”

He followed me down the ladder and stood in the corner as I milked Krasa. When I was finished, he held the heavy pail to his lips and swallowed a few gulps.

“Go about your business as if I’m not here,” he told me, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

I leaned into him and rested my head on his shoulder. “Stay safe, Cousin. You and Borys both.”

He kissed the top of my head. “You too, Cousin.”

We stood like that for a full minute before he stepped away. “Get going, Krystia.”

I slid the pistol into my pocket and blew Josip one last kiss, then hefted the bucket and walked back to the house.

Mama was wiping down the wooden stove with a soapy rag. She paused mid-swipe as I set the bucket on the table. “Why did you do the milking in your nightgown?” she asked me. “And why did you take my pistol?”

I gave Mama back the gun and told her about Josip. She inhaled sharply.

The bedroom door creaked open and Maria walked out, wearing the shabbier of our shared outfits. “I almost wore the good clothing, seeing as it was lying there, tempting me. But I decided that it wouldn’t be fair,” she said.

To save arguments, the two of us had long ago agreed that the first one to rise got to wear the best skirt and blouse.

“Now, what’s this about Josip?” asked Maria.

“NKVD,” said Mama. “He’s in our shed.”

Maria’s face paled. “Doesn’t he know he’s putting us in danger?”

I kept my mouth shut, but I could feel the anger boiling inside. Why did Maria think only of *our* safety?

“Don’t you even *care* about Josip?” I asked. So much for keeping my mouth shut.

Mama looked from me to Maria. “Enough,” she said. “Krystia, go get dressed.”

“But . . .”

“Go.”

I felt like stomping to the bedroom, but I knew Mama wouldn’t put up with that either, so with all the dignity I could muster, I *walked* to the bedroom to change.

As soon as I was there, my anger lightened. How could I be angry with my little sister when she had left me the best skirt and blouse? Yes, we had a deal, but Maria could have argued that I’d forfeited the good clothes by not getting dressed when I got up. It was sweet that she hadn’t done that. And I didn’t mind that Maria wore the shoes, because they pinched my heels.

By the time I stepped back into the main room, Maria had fed our two chickens and had already left to get water. There were chores to do, whether there were still NKVD about or not.

I went back to the shed, hoping Josip was still there, but he had left. “Josip, dear Josip,” I whispered under my breath. “Be safe, be brave.”

I looped a rope around Krasa’s neck and led her outside. Taking her to pasture should have been a job shared by Maria and me, but Maria was terrified to take the long walk on her own. Normally, I didn’t mind, as it was

pleasant to spend time with Krasa and it was certainly easier than lugging endless buckets of water, but if there were still NKVD about, I was sure to run into them. There was no way out of this chore, though, because if I didn't take Krasa to pasture, her milk would dry up, and *then* where would we be?

When I looked toward town, all I saw was Maria waiting in line at the pump, chatting with Nathan Segal. He was eleven, but he had been sweet on my sister for as long as I could remember.

The Zhuks next door still had their house closed up tight. Mr. Zhuk, a bookkeeper, had been deported to a Siberian slave camp more than a year ago, so it was only his wife, Valentina, and her son, Petro, living there now. I turned and stood on tiptoe to look toward the outskirts of town—and again, no people were out except for me, Maria, and Nathan.

Low in the sky, a German airplane—distinctive with its cross and swastika—growled above us, making Krasa tremble. I had seen dozens of these in the last two days, all heading toward Lviv. I hoped the Germans would banish the Soviets once and for all.

We started on our two-kilometer walk to the pasture and I kept my eyes to the ground and my ears tuned for unusual sounds. We passed the Kitais' house, beside

ours—but it was also dark and silent. Mr. Kitai ran a school supply store and Mina Kitai was a doctor—everyone called her Doctor Mina. I imagined my classmate Dolik still sound asleep in his soft, warm bed. His little brother, Leon, too.

Mama cleaned for Doctor Mina. The Kitais were well-to-do enough that they could have been deported to Siberia as “bourgeois,” but Doctor Mina took on some of the Soviet officers as her patients. Mama just had to be careful to avoid them when she went in to clean, though, because if the Soviets thought Doctor Mina had a servant, that could still get her deported.

I could feel my face getting hot at the thought of my mother working as a servant to my classmate. But Doctor Mina was so kind, just like her husband. More than once he had given us pencils and paper for school at no charge. And Doctor Mina had looked after Tato when he was dying of lung cancer. She’d been at our house nearly every day during that awful time.

I continued down the road, passing many empty houses, thinking of all the changes in the two years of Soviet occupation. Of the four thousand or so people who had lived in Viteretz before the war, only eight hundred were Ukrainians, with about sixteen hundred Poles, and the same number of Jews. When the Polish government had

held power, they put a quota on Ukrainians in professions and trades, so most couldn't afford to live in town. They could only be farmers. On our entire long street of St. Olha—Karl Marx Street now, according to the Soviets—we had just four Ukrainian families: us, Uncle Roman and Auntie Iryna Fediuk (because of our blacksmith shop), the Zhuk family, and Father Andrij and his wife, Anya.

The surrounding farmlands were the opposite—mostly poor Ukrainian farmers with just a few Polish and Jewish families mixed in. At the beginning of the occupation, the Soviets were kind to the poor, but they terrorized the wealthy, meaning mostly Poles. Many were killed or deported to slave camps in Siberia. Now, it seemed, they were turning on the Ukrainians.

All at once I heard footsteps behind me. My heart raced. But it was just Uncle Roman, my father's brother.

He stepped in beside me, mopping his brow with his yellow handkerchief. "Krystia, my slow niece," he said. "It looks like we're both late this morning. It took a long time to get Lysa out of her stall."

I reached over and patted her nose, then lowered my voice. "Josip was hiding in our shed this morning, but now he's gone."

"Ah," Uncle Roman said. "Thank the Virgin Mary that my son is safe. Did he have any news of Borys?"

“Hiding in the forest from the Soviets, Josip thinks.”

Uncle Roman’s shoulders relaxed.

When Borys and Josip had lived at home, they would alternate taking Lysa to their pasture and we often walked together. Since they’d gone to university, it had fallen to Uncle Roman to walk the cow himself. He didn’t seem to mind, though. It gave him a break from the blacksmith shop, and he’d often meet his friends and they’d chat as their cows munched the grass.

Uncle Roman’s pasture was just beyond mine. Before he took Lysa there, he gave me a stern look. “Wait for me when Krasa is finished grazing so we can walk back to town together. It’s not safe with the soldiers about.”

“Thanks, Uncle,” I said, standing on my toes and kissing him on his cheek.

I guided Krasa through the bushes and undid her rope so she could graze while I picked raspberries.

I should have brought a pail, but between Josip and all the shooting last night, I had forgotten. At least my apron had deep pockets. I reached through the thorny bushes to get to the ripest berries.

Just then I heard low grinding screeches coming from the road. Artem Bronsek was guiding a slope-backed horse as it pulled a cart filled with a variety of goods that looked like they’d been stolen from different houses and stores.

His wife, Olga, sat on the bench beside him, and their daughter, Sonia, sat perched on a carved box as she steadied a painting of a long-dead princess on her knee.

I knew exactly where that painting had been stolen from—the Tarnowsky house in our town square. Mama used to clean that house too, before the war.

Next, two Soviet trucks rumbled past. One was piled high with stolen goods; the other carried half a dozen soldiers clutching rifles. I let the branches close and kept still, counting the long seconds it took for the trucks to pass.

A minute later, three loud gunshots erupted in rapid succession. Even as they fled, the Soviets wanted to scare us.

CHAPTER THREE

BLOOD AND RASPBERRIES

My pockets bulged with raspberries and Krasa had long finished grazing, but Uncle Roman still hadn't come back. While I was anxious to get home, he had told me to wait, so I sat down on a rock and chewed on a blade of grass. Krasa ambled over and nudged my shoulder with her nose.

"Only a few more minutes," I said, rubbing her face. Just then boots sounded on the road. "There they are, girl." I grabbed Krasa's rope and led her out.

Lysa was there to greet us, but it was Dolik Kitai holding on to her rope, not Uncle Roman. Dolik didn't look me in the eye, but instead stared down at my feet. My bare and dirty feet. He wore sturdy leather boots.

"Why do you have my uncle's cow?" The words came out more sharply than I intended.

"She was wandering down the road," he said, kicking a bit of dirt with the toe of his boot. "It was a good thing I

was delivering medicine for Mami down this way, or Lysa may have been stolen.”

I took Lysa’s rope and thanked him. Then, with one rope in each hand, I turned and led the two cows toward Uncle Roman’s pasture.

“Where is your uncle?” asked Dolik.

“I don’t know,” I said. It wasn’t unusual for Uncle Roman to lose track of time, but to lose track of *Lysa*? Never. “That’s why I’m going to see if I can find him.”

Dolik caught up with me and took Lysa’s rope back. “Let me help you.”

“Aren’t you worried you’ll get your fancy boots dirty?”

“Why do you have to be so mean, Krystia?” he said. “I’m trying to *help* you.”

“*I’m* being mean?”

Two bright red spots formed on Dolik’s cheeks. “It’s not *my* fault that my parents have more money than your mother. Stop holding it against me.”

Was I jealous of Dolik? I had to admit that I was. But it had nothing to do with his boots or his nice clothing. Every time I saw him with his father, my heart ached. How I wished I could have one more hug from my own father. Tato’s death had blasted a hole through my heart.

I opened my mouth to say something back, but no words came. Worse than that, I could feel tears welling up

in my eyes. I brushed my hand across my face and continued walking in silence.

Dolik stomped along a meter behind me as we led the cows down the road toward my uncle's pasture. Strangely, even though Dolik unsettled me, I was grateful for his company. I was getting more worried about what had happened to my uncle.

We tied both cows to a tree to keep them from wandering, then split up so we could check the entire area, calling out Uncle's name as we went.

The place he most often sat was on a rock at the edge of the pasture. I liked sitting there too, because of the view of the roads and farms. I climbed up onto the rock, shouting Uncle's name, but he didn't answer. I turned, looking in all directions. No Uncle Roman. In the distance, I noticed the distinctive blue tile on the roof of Auntie Polina Semko's farmhouse. She was really an elderly distant cousin, but my sister and I called her Auntie. I had been at that farm when I was little, for a wedding. Most of the land had been taken over by a Soviet commune, but that blue roof never changed.

Dolik met back up with me, his brow creased. "Let's switch sides and try again."

About fifteen minutes later he shouted. I spotted him on the rock where I had stood, waving Uncle Roman's yellow handkerchief like a flag.

I ran over to him.

Uncle Roman lay curled on his side, deep in the brambles behind the rock. I pushed through, ignoring the thorns as they cut into me. The back of his shirt was a wet slick of blood.

Sometimes a shock is so bad that it seems you're watching your own actions from above. That's how it was for me. I lay my head on Uncle's back and begged him to get up.

"I think he's dead, Krystia," said Dolik, placing a palm on Uncle's neck. "Feel how cool he is."

I didn't want to believe it, and clung to Uncle Roman's body, begging him to wake up.

Dolik wrapped his arms around me and gently pried me away. "Take a deep breath."

I forced myself to *think*. An image crowded my thoughts. "It was the soldiers."

"What soldiers?"

"Half a dozen Soviets passed this way," I said. "And I *heard* shots, but I thought they were shooting into the air. Why would they shoot an old man looking after his cow?"

"Listen. We need to get the cows home safely," said Dolik. "But we also need to get your uncle's body out of here."

Dolik was right. But I couldn't think it all through.

"Can you stay here with him?" asked Dolik. "I'll get help."

"Go," I said.

Dolik nodded and left.

Even with Uncle Roman lying dead in front of me, I found it hard to believe that he was truly gone. Poor Borys and Josip and Auntie Iryna—their hearts would be broken. The pain of my own father's death was still as deep as if it had just happened. And now my cousins and auntie had their own horrible loss. My entire being ached with sorrow.

I looked down at my good skirt and shirt—both now covered with the red of blood and raspberries. I fell to my knees, hugged Uncle Roman, and wept.