

KIDNAPPED FROM UKRAINE

UNDER ATTACK

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CHAPTER ONE

THE DAY THE WAR STARTED

Mariupol, Thursday, February 24, 2022

I was snuggled deep in my bed with my twin sister, Rada. We had heard that the Russians might be attacking, but I didn't believe it. Mariupol may have been a Ukrainian city, but everyone here could speak Russian. We weren't their enemies.

In the wee hours of the morning, the bed shook. I bolted up. How could the bed be shaking? Our apartment was on the fourth floor. But then again, we lived in a khrushchevka—one of the many mass-produced apartment buildings Khrushchev had slapped together in the 1960s, and they were pretty rickety. I looked over at Rada. She was still asleep, her long thick braid draped neatly across her pillow. Maybe it was a dream. I lay back down, but I couldn't sleep. In fact, I didn't even want to close my eyes.

A crackling in the distance, and through the curtains faint blasts of light. My stomach did a sick twist.

I got out of bed and pulled on a pair of pants and a hoodie while Rada continued to sleep. I popped into the bathroom to

brush my teeth and to splash some water on my hair so it didn't stick out all over the place. That was the advantage of having it so short: no maintenance. I poked my head into Dad and Mom's bedroom. Mom looked like a starfish, sound asleep on her stomach with her arms and legs taking up way more of the bed than necessary. This was an irritant I was familiar with because Rada had inherited Mom's bed-hogging tendencies. Dad's side of the bed was empty.

I found him sitting in his pajama bottoms at the table in the main room, staring out the window. He was like me—typically a bit on edge.

The table was cluttered with Rada's bottles of old nail polish and bits of metal scraps and findings. She was always crafting something, and right now it was bracelets made with metal scraps from the Azovstal steel plant where Dad worked, painted jewel-like with old nail polish from the shop where Mom worked. Dad had cleared off a space to plop down a cup of coffee.

"Are they bombing us?" I asked.

"Putin declared a 'special military operation' to eradicate Ukraine's 'Nazi' regime and free the people," said Dad. "It was a long speech, early this morning."

Even under the terrible circumstances, I couldn't help but smirk. Nazi regime? President Zelensky's first language was

Russian, plus he was Jewish. Everyone knew he lost family in the Holocaust. Plus, he was elected by a landslide. Our country was the opposite of a Nazi regime.

“The Russians are just outside the city,” said Dad, holding his phone to show me a text message. “Martial law has been declared. I need to report for duty.”

“When?” I asked.

Dad was a reserve in the army.

“Today,” he said.

“What about us?” I asked.

“There could be fighting on the streets,” he said. “You’ll need to stay inside.”

Rada got up not long after that, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. She padded over in her slippers and nightgown to the table and plopped down in her chair. When Mom joined us, she was fully dressed and had a frantic look in her eyes. She didn’t sit down.

She held up her phone and said, “They’re attacking the whole country. Will it even be safe here in the apartment?”

“It’s best to stay put,” said Dad. “They’ll be going after the airports, and the armed forces. It wouldn’t make sense for them to waste resources going after twelve-year-old kids like Dariia and Rada, or civilians like you, but stay out of the crossfire.”

“We need food, then,” said Mom. “There’s not much here.”

Dad had an exasperated look on his face. “Why didn’t you go yesterday?”

“You could have gone too, you know,” said Mom. “I was putting together emergency packs for each of us in case the war started.”

“It’s not safe to go to the grocery store,” said Dad.

“We can just go to Tkachuks’,” I said.

Mrs. Tkachuk had a twenty-four-hour variety store on the main floor of our apartment building. It wasn’t huge, but it generally had everything we needed.

“Are they even open?” Mom answered her own question by punching their number into her phone. She listened for a minute and then said, “They’re open right now, but she’s sent staff home and will be closing up shortly. I’d better get down there.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said. “To help carry stuff up.”

Our Soviet-era apartment building had no elevator, making it a pain to lug up groceries, which was one reason we tended to get just enough for a day or two at any one time.

“The girls should stay up here,” said Dad. “I’ll go down with you.”

“You’re not even dressed, Ivan,” said Mom. “I need to hurry. Dariia is dressed. She can come with me instead.”

I slipped my bare feet into sneakers, stuck my phone in my

pocket, and grabbed our cloth shopping bags. “Let’s get going, Mom.”

The store was empty except for Mrs. Tkachuk.

“Our Thursday delivery was canceled,” she said. “And we had a run of customers yesterday. I wish there was more I could offer you.”

The shelves were really picked over, but Mom managed to find a small ham, a container of bryndza—a cheese similar to feta—and a loaf of rye. I got the last jug of water, plus some apples.

While Mom paid for it all, I looked out the window at the gray early morning. Frantic-looking people were running down the street in the icy rain. A car careened past, almost hitting a pedestrian. I was glad I wasn’t out there.

“Thank you for staying open for us,” Mom said to Mrs. Tkachuk as we headed back to the stairwell.

“Glad you got some things you needed,” said Mrs. Tkachuk. “There’s one more person coming, and then I’m closing up.”

We got to the second flight when a blinding light burst in front of us. A force like a giant invisible hand pushed us down the stairs and threw us onto the landing. My ears burned with pain, and I shouted to Mom, but no sound came out. Her mouth opened to respond, but again, silence.

Bricks and concrete silently flew from the walls above and tumbled down toward us. A chunk the size of a handball shot right at me, but I turned just in time, landing on top of Mom in the process. Concrete rained down all around us.

When it subsided, I rolled off Mom and pulled her to a sitting position. My mouth said the words, “Are you okay?” but no sound came out.

Mom’s eyes looked wild, and she had bits of concrete in her hair. Her lips moved, but I couldn’t hear what she said.

We stumbled to our feet. Mom grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the exit, but I pointed up the stairwell. We had to get back upstairs—back to Dad and Rada. Her lips moved again, and the building shook. Another piece of concrete tumbled toward us. With a big yank, she practically dragged me out of the stairwell and under the doorframe at the entrance.

Mom pulled out her phone. The screen was cracked, but it showed three bars. She texted Dad.

We both watched the screen, waiting for a response, but it didn’t come.

I tried not to think of the main reason why he wouldn’t be answering. I texted Rada. Same thing—no response.

Just then the building shook again, and Mom crumpled to the ground. More concrete rained down.

I gripped the doorframe so I wouldn't fall. My head felt like it would explode from the pain in my ears. With my free hand I pulled Mom back onto her feet. I grabbed the groceries. The bread was squished but otherwise fine, and the apples would be bruised. The jug of water was miraculously okay, and so were the ham and cheese. I gave the bags to Mom and held on to the water as we ran back into Tkachuks'.

The store looked like a bomb hit it. In fact, a bomb *had* hit it.

Glass shards covered every possible surface, and icy air whipped through the open window and door.

"Mrs. Tkachuk?" I called out. My head throbbed. I could hear my voice, but it sounded like I was calling from the end of a tunnel. If Mrs. Tkachuk answered, I didn't hear her.

I clutched the jug of water to my chest and carefully stepped through the rubble of glass, hoping it wouldn't cut through the soles of my sneakers, hoping I wouldn't careen over in my wooziness. I got to the other side of the checkout counter and found Mrs. Tkachuk wedged in between the back shelf and the counter, lying on her back with a shard of glass stuck deep in her neck. Blood glistened down her shirt, and her face was the color of putty.

I set the jug of water on top of the counter and squatted beside

Mrs. Tkachuk. Mom put her groceries beside the water and stepped in behind me.

“Don’t touch the shard,” she said—and I could hear the words. “If she’s still alive, she could bleed out if you remove it.”

I heard that too.

I turned up the volume on my phone and called for an ambulance, but the call didn’t go through. I held the screen out to show Mom. “What do we do now?” I asked.

“Can you feel for her pulse?”

I picked up the hand that was closest to me and gently shook it to remove most of the glass. There were a couple of small pieces that were stuck in, so I removed them too. I placed my first two fingers on her wrist. The skin was still warm, but I couldn’t find a pulse.

“Let me try,” said Mom. She had taken a first aid course.

I squirmed out of the way, and Mom squatted down beside Mrs. Tkachuk. She put her fingers on her pulse.

“Anything?” I asked.

Mom shook her head.

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

“Nothing,” said Mom. “We can’t help her. And we have to get to the basement. Now.”

It didn’t seem right to leave Mrs. Tkachuk like that, where

anyone could come in and gawk at her. I found a dusting cloth and shook out the glass shards, then gently covered her face. It wasn't much, but it was a small dignity that I could give her.

"Vichnaya Pamyat," I whispered.

Mom said a quick prayer, then motioned me to follow her back to the stairwell.

The blast that had killed Mrs. Tkachuk had also sheared through what was left of the stairwell. It was blocked going up and down. We turned and went back to the store.

Mom stepped through the bomb-blasted window into the gray, rainy street, clutching her bag of groceries. I was about two steps behind her. There were no normal sounds of a bustling city outside, no regular traffic or people on the street. When a car went by, it careened down the street, not paying attention to traffic rules. Same thing with the people. Any that we saw were running for their lives.

"Do you even know where we're going?" I asked, pulling my hood up for warmth.

"There's a small concrete storeroom under the manicure salon," said Mom. "That's the closest underground spot I can think of."

"But what about Dad and Rada?" I asked.

"They're going to have to look after themselves for the moment," said Mom. "And right now, we're doing the same."

Mom ran down the street, avoiding puddles and cars and people, then hid in a doorway. I followed close behind her, shivering in the cold wetness. I wished I had put on socks. And taken a coat and gloves. I wished we had taken the emergency packs Mom had assembled the day before.

The salon that Mom worked at was just two blocks away, but when you're running through the street wondering if you're going to be shot or hit with a rocket, two blocks stretch out for an eternity. We passed some buildings that looked perfectly normal, but about halfway there, a flash came out of nowhere and hit a small bakeshop moments before we stepped in front of it. There was a billow of smoke and dust, and the store window exploded. I watched the whole thing in what seemed to be slow motion, realizing that if we had been mere seconds faster, we would have been hit. I grabbed Mom from the back and pulled her to the ground.

"Cover your head," I shouted as shards of glass rained all around us.

The only way to the basement of the manicure salon was to get into the building first and then go down the stairs at the back and open it with a key. The salon was locked and hadn't been hit. Even luckier: Mom happened to have her key with her. It was just one of the many keys on her chain.

Mom turned the lock with shaking hands and opened the door. We stepped inside.

The warmth and stillness of the indoors hit me like a blanket. I hadn't realized how cold and wet I had gotten.

Mom called out, "Stasia, are you here?"

Her words echoed in the emptiness.

"We should call Dad and Rada now," I said. "There might not be cell coverage downstairs."

Dad picked up Mom's call on the first ring.

"Where are you?" he shouted. "Where's Dariia?"

"We're both okay. We're at the salon," Mom said. "I'll put you on speaker. Is Rada safe?"

"Dad," I shouted. "I was so worried about you. Where's Rada?"

"Thank God you're safe," said Dad.

Rada's voice was shaking. "It's me," she said. "We thought you'd been hit."

"Can you get out of the building?" Mom asked. "We couldn't get back to the apartment. The stairs are a mass of rubble."

"I know," said Dad. "The whole apartment block shook. I think it was hit on the second or third floor. Our big window shattered."

"Can you get out?" asked Mom.

“We’ll figure out a way.”

“Come to the salon. There’s a small storeroom underground.”

“Here’s the thing,” said Dad. “The salon isn’t a good place to shelter.”

“It’s the perfect place,” said Mom. “It’s got a bathroom, running water, and the storage room downstairs is all concrete.”

“Yaroslava,” said Dad, “what do you think happens to nail polish remover when an explosive hits it? How about nail polish? There’s a lot of stuff in there that’s highly flammable.”

Mom’s face crumpled. “I don’t know where else to go,” she said.

“Azovstal has a whole series of bomb shelters. Go to the entrance I use for work. I’ll find you.”

After Dad clicked off, Mom looked like she was about to throw the phone, so I grabbed it from her.

“We can’t get to Azovstal,” she said. “We barely got here.”

“But Dad’s right,” I said, looking around at the display of regular and gel polishes that took up a whole wall, and the salon chairs, each with their mini collection of fire-starters, like nail polish remover and rubbing alcohol in individual glass bottles.

“We can’t stay here.”

Mom sat down heavily on one of the salon chairs and held her head in her hands. “What are we going to do?” she asked.

“What if we put it outside?”

Mom shook her head. “And create a fire hazard outside? I don’t think so. Besides, Stasia buys in bulk and refills the bottles. There are jugs of this stuff in the basement.”

I slumped down into the chair beside Mom. “I can’t believe this is happening. Even if we escape the bombs we’ll freeze out there,” I said.

Mom’s eyes lit up. “The lost and found,” she said. “I’ll show you.”

She dragged out a cardboard box from behind the cash counter and knelt beside it. Her brow creased in concentration as she rooted through the box. She pulled out a bright red sweater and held it up triumphantly.

“It looks warm,” I said. “But it’s also like wearing a bull’s-eye.”

“It is bright,” said Mom. “But you could wear it underneath your hoodie and no one would see it.”

“You want me to wear it?” I asked.

“You need to be warm. It’s February. And there’s only one sweater.”

“You’re the one who’s always cold,” I said.

Mom gave me a look that said, *Don’t argue with me.*

“What else is there?” I asked, kneeling beside her.

We found enough orphaned gloves to make a set for each of

us, a scarf, and a big floral pashmina. Incredibly, we also found a matching pair of socks.

“How could someone forget their socks?” I asked, holding them up. They were thin and on the small side, but better than nothing.

“Pedicures,” Mom said. “Socks ruin them.”

Mom had been smart enough to wear socks this morning, so I got the socks.