

STOLEN GIRL

A novel by
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CHAPTER ONE

1950—COMING TO CANADA

The woman who said she was my mother was so ill on the ship from Europe that she wore a sickness bag around her neck almost the whole time. The man I called father had come over a year before us. He had worked in different places in Canada, looking for one that could be our home. He wrote to us that he'd settled on Brantford, Ontario, because of the trees and the two Ukrainian churches. And a foundry that gave him a job—which meant that we could eat.

Because Marusia was so sick on the ship, she spent most of her time down below. I do not like to feel closed in, so I let her sleep in peace. I was left with lots of time on my own, and I didn't mind. I would run up the stairs to the top deck and lean over the railing, watching the water churn far, far below me. Once, I climbed over the railing and sat on the edge, dangling my legs over the open water and

relishing the cool, clean air. I was there less than a minute when a deckhand snatched me by the waist and lifted me to safety. He yelled at me in a language that wasn't Ukrainian or Yiddish or German or Russian. It wasn't English either. I suppose he told me that I was crazy to be doing such a thing. It didn't feel crazy. I was finally alone and out in the open, if only for a moment. It felt like freedom.

When the ship landed at the Port of Halifax, I followed Marusia down the gangplank. I had gotten so used to the rolling of the sea that when my feet touched Canadian soil, I thought it was moving. I had to hold on to a post to stop from falling. Marusia was unsteady on her feet too. She was carrying the suitcase and couldn't reach the post, so I grabbed her hand and steadied her, then we walked to the end of the long, snaking line of immigrants.

At the front of the line stood men in uniform, who interviewed every newcomer. That scared me speechless. What would they ask me about? What could I say?

Marusia squeezed my hand reassuringly. "Remember to call me Mama."

When it was our turn, the officer looked at our documents, then bent down until he was eye level with me. His craggy face was kind, but the uniform terrified me. He said in Ukrainian, "Welcome to Canada, Nadia. Are you glad to be here?"

I don't like to lie, so I didn't answer but just stared at him through my tears. I was glad to finally be out of that terrible displaced persons camp we had been in for five years. In some ways, I was glad to be in Canada because it was so far away from my other life. But there were things about my earlier life that I still yearned for.

The immigration officer tugged on one of my pigtails and then stood up. I listened as he asked Marusia questions about where we came from before the war, and what we did during it. I always noticed how easily Marusia lied.

The officer asked to see the train tickets that the United Nations people had given us. Marusia held them up, not wanting to let them go, but he snatched them from her and examined them carefully. Only when he seemed satisfied did he stamp our papers and hand the tickets and our papers back. Marusia folded them with trembling hands and shoved them through the buttons of her carefully ironed blouse. The man gave her some paper money. "That's five Canadian dollars. For food," he said.

The port was thick with other people who had lost their homelands in the war, just like us. Vendors competed with each other, trying to sell us food. They shouted things like "milk," "apples," and "bread." Marusia had tried to learn some English in the DP camp, and so had I, so we could understand some of the words.

Marusia wanted to buy meat sandwiches and a bottle of milk, but she didn't know the word for sandwich. When she finally got a vendor to understand her, he wanted too much money. We needed to be careful so our money would last. I was hungry and thirsty and thought I would die of heat. But at least we were safe.

"I think that is a food store," I said, pointing to a building with a pyramid of tin cans displayed in the window. The door of the building opened and a man walked out. He carried what looked like a loaf of bread.

"Let us try," said Marusia, pushing me toward the store.

When we opened the door, it was even hotter inside than outside. A rosy-faced man with a barrel belly and a shiny hairless head grinned at us.

"Food . . . ?" said Marusia in English, holding the five-dollar bill up for the man to see.

"Not much left," said the man in English, gesturing with his hands to help us understand.

We looked around the store. He was right. The cans arranged in a pyramid had pictures of different vegetables on them. There were sacks of flour and rice. But no buns or cheeses or sausage or anything that could be eaten without preparation.

"Bread?" asked Marusia.

The storekeeper shook his head sadly.

We were about to leave when the man's face brightened. He crooked his finger and we followed him to the back corner of the store. As he opened up a giant box, a whoosh of lovely icy air enveloped us. He pulled out what looked like a large white cardboard brick. "Ice cream," he said, grinning.

"I scream?" Marusia asked, puzzled.

"No, no," the man said.

I was as confused as Marusia. What did this screaming thing have to do with bread?

The man grabbed the cardboard brick and took it to the front counter. He frowned in concentration as he shuffled through a box under his cash register. Smiling, he held up two flat wooden spoons. "Now you'll see," he said, peeling back a paper layer from the cold brick. A vanilla scent swirled toward us.

"Ice," said the man. Then, "Cream." He took one of the wooden spoons and dragged it across the surface of the brick. A cold ball formed. He poised it on the spoon and held it to my mouth. "Taste," he said.

I clamped my mouth shut.

"I will try," said Marusia in her careful English. The man held the spoon to her open mouth and dropped in the cold ball as if he were feeding a bird. Her eyes

widened with shock. I was so glad that I hadn't tried it first. But then she grinned. "Good!" she said.

She rolled a bit onto the other spoon and gave it to me. I touched the strange food with the tip of my tongue. It reminded me of a snowball. I put the entire spoonful into my mouth and shivered at the shock of cold, creamy sweetness. It wasn't just the wonderful taste but the sensation of cold on a hot, sticky day. It was heavenly.

"Five dollars," said the storekeeper.

Marusia blanched. A whole five dollars for this strange new food? She shook her head.

"You eat, you buy," he said sternly.

Marusia reluctantly held up our five-dollar bill. "But this is all we have."

The shopkeeper grabbed it from her fingers.

"Please," she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

The shopkeeper gave us a pitying stare. He reached into his till and took out a one-dollar bill. Marusia took it.

We walked out of the store, Marusia clutching our precious ice cream to her chest. We were barely halfway down the block when she cried, "Oh no. Look!"

Her blouse was covered with thick white liquid. "Hold this," she said, shoving the ice cream container into my hands. She reached through her buttons and took out our precious immigration papers and our train tickets. A

corner of one form was wet and a portion of the official stamp was now illegible. The train tickets were damp but not damaged. She waved them in the air, drying them. Meanwhile, I stood there, watching our four-dollars' worth of ice cream melt in the heat. Marusia gingerly refolded the immigration papers and train tickets and shoved them beneath the waistband of her skirt.

“Let us sit there,” she said, clutching my elbow to direct me over to a park bench. The minute we sat down she handed me a wooden spoon. We slurped the ice cream as quickly as we could. By the time we were finished, our hands and faces were sticky, but I didn't care. That ice cream was the best thing I had tasted in a very long time. We cleaned ourselves off at a public fountain, but Marusia's blouse no longer looked freshly ironed.

I don't remember all that happened over the next few days. We managed to find our way to the train station. I knew we were traveling west and I remember switching trains in Quebec City. We stopped long enough in Montreal to find a food store. We only had that one-dollar bill. The ice cream had been such a costly treat!

One of the other immigrants traveling on the train suggested that we buy something called Wonder Bread.

“It’s cheap,” she said. “You could buy three loaves with your dollar.”

So we went into a grocery store and asked the red-lipsticked cashier where we would find Wonder Bread. “Down the aisle,” she said in a bored voice, pointing with a long red fingernail. An entire shelf was filled with fluffy white loaves wrapped in colorful waxed paper. Marusia took two. We didn’t dare buy anything to drink, and besides, there was a water fountain outside. The cashier gave us several coins in change.

When we got back onto the train, Marusia opened up one of the bread packages and drew out a couple of slices for each of us. It looked like perfect white bread, with a soft golden crust. I held it to my face and breathed in. It had no smell. I took a bite. It had no taste. I looked at Marusia. She was chewing slowly, with a puzzled expression on her face. “I wonder why they call this bread,” she asked. Then she chuckled sadly. “Wonder Bread.”

I felt like crying. Would this be the only kind of bread we could eat in Canada?

Marusia patted my hand. “I’ll bake some real bread when we get to our new home.”

With the motion of the train and my hunger staved off with Wonder Bread, I drifted off to sleep, dreaming of real bread.

Our train chugged through Ottawa, then we switched trains in Toronto. I was amazed that Marusia could keep it all straight, but each time the train stopped, she would show our tickets to the conductor to make sure we were going in the right direction. These trains were enclosed, with soft chairs and big windows—nothing like the flat-cars in Germany. I stared out the window as the cities flashed by, surprised that there were no bombed-out buildings, no burnt-down cities. Had the war not traveled across the ocean? I guess it was not a world war after all.

By the time the train pulled into Brantford, we had eaten the two loaves of Wonder Bread and I was truly sick of it. At the Brantford train station, I could see Ivan—the man I am supposed to call Father—waiting outside the station for us. His face was freshly shaved, and his hair was combed back and still wet. His hands were shoved deep into the pockets of a carefully pressed pair of worn gray pants.

When we stepped off the train, his face broke into a grin. We were just steps away from the train when he wrapped his arms around Marusia and gave her a loud kiss—right in front of everyone.

I tried to pretend I didn't know them, but then he caught me up in his arms and hugged me close. I tried to push him away, but he held on tight. "You are safe, Nadia,"

he whispered. “We will not let anyone harm you ever again.”

I would not hug him back but instead went limp. I didn’t want more of a scene.

Ivan grabbed Marusia’s battered old suitcase and put it in the trunk of his big black car. I had no luggage—my few items of clothing had fit easily into Marusia’s suitcase. We got into the car, just as if we were a real family. I had not been in a car for a very long time. I settled into the backseat, enveloped in the scent of leather and gasoline . . .

A large black car driven by a man in uniform . . .

“Nadia, open your window a little and let the breeze cool you,” Marusia said. Then, turning back to Ivan in the front, “Did you buy this car, Ivashko?”

“No,” he replied. “It belongs to my boss. He loaned it to me today so you could have a grand arrival to our new home.”

Marusia’s eyes crinkled with pleasure and she brushed her husband’s cheek with her fingertips. “That was so very thoughtful of him,” she said. “It reminds me of when we got married.”

I remembered that too. They got married in the DP camp. Not right inside the camp, but in a little Austrian church outside it. The Austrian priest let a Ukrainian priest from the camp do the service. Afterward, we had all

taken a taxi back to the camp. That car had been small and old, the leather seats cracked with age.

I settled down for a long ride, but within minutes Ivan turned down a street of mostly older-looking brick houses. I noticed some smaller wooden houses built in between. He pulled up in front of one of these. It looked like it had just been built.

“You bought a house, Ivashko?” Marusia asked with surprise.

“I bought some land, Marusia,” he answered. “I am building a house.”

Marusia and Ivan got out of the car but I stayed sitting in the backseat. What was the matter with me? All this time, I had wanted the journey to be over. Yearning to be home. But was this really my home?

Ivan opened the back door of the car and held out his hand to me. “Nadia,” he said. “I made a swing for you in the backyard.”

Twelve-year-olds are too old for swings, I knew that, but I smiled anyway. It was the thought that counted: Ivan tried so hard. I stepped out of the car. Ivan retrieved Marusia’s suitcase from the trunk and the three of us walked to the front door.

Ivan opened the door and set the suitcase inside. He turned to Marusia with a grin on his face, picked her up as

if she were a child, and carried her through the door. “What are you doing?” she cried. “Put me down!”

“It is a Canadian custom,” said Ivan. “It is supposed to bring good luck.”

He set her down on the floor just inside and I followed them in, thankful that he didn’t carry me over the threshold as well.

On the outside the house looked finished, but inside, only wooden boards—Ivan said they were called studs—stood where walls should have been. The floor was plain sanded wood like you would see in a good barn. There was no furniture.

“Let me take my two girls on a tour of their new home,” said Ivan, grabbing each of us by the hand and grinning with excitement. Marusia tried to paint a smile on her face, but her eyes showed the same confusion that I felt.

“This is our living room,” he said. Still holding on to our hands, he walked us through an open doorway. “And this is the bedroom.”

Was there only one bedroom in this house? The room was tiny. Barely big enough to fit the two bare mattresses on the floor. Neatly folded bedding was stacked on top. If there was just one bedroom, it would be for Marusia and Ivan.

“Will I be sleeping in the living room, then?” I asked. I wouldn’t mind sleeping there. It was more open and airy than this small room.

A look of surprise showed briefly in Ivan’s eyes, but then he answered, “When the house is finished, you will have your very own room in the attic.” He pointed to a small roughed-out area above our heads. “And you can choose the color for your walls.”

How would I breathe in such a tiny space? Thank goodness it wasn’t finished yet. There might be time to change that. “Where will I sleep until then?”

“In the backyard, just like us,” Ivan answered.

In the open. Much better!

“Now let us continue the tour.”

There wasn’t much more to it. Aside from the roughed-out living room and bedroom, there was a kitchen and bathroom and that was it. The bathroom had a sink and a new flush toilet and an old-fashioned iron bathtub with a delicate floral design etched around the edge.

“I got that from the dump,” said Ivan proudly. “Can you imagine that someone threw it out?”

A large chunk of enamel was missing from the bottom of the tub, revealing a gash of black metal and a ring of rust. Other than that, the tub was perfectly usable. What I would have given for a tub like this in the camp.

“That is easily fixed,” said Ivan, following my glance to the chipped part. “Once the house is finished.”

He took us through to the kitchen and we admired the secondhand electric stove with two burners and a freshly painted baby-blue icebox. Stacked neatly on top of it were three clean but chipped dinner plates and three coffee cups, all different. There was an iron frying pan and a knife, fork, and spoon for each of us. Ivan was most proud of the giant kitchen sink and the taps that ran with hot and cold water. “We can do our laundry in that sink too,” he said. “Now, wait until you see our backyard.”

Ivan let go of my hand long enough to open the back door. We stepped out onto cinder blocks that had been stacked up to form a step. In the middle of the tiny backyard was a huge oak tree. Hanging from the strongest branch was a rope swing with a wooden seat.

“That is for you, Nadia.”

I didn’t want to like it, but I couldn’t help myself. “Thank you!” I said, and then I hugged Ivan. I really meant it, which surprised me. I ran out to the swing to see it up close. The wooden seat was as smooth as velvet. Ivan had sanded out every stray sliver.

Marusia and Ivan stood hand in hand on the cinder-block porch. “Try it out,” she said.

I loved the feel of the breeze on my face as I pumped my legs to make the swing go higher and higher. I felt almost free. When the swing was at its highest, I could see into our neighbors' backyards. Two doors down was another swing in a tree. There was at least one other child on this street, and that was good. Maybe this could be home.

CHAPTER TWO

IS BRANTFORD HOME?

That first night, people came to our house with gifts. There was all sorts of food—good rye bread and *holubtsi* and sausage. Marusia was given jars of pickled beets, strawberry jam, and honey, as well as eggs and a sack of flour. Someone brought a bolt of light-blue cloth and Ivan was given a bottle of vodka. The priest gave me a prayer book, and an English lady with a mole on her cheek gave me a package of crayons. Just as most people were leaving, a couple arrived with an angry-looking dark-haired boy in tow.

“This is Mychailo,” the woman said to me, pushing the boy forward. “He’s a student at Central School.”

His parents went into the house, leaving Mychailo with me in our yard.

“What’s Central School?” I asked him.

“You’ll be going there in September,” he said. “You’ll hate it.”

“Why?”

“They’ll make fun of you because you’re not Canadian.”

“Do they make fun of you?” I asked.

“Not anymore,” he said, balling his hands into fists. “I beat them up if they do.”

It didn’t seem like something that would work for me. Maybe Mychailo would beat people up for me if we became friends?

After everyone left, Ivan said, “I have another surprise for you.” He took my hand and walked me to the bushes that acted as a fence between our yard and our neighbor’s. “Did you notice what these are?” he asked.

There were no flowers—the bushes looked like they had just been planted—but I recognized the shape of the leaves. “Lilacs!” I said.

“I planted them for you,” he said. “They’ll bloom next spring and you’ll wake up every morning to their scent.”

I was so overcome that I could barely croak out a *thank you*.

“This is your home, Nadia,” he said, giving my hand a squeeze. “We want you to be happy here.”

We dragged out the mattresses and slept in the backyard under the stars. The cool breeze soothed me and I loved being

out in the open. The sound of chirping in the night startled me at first, but Ivan explained that it was the frogs singing, even finding a small one to show me. We had frogs back home but I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen one. A frog's song is so very different from the sounds of land mines, artillery fire, bombs. How many nights had I tried to sleep despite all those sounds, all through the war years? And the years in the camp, even without the din of war, we had lived so crowded in with other DPs that all I could hear were snores and grunts and sobs.

As I lay there, looking up at the stars and listening to the frogs, I began to relax—just a little. Maybe everything would be fine. I took deep breaths of the cool evening air and closed my eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. Marusia tossed and turned a little bit. She faced me and began to sing the lullaby I had known all my life.

Kolyson'ko, kolyson'ko
Kolysby nam dytynon'ku
A shchob spalo, ne plakalo
A shchob roslo, ne bolilo
Ni holovka, ni vse tilo

I could feel the fear leave my body as I listened to the words. I was lulled by the coziness of the mattress and

the bedding and being beside the two people who so far had kept me safe.

I fell asleep feeling loved and secure.

I am surrounded by the people whom I love most, snuggled together under a down comforter in a cozy bedroom. Suddenly, there is a banging at the door. I try to wake the people beside me but they have melted away. I am alone. My heart pounds. The door bursts open, but I cannot see who it is.

I woke with my arms flailing, shouting, “Leave me alone!” Strong hands pulled me to a sitting position. I opened my eyes. I was in Brantford, in my own backyard. Marusia sat beside me. I was safe. But even in the darkness I could see the worry on her brow. Ivan was there too, kneeling at my other side.

“Were you having a nightmare?” Marusia asked.

It had seemed so real, but yes, it must have been a nightmare. I nodded.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

Marusia snuggled up close to me on the mattress and whispered the lullaby into my ear in a low, sweet voice. The words soothed me a little bit and I could feel my heart settle down.

I wanted to sleep but I didn’t want to dream again.

Once my breathing slowed, it was easy to convince Marusia that I was all right. She and Ivan needed their sleep.

Marusia settled back on her mattress. I stayed awake, listening to the frogs and the rhythm of Ivan's snores. When I knew that Marusia was also deep in sleep, I sat back up and breathed in some cool night air to try to clear my thoughts. Why did I have that dream? Who was pounding at the door?

I clasped my arms around my knees and rocked back and forth, soothing myself like someone had once soothed me. I chanted the lullaby under my breath. The words made me feel safe and loved. I reached back into my memory to the last time I had felt completely safe. I remembered a time before the camp. I had a bedroom all to myself then, a room with high ceilings and big windows. I had plenty to eat and good clothing to wear.

But had I felt safe? No. Who could feel safe in the middle of a war?

