

WINTERKILL

A NOVEL BY

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SHOCK BRIGADE

February 1930, in Felivka, a village near Kharkiv, Soviet Ukraine

Tato and I had just entered the village after inspecting our wheat field. There we stood, father and son, in front of Saint Sophia Church in silence and watched as hundreds of uniformed young people armed with leaflets marched past us.

A lot of them looked to be in their early twenties, and they wore the distinctive uniform of the Komsomol—the Young Communist League—beneath their unbuttoned winter coats: brownish-gray short pants gathered at the knee and a military tunic topped off with a red neck scarf and a belt across the chest. Their tall black boots made an intimidating thump as their feet hit our muddy road in unison.

There were also Young Pioneers, with their red ties visible above their coats. Young Pioneers could be as young as nine and as old as fifteen, but most in this group looked to be about my age, twelve. I was a Pioneer on paper

because you got into trouble if you didn't join, but around here people called the red tie "the devil's noose."

There were also some adult marchers in city clothes, as well as others in the uniforms of youth leaders.

It took a while for them all to pass by. We waited another minute or so, then Tato and I stepped onto the road and followed them.

The Saturday market was in progress in the square, and as the strangers marched past them, our friends and neighbors stopped mid-haggle and gawked at the parade just like we had done. The marchers continued north up the street, and we continued to follow. Tato and I didn't have much choice, because our house was as far north as you could go and still be within the village.

Once the parade got past the village square, the marchers dispersed. I noticed a couple of them approaching Pani Pich's cottage, while three stood at Comrade Olinyk's door.

By the time we got to our own house, the parade had dissolved. I pushed open our door, grateful to be away from all the drama.

"Son, husband," said Mama, her face frozen in an artificial grin. She was seated at the table with my nine-year-old brother, Slavko, and eleven-year-old sister, Yulia. My chair and Tato's were occupied by two strangers. "We have company, all the way from Canada."

A Young Pioneer girl wearing her red devil's noose

around her neck sat at my spot beside Yulia as if it were hers. She had been scribbling something on a form when we walked in. The other visitor was a man sitting beside Slavko, in Tato's spot. He wore the kind of collared shirt with buttons that Roman, the priest's son, sometimes wore when he got a package from relatives in America.

The sight of them occupying not just our house but our places at the table sent a wave of fury through me. It was bad enough that Stalin had become the dictator of all the republics in the Soviet Union, but now he was starting up his "five-year-plan." It was supposed to modernize the Soviet Union but actually hurt people like us. He was taking away our farms and making them into one big collective farm—the kolkhoz. He had already sent in city people ignorant of farming to force the change on us, but now he was sending in foreigners. They couldn't possibly know the challenges we had. Every single day since Stalin's push had begun last year, friends and neighbors had been bullied and forced into giving up their property and joining the kolkhoz. But why Canadians?

"Slavko, go to Auntie and Uncle's barn and feed the animals," said Mama.

I was extremely jealous as my brother excused himself and ran out the door.

"Sit," said Mama, giving Tato and me each a look that said, *Don't argue.*

I had a barn to repair and chores to do, not to mention homework, but I was supposed to sit and be nice to these Canadians as they told me how to live. I pasted a smile onto my face. I'd be polite until we could get them to leave.

The man smiled. "Comrade Chorny, Comrade Nyl." He spoke perfect Ukrainian but with an odd accent. "I'm Comrade White. I go by George White, although my Ukrainian name was Yury Bialek. Let me introduce you to my daughter."

The girl looked up and smiled. "I'm Comrade Alice."

Tato sat in Slavko's spot. I pulled up an extra chair and sat down across from Alice and Yulia. "You came all the way from Canada to assist with Stalin's five-year plan?" I asked.

"We did," said Alice. "A new tractor factory is being built in Kharkiv, and once it's finished, my father will work there. In the meantime, we're helping with the drive to get people signed up for the kolkhozes."

Her Ukrainian was almost as smooth as her father's, but the accent was more pronounced. With her light brown hair and hazel eyes, she could have been a local, but the blouse and skirt had that fine weave and careful stitching that you only saw in clothing that came in packages from North America. It made no sense that they had come here. Living in America was the ultimate dream, yet they left it to come back here to help Stalin?

“What’s that written on your pin?” asked Yulia, staring at the ornament on the Canadian girl’s lapel.

Alice unclipped her pin and handed it to Yulia. “It’s in English script, but the words are the same as on the Young Pioneer pins here. It says *Always Ready*.”

“I have one too,” Yulia said. She scrambled from her seat and came back with her pin in her hand and her red tie draped loosely around her neck. She set her pin on the table so we could see the Russian beside the English. They had the identical image: Lenin with a Soviet star and flame in the background. I smiled and pretended to be interested in the whole show. I had a pin as well, but I never wore it or my devil’s noose.

“Was there a Communist revolution in Canada?” I asked.

Comrade White cleared his throat. Mama gave me a look.

Yulia gazed longingly at the Lenin pin from Canada.

“Do you know what we should do?” Alice asked Yulia.

“What?” asked Yulia.

Alice slid her pin in front of Yulia’s spot at the table. “Let’s trade pins.”

Yulia’s eyes went wide. “Oh my,” she said. “Do you mean it?”

“I do,” said Alice. “Here.”

I watched as Alice expertly tied the devil's noose around my sister's neck, then fastened the pin to the left side of her blouse. Yulia looked like she was about to burst with pride, and I had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. My sister seemed far too impressed with this girl from Canada.

"Don't you look smart," said Alice as she straightened my sister's tie. "Now promise me you'll take good care of your new pin."

"Of course I will," said Yulia. "And I hope you'll enjoy wearing your Russian one."

"I will," said Alice.

While this whole exchange was going on, I looked across the table at the paper Alice had been filling out. Even reading it upside down I could see that it was a checklist of household items written in Russian. The sections listing our pots and pans and dishes and clothing were already filled out. She'd made a special note of our hand mill for grinding hard grain and our loaf pans too. This was alarming.

Tato had sat down beside me in Slavko's chair. Mama served mugs of mint tea even though it was time for lunch and my stomach was grumbling. I think she was hoping the visitors would leave; two extra mouths would use up a lot of our food. Unfortunately, both father and daughter looked settled in and comfortable. Comrade White

launched into a speech to Tato about the advantages of living on a kolkhoz while the rest of us stayed politely silent.

As her father talked, the Canadian girl looked around at the icons on our walls and frowned. Her attitude was typical of all the pushy shock workers—those Russians sent from Moscow, like Comrades Tupolev and Chort—and the locals who had bought into their lies, like Fedir’s father, Comrade Berkovich; my old teacher, Comrade Holodnaya; and that stupid Comrade Smert. Alice also glanced at the glass bowl of decades-old pysanky—colorful hand-decorated eggs—that graced our table and at Mama’s delicate embroideries covering the windows, but she seemed to be blind to their beauty. She just counted each item on her fingers, then noted the quantity on her form. She kept on glancing over to the corner of the room where Mama prayed. It was simple but functional, just a small table covered with a white embroidered cloth. There were beeswax candles on either side of an intricately carved crucifix.

Alice leaned over the table and said, “That’s going to get your family into a lot of trouble.” She pointed at the prayer corner. “You really should get rid of it.”

“My great-grandfather carved that crucifix,” I told her. “It means a lot to Mama.”

“Then hide it,” said Alice.

“We made atheist’s corners at school last week,” said Yulia.

“You should replace it. I’m serious,” Alice said.

Mama held her finger to her lips. Alice sighed and continued with her inventory. Comrade White sounded like Tupolev, the head shock worker, in his arguments about why we should join the kolkhoz. “You’ll get tractors and modern equipment for farming. We’ll work together, and everyone’s quality of life will be better. We’ll grow more grain than ever before.”

“Have you ever been a farmer?” asked Tato.

“No. I’m a tractor machinist,” said Comrade White.

“That’s impressive,” said Tato. “I would never dream to advise you on making tractors, so why are you advising me on the best way to farm?”

“There’s no reason to be rude,” said Comrade White. “Don’t you understand that I’m trying to help you?”

“Don’t you understand what the revolution was all about?” asked Tato. “We got rid of the landlords and became our own bosses. Now Stalin wants to give us new landlords and take away our land.”

“You realize that your words are treason, don’t you?” said Comrade White. “The only farmers who insist on owning land are the kulaks, and they’re the enemies of the revolution.”

I felt like I had a stone in my stomach. Being labeled a kulak was serious. The term used to simply mean a rich farmer, but now it was applied to any farmer that

the Stalinists wanted to eliminate. If Comrade White denounced Tato as a kulak, we could be executed or sent to a slave labor camp in Siberia.

Tato took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. I could see it in his face that he regretted his outburst. He didn't respond right away but then finally said, "I'm sorry. I spoke out of turn."

The uncomfortable silence was broken when Alice set down her pencil and said, "Who would like to help with the inventory of the outside?"

"I would," said Yulia, a bit too eagerly.

Mama's eyes landed on me. "Nyl," she said. "You can help Alice with the inventory."

"But I want to," said Yulia, her eyes filling with tears.

"You, young lady, need to feed the chickens and do your homework," said Mama.

I knew what Mama was doing. The chickens would be happy with their early meal, but Mama wanted to keep Yulia away from Alice. Yulia was far too eager to hear what Alice had to say.

"Yes, Mama," I said, getting up from the table. "Comrade Alice, I would be happy to help you."

I tried my best to keep the rage out of my voice. There was only one reason for Alice to be doing an inventory and that was so she could report to Tupolev all that we owned. It would help him know what he could steal. I wished

more than anything that we had a way out of this situation, but I feared we did not.

Alice stood up, and I walked to the door. She followed, but she didn't look happy about going with me instead of my more congenial sister.

"You speak English and Ukrainian?" I asked her as we walked out the door and around to the back. I was determined to sound friendly. "How come?"

"I've spoken Ukrainian and English since I was little," she said. "I'm picking up Russian now, since everyone in the Communist Party seems to prefer it."

"I know what you mean," I said. "We understand Russian—there's a lot of similarities with Ukrainian—but we prefer to speak our own language."

"Me too," she said. "Russian feels funny on my tongue."

"That's our storage shed," I said, pointing to the wooden structure with a sod roof beside the barn-in-progress. Between where we stood and the storage shed there was a large mound of composting manure. As it rotted, it made good rich soil for our family vegetable garden, but it also had another purpose: It sat on top of a stone-lined storage cellar where we had hidden our precious store of millet, corn, and wheat seed as well as emergency sacks of wheat for eating. The trapdoor to the cellar was undetectable unless you knew exactly where to look. We walked right past it as I led Alice to the storage shed.

I opened the door for Alice, and she stepped inside. The shelves were lined with glass jars filled with preserves made from our own garden: pickled beets, cucumbers, and carrots. A brine barrel of cabbageheads sat in one corner, while hanging down from the ceiling were onions, garlic, and various herbs. There were also a couple of small burlap sacks of wild dried mushrooms and larger sacks of potatoes.

“No flour or grain?” Alice asked.

“The government requisitioned all of it last fall,” I said. “In addition to our entire harvest, they took our stored wheat.”

“You do have some wheat,” she said. “I noticed the hand mill and loaf pans in the kitchen area.”

“This is what we’ve been living on,” I said, pointing to the items in the storage shed.

“No grain at all?” she asked.

“Just enough for our family to get by until the next harvest,” I said.

It was almost the truth.

“Can you show me where it is?” she asked, holding up her inventory sheet. “I’d like to take note of it.”

“You probably already tallied it,” I lied. “It was the sack in the kitchen pantry.”

“What’s this?” she asked, stepping in front of our barn-in-progress. The outside structure was nearly finished,