

CHAPTER 1

DREAMS

I dream of dogs. I dream of warm, soft backs pressed against mine, their deep musky smell a comfort on long, bitter nights. I dream of wet tongues, flashing teeth, warm noses, and knowing eyes, watching. Always watching.

Sometimes I dream we are running, the dogs and I, through empty streets and deserted parks. We run for the joy and freedom in it, never tiring, never hungry. And then, great wings unfold from their backs, spreading wide and lifting the dogs above me. I cry out, begging them to come back, to take pity on this earthbound boy.

It has been many years since I lived with the dogs, but still I dream. I do not dream of the long winter nights on the streets of Russia; seldom do I dream of the things that drove me from my home. My dreams begin and end with the dogs.

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.