

ice and
ashes

WE TRAVELED ALL morning in the truck. The road squirmed a thin line, hidden in the trees. Like Mother, I tried to think of the positive. I thought of Andrius. I could still hear his voice. At least we had left the commander and Kretzsky behind. I hoped we would be somewhere near Krasnoyarsk, closer to Papa.

The truck stopped next to a field. We were allowed to jump off and relieve ourselves in the grass. The NKVD began yelling within a matter of seconds.

"Davai!"

I knew that voice. I looked over. Kretzsky.

Late that afternoon, we reached a train station. A faded sign creaked in the wind. Biysk. Trucks littered the train yard. The scene was unlike the train station when we were deported. In Kaunas, back in June, we were frantic. Panic rose everywhere. People ran and screamed. Now, masses of tired, gray

people made their way slowly toward the train cars, like a group of exhausted ants marching toward a hill.

"Everyone stand at the front of the door opening," instructed the bald man. "Look uncomfortable. Maybe they won't put more people in here and we'll have room to breathe."

I stepped up into the train car. It was different from the previous car, longer. A lamp hung from above. The carriage smelled of sour body odor and urine. I missed the fresh air and the scent of wood from the labor camp. We did as the bald man suggested and crowded near the door. It worked. Two groups of people were steered toward other cars.

"This is filthy," said Mrs. Rimas.

"What did you expect? A luxury sleeper car?" said the bald man.

They shoved a few more people into our car before slamming the door. A woman with two boys and an older man climbed in. A tall man stepped in and looked around nervously. A woman and her daughter were hoisted up. Jonas nudged my arm. The girl looked as yellow as a lemon, her eyes nothing more than swollen slits. Where had she been? The mother spoke in Lithuanian to her daughter.

"Just another short trip and we'll be home, dear," said the girl's mother. Mother helped the woman with her luggage. The girl hacked and coughed.

We were lucky. We had only thirty-three people in our car. We had room and light this time. We gave the lemon girl a plank to sleep on. Mother insisted that Jonas have one as well. I sat on the floor, next to the girl with the dolly, whose hands were now empty.

"Where's your doll?" I asked.

"Dead," said the girl, with a hollow look in her eyes.

"Oh."

"The NKVD killed her. Remember how they shot the woman with the baby? That's what they did to Liale, except they threw her in the air and shot her head off. Kind of like a pigeon."

"You must miss her a lot," I said.

"Well, I missed her at first. I kept crying and crying. A guard told me to stop crying. I tried, but I couldn't. He clobbered me in the head. See my scar?" she said, pointing to a thick red fold on her forehead.

Bastards. She was only a child.

"You couldn't stop crying either?" she asked.

"What?"

She pointed to the scar above my eyebrow.

"No, they hit me with a can of sardines," I said.

"Because you were crying?" she said.

"No, just for fun," I answered.

She curled her finger toward me, beckoning me closer.

"Want to know a big secret?" she asked.

"What's that?"

She leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Mama says the NKVD are going to hell." She leaned back. "But you can't tell anyone. It's a secret, okay? You see, Liale, my dolly, she's up in heaven. She talks to me. She tells me things. So that's a secret, but Liale said I could tell you."

"I won't tell anyone," I said.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Lina," I said.

"And your brother?"

"Jonas."

"My name is Janina," she said, continuing to chatter. "Your mama, she looks old now. My mama does, too. And you like the boy who was waiting near the truck."

"What?"

"The one who put something into your pocket. I saw. What did he give you?"

I showed her the stone.

"It's so sparkly. I think Liale would like it. Maybe you could give it to me."

"No, it was a present. I think I better hold on to it for a while," I said.

Mother sat down next to me.

"Did you see the present Lina's boyfriend gave her?" asked Janina.

"He's not my boyfriend."

Was he my boyfriend? I wanted him to be my boyfriend. I showed Mother the stone.

"I see it made its way back to you," she said. "That's good luck."

"My dolly's dead," announced Janina. "She's in heaven."

Mother nodded and patted Janina's arm.

"Someone shut that kid up," said the bald man. "You, the tall one. What do you know of the war?"

"The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, they bombed," said the man.

"Pearl Harbor? They bombed America?" said Mrs. Rimas.

"When?" asked the bald man.

"Months ago. Around Christmas, yes, Christmas." He repeated his words, a nervous tic.

"So the United States has declared war on Japan?" asked Mother.

"Yes, along with Britain. Britain has also declared war."

"Where did you come from?" asked the bald man.

"Lithuania," said the man.

"I know that, idiot. Where did you come from today?"

"Kalmanka," said the man. "Yes, Kalmanka."

"Kalmanka, eh? Was it a prison or a camp?" asked the bald man.

"A camp, hmm, a camp. A potato farm. You?"

"A beet farm near Turaciak," replied Mother. "Were there all Lithuanians in your camp?"

"No, mostly Latvians," said the man. "And Finns. Yes, Finns."

Finns. I had forgotten about Finland. I remembered the night Dr. Seltzer came to the house looking for Papa. The Soviets had invaded Finland.

"It's only thirty kilometers from Leningrad, Elena," Dr. Seltzer had told Mother. "Stalin wants to protect himself from the West."

"Will the Finns negotiate?" asked Mother.

"The Finns are strong people. They'll fight," said Dr. Seltzer.

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THE TRAIN CHURNED forward. The rhythm of the rails tormented me, screeching and banging. They pulled me away from Andrius, further into an unknown. The metal lamp swayed above like a pendulum, illuminating hollow faces, throwing shadows throughout the carriage. Janina whispered to the ghost of her dead doll, giggling.

The yellow girl hacked and wheezed next to Jonas. She spit up blood all over his back. Mother snatched Jonas off the plank. She tore off his shirt and threw it down the bathroom hole. It didn't seem necessary. We were all breathing the same air as the yellow girl. Phlegm and blood on a shirt couldn't be any more contagious.

"I'm so sorry," sobbed the girl. "I've ruined your shirt."

"It's okay," said Jonas, hugging his naked torso. His scurvy spots hadn't entirely disappeared. Pink blotches dotted his emaciated rib cage.

The tall man, the repeater, spoke sprightly, convinced of America, America. I wasn't convinced of anything, except my yearning to see Papa, Andrius, and home.

On the third night, I woke up. Something tapped on my chest. I opened my eyes. Janina's face hovered above mine, her eyes wide. The light swung back and forth behind her head.

"Janina? What is it?"

"It's Liale."

"Tell Liale it's time to sleep," I said, closing my eyes.

"She can't sleep. She says the yellow girl is dead."

"What?"

"Liale says she's dead. Can you check if her eyes are open? I'm scared to look."

I pulled Janina against me, laying her head on my chest. "Shh. Go to sleep." She trembled in my arms. I listened. The coughing had stopped. "Shh. Time to sleep, Janina." I rocked her gently.

I thought of Andrius. What was he doing back at the camp? Had he looked at my drawings? I reached into my pocket and wrapped my fingers around the stone. I saw him smiling, tugging my hat in the ration line.

The yellow girl was dead. Streaks of dried blood ran from the corners of her mouth to her chin. The next day, the guards dragged her stiff body out of the train. Her mother jumped down after her, crying. A gunshot fired. A thud hit the dirt. A grieving mother was an annoyance.

Ulyushka, the woman I despised, kept us alive on the train. We lived off the food she had given Mother. We shared it with

others. I drew Ulyushka's wide face and stalks of black hair, trying to steady my hand through the train's vibration.

No one refused the water or gray slop in the buckets. We ate greedily, licking our palms and sucking under our dirty fingernails. Janina's mother slept often. I could barely sleep even though I was exhausted. The noise and movement from the train kept me awake. I sat, wondering where they were taking us and how I would let Papa know.

Janina tapped the bald man on the shoulder. "I heard you're a Jew," she said.

"That's what you heard, eh?" said the bald man.

"Is it true?" asked Janina.

"Yes. I heard you're a little brat, is that true?"

Janina paused, thinking. "No, I don't think so. Did you know Hitler and the Nazis might kill the Jews? My mama said that."

"Your mother's wrong. Hitler *is* killing the Jews."

"But why?" asked Jonas.

"The Jews are the scapegoat for all of Germany's problems," said the bald man. "Hitler's convinced racial purity is the answer. It's too complicated for children to understand."

"So you're here with us, rather than with the Nazis?" asked Jonas.

"You think I'd choose this? Under Hitler or Stalin, this war will end us all. Lithuania is caught in the middle. You heard the man. The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor. The United States may already be allied with the Soviets. Enough talk. Be quiet," said the bald man.

"We're going to America," said the repeater. "America."

AFTER A WEEK, the train stopped late at night. Mrs. Rimas said she saw a sign that said Makarov. They herded us out of the carriages. The open air swirled around my face, clean, fresh. I breathed in through my nose and exhaled through my dry lips. The guards directed us toward a large building four hundred yards away. We dragged our filthy belongings from the train. Mother collapsed in the dirt.

"Lift her, quickly," said Mrs. Rimas, looking around for the guards. "If they would shoot a grieving mother, they might shoot a woman with loose legs."

"I'll be fine. I'm just tired," said Mother. Mrs. Rimas and I helped Mother walk. Jonas dragged our suitcases. Mother stumbled again near the building.

"Davai!" Two NKVD approached, clutching rifles. Mother wasn't moving fast enough.

They marched toward us. Mother straightened up. One of the NKVD spit in the dirt. The other looked at her. My stomach dropped. Kretzsky. He had traveled with us.

"Nikolai," Mother said weakly.

Kretzsky pointed in another direction. He marched away toward a group of people.

The building felt large, like an enormous barn. There must have been a thousand of us. We were too tired to speak. We fell to the ground on our belongings. My muscles released their clench. The stillness of the ground felt wonderful, as if a hand had stopped a metronome. The screeching of the rails had finally ended. I put my arm around my suitcase, hugging *Dombey and Son*. It was quiet. We lay in our rags and slept.

Morning broke. I felt Janina breathing, nestled against my back. Jonas sat on top of his suitcase. He nodded at me. I looked at Mother. She slept soundly, her face and arms on her suitcase.

"She called him Nikolai," said Jonas.

"What?" I asked.

Jonas began pacing. "Kretzsky. Did you hear her? Last night, she called him Nikolai."

"Is that his first name?" I asked.

"Exactly. I don't know. How does she know?" snapped Jonas. "Why did he come with us?" Jonas kicked at the dirt.

The NKVD arrived with bread and buckets of mushroom soup. We woke Mother and dug in our bags for a cup or a dish.

"They are preparing us, preparing," said the repeater. "We shall feast every day in America. Every day."

"Why are they feeding us?" I asked.

"To strengthen us for work," said Jonas.

"Eat every last bit," instructed Mother.

After the meal, the guards began rounding up groups. Mother strained to hear.

She laughed weakly. "We're going to bathe. We'll be able to bathe!"

We scurried toward a large wooden bathhouse. Mother's stride had steadied. We were divided at the gate into male and female groups.

"Wait for us," Mother told Jonas.

We were instructed to take off our clothes and give them to Siberian men working at the door. All modesty dissolved. The women quickly undressed. They wanted to be clean. I looked down, hesitating.

"Hurry, Lina!"

I didn't want them to touch me, to look at me. My arms folded over my breasts.

Mother spoke to one of the men. "He says we must hurry, that this is a travel stop. A large group is coming later today. He says that Latvians, Estonians, and Ukrainians have already passed through," said Mother. "It's okay, darling, really."

The men didn't seem to be paying any attention. Of course not. Our shrunken bodies appeared almost androgynous. I hadn't had a period in months. Nothing about me felt feminine. A piece of pork or a foamy beer would be more alluring to men.

After our showers, we were put on a truck with our belongings. They drove us several kilometers through the woods until

we arrived at the bank of the Angara River.

"Why are we here?" asked Jonas.

Large wooden sheds dotted the bank. Tucked near the trees was a large NKVD building.

"They're putting us on boats. Don't you see? We're going to America. America!" said the repeater. "We're traveling up the Angara to the Lena and then across the sea to the Bering Strait. The Bering Strait."

"That journey would take months," said the man who wound his watch.

America? How could we leave Papa behind in a prison in Krasnoyarsk? How would I get my drawings to him? And what about the war? What if other countries became allies with Stalin? I saw Andrius's face, when he told me we were on the list. Something about his expression told me we weren't going to America.

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THE BOATS WERE delayed. We waited on the stony banks of the Angara River for more than a week. They fed us barley porridge. I couldn't figure out why they were feeding us more than bread. It was not out of kindness. Our strength would be needed, but what for? We sat in the sun, as if on vacation. I drew for Papa and wrote to Andrius every day. I drew on small scraps of paper so as not to be noticed and hid them between the pages of *Dombey and Son*. An Estonian woman noticed me drawing and gave me additional paper.

We hauled logs, but only for our nightly bonfires. We sat around the crackling fires and sang Lithuanian songs. The entire forest echoed in song from the people of the Baltics, singing of their homeland. Two women were chosen to travel to Tcheremchov by train to help carry supplies back for the NKVD. They mailed our letters for us.

"Please, could you take this to Tcheremchov and pass it along to someone?" I handed a slat of wood to the woman.

"It's lovely. The flowers—you've done a beautiful job. I had rue flowers in my backyard at home," she said, sighing. She looked up at me. "Your father is in Krasnoyarsk?"

I nodded.

"Lina, please don't get your hopes up. Krasnoyarsk is a long way from here," said Mother.

One day, after sitting in the sun, Mother and I waded into the Angara. We ran out of the water, laughing. Our clothes clung tightly to our thin bodies.

"Cover yourself!" said Jonas, looking around.

"What do you mean?" said Mother, pulling at the wet fabric clinging to her.

"They're watching," said Jonas, motioning with his head to the NKVD.

"Jonas, they have no interest. Look at us. We're hardly glamorous," said Mother, wringing water from her hair. I wrapped my arms around my torso.

"They found Mrs. Arvydas interesting. Maybe he finds you interesting," said Jonas.

Mother's hands dropped. "What are you talking of? Who?"

"Nikolai," said Jonas.

"Kretzsky?" I said. "What about him?"

"Ask Mother," said Jonas.

"Stop it, Jonas. We don't know Nikolai," said Mother.

I faced Mother. "Why do you call him Nikolai? How do you know his name?"

Mother looked from me to Jonas. "I asked him his name," she said.

My stomach dropped. Was Jonas right? "But Mother, he's a monster," I said, wiping water from the scar on my forehead.

She moved in closer, wringing out her skirt. "We don't know what he is."

I snorted. "He's a—"

Mother grabbed my arm. Pain shot up into my shoulder. She spoke through clenched teeth. "We don't know. Do you hear me? We don't know what he is. He's a boy. He's just a boy." Mother let go of my arm. "And I'm not lying with him," she spat at Jonas. "How dare you imply such a thing."

"Mother . . .," stammered Jonas.

She walked away, leaving me rubbing my arm.

Jonas stood, shocked by Mother's outburst.

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FOR WEEKS, THE BARGES crept farther north up the Angara. We disembarked and rode for days in the back of black trucks through dense forests. We passed enormous fallen trees, with trunks so large the truck could have driven inside them. I saw no human beings. The dark forest seemed to surround us, impenetrable. Where were they taking us? We broiled each day and shivered at night. Blisters healed. We ate everything given to us, thankful we weren't put to work.

The trucks arrived at Ust Kut, on the River Lena. We waited once again for barges. The bank of the Lena was blanketed with tiny pebbles. It poured rain. The makeshift tents on the bank did nothing to shelter us. I lay on top of my suitcase, protecting *Dombey and Son*, the stone, my drawings, and our family photo. Janina stood in the rain. She stared at the sky, carrying on conversations with no one. Kretzsky's boots crunched

up and down the bank. He yelled at us to stay in groups. At night, he'd stand staring at the silvery ribbon of moonlight on the Lena, moving only to bring his glowing cigarette to his lips.

My Russian improved. Jonas was still far ahead of me.

After two weeks, the barges arrived and the NKVD once again boarded us to float north.

We left Ust Kut and passed Kirensk.

"We're traveling north," said Jonas. "Maybe we really will sail for America."

"And leave Papa behind?" I asked.

Jonas looked out at the water. He said nothing.

The repeater spoke of nothing but America. He tried to draw maps of the United States, discussing details he had heard from friends or relatives. He needed to believe it was possible.

"In America there are excellent universities in an area they call New England. They say New York is quite fashionable," said Joana.

"Who says New York is fashionable?" I asked.

"My parents."

"What do they know of America?" I asked.

"Mother has an uncle there," said Joana.

"I thought all of Auntie's family was in Germany," I said.

"Apparently she has a relative in America. She gets letters from him. He's in Pennsylvania."

"Hmph. I don't much care for America. They certainly lack for art. I can't name a single American artist who is accomplished."

"You better not be drawing me," said the bald man. "I don't want any pictures drawn of me."

"Actually, I'm almost finished," I said, shading in the gray area of his spotted cheeks.

"Tear it up," he insisted.

"No," I said. "Don't worry, I won't show it to anyone."

"You won't, if you know what's good for you."

I looked down at my drawing. I had captured his curled lip and the surly expression he always wore. He wasn't ugly. The deep lines above his brow just made him look cranky.

"Why were you deported?" I asked him. "You said you were a stamp collector. But why would they deport you for collecting stamps?"

"Mind your own business," he said.

"Where is your family?" I pressed.

"I said it's none of your business," he snapped, pointing his crooked finger at me. "And if you know what's best for you, you'll keep your drawings out of sight, you hear me?"

Janina sat down next to me.

"You'll never be a famous artist," said the bald man.

"Yes, she will," argued Janina.

"No, she won't. You know why? Because she's not dead. But maybe there's still hope for that. America, bah."

I stared at him.

"My dolly's dead," said Janina.

WE APPROACHED JAKUTSK.

"Now we shall see. We shall see," said the repeater, fidgeting. "If we disembark here, we will not go to America. We will not go."

"Where would we go?" asked Jonas.

"To the Kolyma region," said the bald man. "To the prisons, maybe Magadan."

"We're not going to Magadan," said Mother. "Stop such talk, Mr. Stalas."

"Not Kolyma, no, not Kolyma," said the repeater.

The barges slowed. We were coming to a stop.

"No, please, no," whispered Jonas.

Mrs. Rimas began to cry. "I can't be in prison this far from my husband."

Janina tugged at my sleeve. "Liale says we're not going to

Kolyma."

"What?" I said.

"She says we're not going." She shrugged.

We crowded near the edge of the barge. Some of the NKVD disembarked. Kretzsky was among them. He carried a rucksack. A commander met the guards on the shore. We watched as they checked assignments.

"Look," said Jonas. "Some of the NKVD are loading supplies onto the boat."

"So we're not getting off here?" I asked.

Suddenly, voices rose from the bank. It was Kretzsky. He was arguing with a commander. I understood the commander. He told Kretzsky to get back on the barge.

"Kretzsky wants to stay," said Jonas.

"Good, let him stay," I said.

Kretzsky flailed his arms at the commander, who pointed back at the boat.

Mother sighed and looked down. Kretzsky turned back toward the barge. He wasn't leaving. He was coming with us, wherever we were going.

The passengers cheered and embraced as the barge pulled away from Jakutsk.

A week later spirits were still buoyant. People sang on the deck of the barge. Someone played an accordion. Kretzsky stormed through the crowd, shoving people aside. "What's wrong with you? Are you all imbeciles? You cheer as if you're going to America. Fools!" he yelled.

The elation collapsed to murmurs.

"America. America?" said the repeater quietly.

Where were they taking us? It was already August. Temperatures dropped as we sailed northward. It felt like late October, not summer. The forests along the bank of the Lena thinned.

"We've crossed into the Arctic Circle," announced the man who wound his watch.

"What?" gasped Jonas. "How can that be? Where are they taking us?"

"That is correct," said the repeater. "We'll go to the mouth of the Lena and get on huge steamships to America. Steamships."

The barges stopped in Bulun and Stolbai in the Arctic. We watched as large groups were herded off the barge and simply left standing on the deserted shore as we pulled away. We sailed on.

In late August we reached the mouth of the River Lena. The temperature was just above freezing. The icy waves of the Laptev Sea crashed against the barge as it was moored to the shore.

"Davai!" yelled the guards, jabbing us with the butts of their rifles.

"They're going to drown us," said the bald man. "They've brought us all this way to drown us and get rid of us here."

"Dear God, no," said Mrs. Rimas.

The NKVD threw a wooden plank against the side of the barge. They pushed the children down the plank, screaming

for them to hurry.

"Hurry, where? There's nothing here," said Mother.

She was right. It was completely uninhabited, not a single bush or tree, just barren dirt to a shore of endless water. We were surrounded by nothing but polar tundra and the Laptev Sea. The wind whipped. Sand blew into my mouth and stung my eyes. I clutched my suitcase and looked around. The NKVD made their way to two brick buildings. How would we all fit? There were more than three hundred of us.

Kretzsky argued with some of the NKVD, repeating that he had to go to Yakutsk. An NKVD with greasy hair and brown crooked teeth stopped us.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"To the buildings," said Mother.

"Those are for the officers," he snapped.

"And where are we supposed to stay?" asked Mother. "Where is the village?"

The guard waved his arms wide. "*This* is the village. You have the whole village for yourself." The other NKVD laughed.

"Excuse me?" said Mother.

"What, you don't like it? You think you're too good for this? Fascist pig. Pigs sleep in the mud. Didn't you know that? But before you sleep, you have to finish the bakery and build a fish factory." He moved closer to Mother. His corroded teeth protruded from under his top lip. "You fascists like fish, don't you? You pigs disgust me." He spit on her chest and walked away. "You don't even deserve the mud," he yelled over his shoulder.

They made us carry bricks and wood from the barge. We

filed in and out of the barge's deep hold, carrying as many bricks as we could. It took ten hours to unload the barges. In addition to bricks and wood, we carried barrels of kerosene, flour, and even small fishing boats, all for the NKVD. My arms trembled with fatigue.

"Liale says we're not going to America," announced Janina.

"No kidding. Did your ghost doll tell you we'd be here?" demanded the bald man. He pointed to a sign, crisped and faded from the weather.

Trofimovsk. The very top of the Arctic Circle, near the North Pole.

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WE HUDDLED TOGETHER and pulled our coats tight for warmth. I longed for the labor camp, for Ulyushka's hut, for Andrius. The steamer's whistle shrieked and pulled the barges back down the Lena. Were they going to pick up more people?

"How will you mail letters to Papa from here?" asked Jonas.

"There has to be a village close by," said Mother.

I thought of the piece of wood, handed off in Tcheremchov. Something had to have made its way to Papa by now.

"So this is their plan," said the bald man, looking around.

"This is how Stalin will end us? He'll let us freeze to death. He'll let the foxes eat us."

"Foxes?" said Mrs. Rimas. Janina's mother snapped a glance at the bald man.

"If there are foxes, we can eat them," said Jonas.

"Have you ever caught a fox, boy?" asked the bald man.

"No, but I'm sure it can be done," said Jonas.

"He said we have to build a factory for them," I said.

"This can't be our destination," said Mother. "Surely they're going to transport us somewhere else."

"Don't be so sure, Elena," said the man who wound his watch. "To the Soviets, there is no more Lithuania, Latvia, or Estonia. Stalin must completely get rid of us to see his vision unlitlered."

Litter. Is that what we were to Stalin?

"It's nearly September," said the man who wound his watch.

"Soon the polar night will be upon us."

Nearly September. We were freezing. We had learned about the polar night in school. In the polar region, the sun falls below the horizon for 180 days. Darkness for nearly half a year. I hadn't paid much attention to the lecture in school. I had sketched the sun sinking over the horizon. Now my heart sank into my stomach where the bile began to chew it.

"We haven't much time," continued the man who wound his watch. "I think—"

"STOP IT! Stop talking!" shrieked Janina's mother.

"What's wrong, dear?" asked Mother.

"Shh . . . Don't draw the attention of the guards," said Mrs. Rimas.

"Mama, what's wrong?" asked Janina. Her mother continued shrieking.

The woman had barely spoken during the entire voyage and suddenly we couldn't make her stop.

"I can't do this! I won't die here. I will not let a fox eat us!"

Suddenly the woman grabbed Janina by the throat. A thick gurgle came from Janina's windpipe.

Mother threw herself on Janina's mother and pried her fingers from her daughter's neck. Janina caught her breath and began to sob.

"I'm so sorry," cried her mother. She turned her back to us, placed her hands on her own throat, and tried to strangle herself.

Mrs. Rimas slapped the woman across the face. The man who wound his watch restrained her arms.

"What's wrong with you? If you want to kill yourself, do it in private," said the bald man.

"It's your fault," I said. "You told her she'd be eaten by a fox."

"Stop it, Lina," said Jonas.

"Mama," sobbed Janina.

"She already talks to her dead doll. Do we really want to hear about her dead mother?" said the bald man.

"Mama!" shrieked Janina.

"You're going to be fine," said Mother, stroking the woman's filthy hair. "We're all going to be fine. We mustn't lose our senses. It's going to be all right. Really."

AT DAYBREAK, the NKVD shouted at us to get to work. My neck hurt from sleeping on my suitcase. Jonas and Mother had slept under a fishing boat to protect themselves from the wind. I had slept only a few hours. After everyone was asleep, I drew by moonlight. I sketched Janina's mother, her hands squeezing tight around her daughter's neck, Janina's eyes bulging. I wrote a letter to Andrius, telling him we were in Trofimovsk. How would I ever mail the letter? Would Andrius think I had forgotten about him? *I'll find you*, he had said. How could he ever find us here? Papa, I thought. You're coming for us. Hurry.

The NKVD divided us into twenty-five groups, fifteen people per group. We were group number eleven. They took the men with any strength and sent them to work finishing the NKVD barracks. The boys were sent to fish in the Laptev Sea. The remainder of the women and elderly were instructed to

build a *jurta*, a hut, for their group. We could not, however, use any of the bricks or wood near the NKVD building. Those were reserved for the NKVD barracks. After all, winter was coming and the NKVD needed warm housing, said Ivanov, the brown-toothed guard. We could use scraps or pieces of logs that might have floated ashore.

"Before we even think of building something, we'll need supplies," said Mrs. Rimas. "Hurry, scatter and pick up anything and everything you can find before the others take it all. Bring it back here."

I picked up large stones, sticks, and chips of brick. Were we really going to build a house from sticks and stones? Mother and Mrs. Rimas found logs that had washed ashore. They dragged them all the way back to our site and went back for more. I saw a woman digging up moss with her hands and using it as mortar between the rocks. Janina and I ripped up pieces of moss and piled it near our supplies. My stomach churned with hunger. I couldn't wait for Jonas to return with the fish.

He returned, wet and shivering. His hands were empty.

"Where are the fish?" I asked. My teeth chattered.

"The guards say we're not allowed fish. All of the fish we catch is stored for the NKVD."

"What will we eat?" I asked.

"Bread rations," he replied.

It took us a week to collect enough logs to create a framework for our *jurta*. The men discussed the design. I drew the sketches.

"These logs don't look very strong," commented Jonas. "They're just driftwood."

"It's all we have," said the man who wound his watch. "We must hurry. We must finish before the first snow comes. If we don't, we won't survive."

"Hurry. Hurry," said the repeater.

I dug deep notches in the hard dirt with a flat stone. The ground was frozen. As I dug deeper, I had to hack at ice. Mother, Mrs. Rimas and I stood the logs vertically in the notches. We packed dirt around them.

"It doesn't look big enough for fifteen people," I said, looking at the framing. The wind whipped, stinging my face.

"We'll be warmer if we're close together," said Mother.

Ivanov approached with Kretzsky. I understood most of the conversation.

"The slowest pigs in Trofimovsk!" said Ivanov through his rotten teeth.

"You need a roof," said Kretzsky, motioning with his cigarette.

"Yes, I know. And heat?" I said. We had enough logs for a roof, but what would we do for heat?

"We'll need a stove," Mother said in Russian.

Ivanov found that particularly funny. "You'd like a stove? What else? A hot bath? A glass of cognac? Shut up and get to work." He walked away.

Mother looked at Kretzsky.

He looked down and then walked off.

"See, he won't help," I said.

We worked for another week, building from scratch. It wasn't a house. It was a dung heap, a bunch of logs covered in mud, sand, and moss. It looked like something a child would make in the dirt. And we had to live in it.

The men finished building the barracks and a bakery for the NKVD. They were proper brick buildings with stoves or fireplaces in each room. The man who wound his watch said it was well outfitted. And we were expected to endure an arctic winter in a mud hut? No, they expected us not to endure at all.

THE DAY AFTER we finished our jurta, Janina came running to me. "Lina, there's a ship! There's a ship coming!"

Within seconds, the NKVD was upon us, pointing rifles in our faces. They ordered everyone into their jurtas. They ran, screaming, frantic.

"Jonas?" Mother yelled. "Lina, where is Jonas?"

"He was sent to fish," I said.

"Davai!" barked Ivanov, pushing me into the jurta.

"Jonas!" yelled Mother, stumbling to get away from Ivanov.

"He's coming, Elena," said Mr. Lukas, running toward us.

"I saw him behind me."

Jonas arrived, out of breath from running. "Mother, there's a ship. It has an American flag."

"The Americans have arrived. They've arrived!" said the repeater.

"Will the Americans fight the NKVD?" asked Janina.

"Stupid girl. The Americans are helping the NKVD," said the bald man.

"They're hiding us," said Mother. "The guards don't want the Americans to see us, to know what they're doing to us."

"Won't the Americans wonder what these mud huts are?" I asked.

"They'll think they're some sort of military unit," said the man who wound his watch.

"Should we run out, so the Americans can see us?" I asked.

"They'll shoot you," said the bald man.

"Stay put, Lina!" said Mother. "Do you understand me?"

She was right. The NKVD was hiding us from the Americans. We stayed in our jurtas for more than five hours. That's how long it took for the American ship to be unloaded. As soon as the ship sailed, the NKVD came screaming for us to get to work. There were supplies to be moved to the bakery and NKVD barracks. I watched as the American ship drifted out of sight, pulling thoughts of rescue away with it. I wanted to run to the shore, waving my arms, screaming.

The supplies were stacked on large wooden pallets and stood as tall and wide as four homes in Kaunas. Food. It was so close. Jonas told me to keep an eye on the wood from the pallet, that we could use it to build a door for our jurta.

The man who wound his watch spoke English. He translated the markings on the containers. Canned peas, tomatoes, butter, condensed milk, powdered eggs, sugar, flour, vodka, whiskey. More than three hundred Lithuanians and Finns

moved mountains of food and supplies they would never again touch. How much food was there in America that a ship could drop such an enormous supply for fewer than twenty guards? And now the Americans had sailed away. Did they know the Soviets' gruesome secret? Were they turning the other cheek?

After the food, we moved supplies—kerosene, fishing nets, fur-lined coats, hats, thick leather gloves. The NKVD would be cozy for the winter. The wind blew through my threadbare coat. I strained to lift crate after crate with Jonas.

"Please, stop," Mother told Mr. Lukas.

"I'm sorry," he said, winding his watch. "It calms me."

"That's not what I mean. Stop translating the words on the crates. I can't bear to know what we're carrying anymore," Mother said as she walked away.

"I want to know," objected the bald man. "I want to know what might be available if the opportunity presents itself for one of you."

"What does he mean?" asked Jonas.

"Probably that he wants us to steal things for him," I said.

"She's doing it again," said Jonas.

"What?" I asked.

Jonas motioned to Mother. She was talking to Kretzsky.

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JONAS FOUND AN EMPTY barrel floating in the Laptev Sea. He was able to pull it ashore with a log. He rolled it up to our jurta. The men cheered.

"For a stove," Jonas said, smiling.

"Good work, darling!" said Mother.

The men set to work on the barrel, using empty tin cans from the NKVD's trash to create a stovepipe.

It was risky to carry or save your bread ration when Ivanov was around. He loved to take bread rations. Three hundred grams. That's all we got. Once, I saw him snatch a piece of bread from an old woman in line at the bakery. He popped it into his mouth and chewed it up. She watched, her empty mouth chewing along with his. He spit it on her feet. She scrambled to pick up every chewed piece and eat it. Mrs. Rimas said she heard Ivanov had been reassigned from a

prison in Krasnoyarsk. The assignment in Trofimovsk had to be a demotion. Had Kretzsky also been demoted? I wondered if Ivanov had been at the same prison as Papa.

My stomach burned. I longed for the gray porridge they gave us on the train. I drew detailed pictures of food—steaming chicken with crispy, glazed skin, bowls of plums, apple cakes with crumbling crusts. I wrote down the details of the American ship and the food it carried.

The NKVD set us to rolling logs out of the Laptev Sea. We were to chop them up to dry for firewood. We weren't allowed any wood for ourselves. We sat in our jurta facing the empty stove. I saw plates with food being taken from our dinner table and the pieces scraped into the trash. I heard Jonas's voice saying, *But Mother, I'm not hungry* when told to finish his dinner. Not hungry. When were we ever not hungry?

"I'm cold," said Janina.

"Well, go find some wood for the stove then!" said the bald man.

"Where can I find it?" she asked.

"You can steal it. Near the NKVD building," he replied.

"That's where the others are getting it."

"Don't send her to steal. I'll go find something," I said.

"I'll come with you," said Jonas.

"Mother?" I expected her to protest.

"Hmm?" she said.

"Jonas and I are going to look for wood."

"All right, dear," she said softly.

"Is Mother okay?" I asked Jonas as we walked out of our mud hut.

"She seems weaker and confused," said Jonas.

I stopped. "Jonas, have you seen Mother eat?"

"I think so," he said.

"Think about it. We've seen her nibble, but she's always giving us bread," I said. "Just yesterday she gave us bread. She said it was an additional ration she got for hauling logs."

"Do you think she's giving us her ration?"

"Yes, or at least part of it," I said. Mother was starving herself to feed us.

The wind howled as we walked toward the NKVD building. My throat burned with each breath. The sun did not appear. The polar night had begun. The desolate landscape was painted in blues and grays by the moon. The repeater kept saying we had to make it through the first winter. Mother agreed. If we could make it through the first winter, we'd survive. We had to endure the polar night and see the sun return.

"Are you cold?" asked Jonas.

"Freezing." The wind sliced through my clothing and stabbed at my skin.

"Do you want my coat?" he asked. "I think it will fit."

I looked at my brother. The coat Mother had traded was too big for him. He'd grow into it.

"No, then you'll be cold," I said. "But thanks."

"Vilkas!" Kretzsky. He wore a long wool coat and carried a canvas sack.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Looking for driftwood to burn," said Jonas. "Have you seen any?"

Kretzsky hesitated. He reached into the bag and threw a

piece of wood at our shins, walking away before we could say anything.

That night, September 26, the first snowstorm arrived.

It lasted two days. The wind and snow bellowed and blew through the cracks in our jurta. The freezing temperatures crept into my knees and hips. They ached and throbbed, making it hard to move. We huddled together for warmth. The repeater pushed in close. His breath smelled rotten.

"Did you eat fish?" asked the bald man.

"Fish? Yes, a little fish," said the man.

"Why didn't you bring any for us?" demanded the bald man. Others also yelled at the repeater, calling him selfish.

"I stole it. There was just a little. Only a little."

"Liale doesn't like fish," whispered Janina. I looked at her. She clawed her scalp.

"Does it itch?" I asked.

She nodded. Lice. It was only a matter of time before our entire mud hut was crawling with them.

We took turns digging a path out the front door to make our way to the bakery for rations. I scooped up large amounts of snow to melt for drinking water. Jonas made sure Mother ate her entire ration and drank water. We had been relieving ourselves outside, but with the snowstorm in full rage, we had no choice but to sit on a bucket in the jurta. As a courtesy, the sitter did not face us, but some argued the rear view was worse.

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WHEN THE STORM broke, the NKVD yelled at us to get back to work. We emerged from our mud hut. Even though it was dark, the white snow brightened the charcoal landscape. But that's all we could see—gray everywhere. The NKVD ordered us to roll and chop logs for firewood. Jonas and I passed a jurta completely covered in snow.

"No," cried a woman outside. The tips of her fingers were bloody, her fingernails shredded.

"Idiots. They built their door so it opened out. When it snowed, they trapped themselves inside. The weaklings couldn't pull or claw the door down!" Ivanov laughed, slapping his thigh. "Four of them are dead in there! Stupid pigs," he said to another guard.

Jonas's mouth hung open. "What are you looking at?" yelled Ivanov. "Get to work."

I pulled Jonas away from the crying woman and the snow-covered mound.

"He was laughing. Those people died and Ivanov was laughing," I said.

"Four people died in the very first snowstorm," said Jonas, looking at his feet. "Maybe more. We need more wood. We have to make it through the winter."

They split us into groups: I had to walk three kilometers to the tree line to find wood for the NKVD. The bald man was in my group. We trudged through the snow, a dry crunching underfoot.

"How am I expected to walk in this with my bad leg?" complained the bald man.

I tried to rush ahead. I didn't want to be stuck with him. He would slow me down.

"Don't you leave me!" he said. "Give me your mittens."

"What?"

"Give me your mittens. I don't have any."

"No. My hands will freeze," I said, the cold already scraping against my face.

"My hands are already freezing! Give me your mittens. It's only for a few minutes. You can put your hands in your pockets."

I thought about my brother offering me his coat, and wondered if I should share my mittens with the bald man.

"Give me your mittens and I'll tell you something," he said.

"What are you going to tell me?" I asked, suspicious.

"Something you want to know."

"What would I want to know from you?" I asked.

"Hurry, give me your mittens." His teeth chattered.

I walked on, silent.

"Just give me your damn mittens and I'll tell you why you were deported!"

I stopped and stared at him.

He snatched the mittens off my hands. "Well, don't just stand there. Keep walking or we'll freeze to death. Put your hands in your pockets."

We walked.

"So?"

"You know a Petras Vilkas?" he asked.

Petras Vilkas. My father's brother. Joana's father. "Yes," I said. "He's my uncle. Joana's my best friend."

"Who's Joana, his daughter?"

I nodded.

"Well, that's why you're deported," he said, rubbing the mittens together. "Your mother knows. She just hasn't told you. So there you have it."

"What do you mean, that's why we're deported? How do you know?" I asked.

"What does it matter how I know? Your uncle escaped from Lithuania before you were deported."

"You're lying."

"Am I? Your aunt's maiden name was German. So your uncle's family escaped, probably repatriated through Germany. Your father helped them. He was part of it. So your family was

then put on the list. So your father's in prison, you'll die here in arctic hell, and your best friend is probably living it up in America by now."

What was he saying? Joana escaped and went to America? How could that be possible?

"Repatriate, if they can get away with it," said my father, stopping abruptly when he saw me in the doorway.

Dear Lina,

Now that the Christmas holiday is passed, life seems on a more serious course. Father has boxed up most of his books, saying they take up too much space.

I thought of my last birthday. Papa was late coming to the restaurant.

I told him I had received nothing from Joana. I noticed that he stiffened at the mention of my cousin. "She's probably just busy," he had said.

"Sweden is preferable," said Mother.

"It's not possible," said Papa. "Germany is their only choice."

"Who's going to Germany?" I yelled from the dining room.

Silence.

"I thought all of Auntie's family was in Germany," I said.

"Apparently she has a relative in America. She gets letters from him. He's in Pennsylvania."

It was possible.

Joana's freedom had cost me mine.

"I'd give anything for a cigarette," said the bald man.

"BUT WHY DIDN'T you tell me?"

"We were trying to protect your uncle. They were going to help us," said Mother.

"Help us what?" asked Jonas.

"Escape," whispered Mother.

There was no need to lower our voices. Everyone pretended to occupy themselves with their fingernails or clothing, but they could hear every word. Only Janina watched intently. She sat on her knees next to Jonas, swatting lice off her eyebrows.

"When they got to Germany, they were going to process papers for us to try to repatriate as well."

"What's *repatriate*?" asked Janina.

"To go back to where your family is originally from," I told her.

"Are you German?" she asked Mother.

"No, dear. But my sister-in-law's family was born in

Germany," said Mother. "We thought we could get papers through them."

"And Papa helped them? So he was an accessory?" I asked.

"Accessory? He committed no crime, Lina. He helped them. They're family," she said.

"So is Joana in Germany?" I asked.

"Most likely," said Mother. "It all went horribly wrong. After they left, your father received reports in April that the NKVD had entered and searched their house. Someone must have informed the Soviets."

"Who would do such a thing?" asked Jonas.

"Lithuanians who work with the Soviets. They give information about other people in order to protect themselves."

Someone hacked and coughed in the hut.

"I can't believe Joana didn't tell me," I said.

"Joana didn't know! Surely her parents didn't tell her. They feared she might tell someone. She thought they were going to visit a family friend," said Mother.

"Andrius said they thought his father had international contacts. Now the Soviets think Papa has communication with someone outside Lithuania," said Jonas quietly. "That means he's in danger."

Mother nodded. Janina got up and lay down next to her mother.

Thoughts swam through my brain. I couldn't process one before another stepped over it. We were being punished while Joana's family lived comfortably in Germany. We had given up our lives for theirs. Mother was angry that the bald man had told me. She had trusted him with the secret. He had given

it up for five minutes of mittens. Hadn't Mother and Papa thought to trust *us*? Did they consider the consequences before they helped them escape? I scratched at the back of my head. Lice were biting a trail down the nape of my neck.

"How selfish! How could they do this to us?" I said.

"They had to give up things, too," said Jonas.

My mouth fell open. "What do you mean?" I asked. "They gave up nothing! We gave it all for them."

"They gave up their home, Uncle gave up his store, Joana gave up her studies."

Her studies. Joana wanted to be a doctor as much as I wanted to be an artist. Although I could still draw, she could not pursue medicine with a war raging in Germany. Where was she? Did she know what had happened to us? Had the Soviets managed to keep the deportations a secret from the world? If so, how long would that last? I thought of the American supply ship, sailing away. Would anyone think to look for us in the Siberian Arctic? If Stalin had his way, we'd be entombed in the ice and snow.

I got my paper. I sat near the firelight of the stove. Anger sizzled within me. It was so unfair. But I couldn't hate Joana. It wasn't her fault. Whose fault was it? I drew two hands clutching on to each other, yet pulling apart. I drew a swastika on her palm and the hammer and sickle on top of my hand, the Lithuanian flag shredded and falling in between.

I heard a scraping sound. The man who wound his watch carved a small piece of wood with his knife. The logs popped, spitting ashes out of the barrel.

"It looks scratched," said Jonas. He sat cross-legged on my bed, looking at one of the Munch prints I had received from Oslo.

"It is. He used his palette knife to scrape texture into the canvas," I said.

"It makes her look . . . confused," said Jonas. "If it weren't scratched, she would look sad. But the scratches make confusion."

"Exactly," I said, using long strokes to comb through my warm, clean hair. "But to Munch, that made the painting feel alive. He was a confused man. He didn't care about proportion, he wanted it to feel real."

Jonas flipped to the next print. "Does this feel real to you?" he said, his eyes wide.

"Definitely," I told him. "That's called Ashes."

"I don't know about real. Maybe real scary," said Jonas as he got up to leave. "You know, Lina, I like your paintings better than these. These are too weird. Good night."

"Good night," I said. I took the papers and flopped down on my bed, sinking into my puffy goose-down duvet. A comment in the margin from an art critic read, "Munch is primarily a lyric poet in color. He feels colors, but does not see them. Instead, he sees sorrow, crying, and withering."

Sorrow, crying, and withering. I saw that in Ashes, too. I thought it was brilliant.

Ashes. I had an idea. I grabbed a stick from next to the stove. I peeled back the outer skin to reveal the pulp. I separated the fibers, forming bristles. I grabbed a handful of snow from outside the door and carefully mixed in ashes from the barrel. The color was uneven, but made a nice gray watercolor.

NOVEMBER CAME. Mother's eyes lacked their wink and sparkle. We had to work harder for her smile. It came only when her chin rested on the heel of her hand or when Jonas mentioned Papa in our evening prayers. Then she would lift her face, the corners of her mouth turned up with hope. I worried for her.

At night, I closed my eyes and thought of Andrius. I saw his fingers raking through his disheveled brown hair, his nose tracing a line down my cheek the night before we left. I remembered his wide smile when he teased me in the ration line. I saw his tentative eyes, handing me *Dombey and Son*, and his reassurance as the truck pulled away. He said he'd find me. Did he know where they had taken us? That they laughed and wagered upon our deaths? *Find me*, I whispered.

The man who wound his watch looked at the sky. He

said a storm was coming. I believed him, not because of the pale gray of the sky, but because of the bustle of the NKVD. They shouted at us. Their "davais" pushed with an urgency. Even Ivanov was upon us. Normally, he shouted orders from afar. Today, he hastened to and from the barrack, coordinating every effort.

Mrs. Rimas tried to negotiate advance rations for the impending storm.

Ivanov laughed. "If there's a storm, you won't work. Why should you get a ration?"

"But how will we survive without bread?" asked Mrs. Rimas.

"I don't know. How will you?" said Ivanov.

I pilfered wood from the NKVD barracks. There was no other way. We would need a lot for the storm. I went back for more. Snow began to fall.

That's when I saw it.

Mother stood, talking to Ivanov and Kretzsky behind the NKVD barracks. What was she doing? I stepped out of sight and squinted to see. Ivanov spit on the ground. He then leaned close in to Mother's face. My heart began to pound. Suddenly, he lifted his gloved hand to his temple, mocking a gun firing. Mother flinched. Ivanov threw his head back and laughed. He walked into the NKVD barracks.

Mother and Kretzsky stood motionless, snow falling all around them. Kretzsky reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. I saw his lips moving. Mother's knees buckled. He caught her by the waist. Her face contorted and fell against his chest. She pounded his shoulder with her fist.

"MOTHER!" I screamed, running toward her. I tripped over the firewood tumbling from under my coat.

I grabbed her from Kretzsky, pulling her to me. "Mother." We fell to our knees.

"Kostas," she sobbed.

I stroked her hair, hugging her to me. Kretzsky's boots shifted. I looked up at him.

"Shot. In Krasnoyarsk prison," he said.

The air crushed in around me, pushing my body deep into the snow. "No, you're wrong," I said, my eyes searching Kretzsky's. "He's coming to get us. He's on his way. He's wrong, Mother! They think he's dead because he has left. He got my drawings. He's coming for us!"

"No." Kretzsky shook his head.

I stared at him. *No?*

Mother wept, her body chugging into mine.

"Papa?" The word barely escaped my lips.

Kretzsky took a step closer, reaching to help Mother. Loathing purged from my mouth. "Get away from her! Stay away. I hate you. Do you hear me? I HATE YOU!"

Kretzsky stared at Mother. "Me, too," he said. He walked away, leaving me on the ground with Mother.

We sank deeper, snow blanketing us, the wind sharp against our faces like needles. "Come, Mother. A storm is coming." Her legs couldn't carry her. Her chest heaved with every step, throwing us off balance. Snow whirled around us, limiting my sight.

"HELP ME!" I screamed. "Somebody, PLEASE!" I heard

nothing but the wail of the winds. "Mother, match my steps. Walk with me. We must get back. There's a storm."

Mother didn't walk. She just repeated my father's name into the falling snow.

"HELP!"

"Elena?"

It was Mrs. Rimas.

"Yes! We're here. Help us!" I cried.

Two figures emerged through the wall of wind and snow.

"Lina?"

"Jonas! Please!"

My brother and Mrs. Rimas came through the snow, their arms extended.

"Oh dear God, Elena!" said Mrs. Rimas.

We dragged Mother into our jurta. She lay facedown on a wood plank, Mrs. Rimas at her side, Janina peering over her.

"Lina, what is it?" said Jonas, terrified.

I stared blankly.

"Lina?"

I turned to my brother. "Papa."

"Papa?" His face fell.

I nodded slowly. I couldn't speak. A sound came out of my mouth, a twisted, pitiful moan. This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening. Not Papa. I had sent the drawings.

I saw Jonas's face rewind before me. He suddenly looked his age, vulnerable. Not like a young man fighting for his family, smoking books, but like the little schoolboy who ran into my bedroom the night we were taken. He looked at me, then

at Mother. He walked over to her, lay down, and carefully put his arms around her. Snow blew through a crack in the mud, falling on their hair.

Janina wrapped her arms around my legs. She hummed softly.

"I'm sorry. So sorry," said the repeater.

76

I COULDN'T SLEEP. I couldn't speak. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Papa's face, battered, peering down from the bathroom hole on the train. *Courage, Lina*, he said to me. Exhaustion and grief inched heavily into every fiber of my body, yet I was wide awake. My mind flickered as if on short circuit, spitting never-ending images of anguish, anxiety, and sorrow at me.

How did Kretzsky know? There was a mistake. It was another man, not Papa. It was possible, right? I thought of Andrius, searching the train cars for his father. He thought it was possible, too. I wanted to tell Andrius what had happened. I put my hand in my pocket and clutched the stone.

My drawings had failed. I had failed.

I tried to sketch but couldn't. When I started to draw, the pencil moved by itself, propelled by something hideous that lived inside of me. Papa's face contorted. His mouth pulled in agony. His eyes radiated fear. I drew myself, screaming

at Kretzsky. My lips twisted. Three black snakes with fangs spurted out of my open mouth. I hid the drawings in *Dombey and Son*.

Papa was strong. He was a patriot. Did he fight? Or was he unaware? Did they leave him in the dirt like Ona? I wondered if Jonas had the same questions. We didn't discuss it. I wrote a letter to Andrius, but it became smudged with tears.

The storm raged. The wind and icy snow created a deafening roar of white noise. We dug a path out the door to collect our rations. Two Finns, lost in the blizzard, couldn't find their jurta. They squeezed into ours. One had dysentery. The stench made me gag. My scalp was crawling with lice.

On the second day, Mother got up and insisted on shoveling the door. She looked drawn, like a part of her soul had escaped.

"Mother, you should rest," said Jonas. "I can dig through the snow."

"It does no good to lie here," said Mother. "There is work to be done. I must do my part."

On the third day of the storm the man who wound his watch directed the two Finns back to their jurta.

"Take that bucket outside. Wash it out in the snow," the bald man told me.

"Why me?" I asked.

"We'll take turns," said Mother. "We'll all have to do it."

I took the bucket out into the darkness. The winds had retreated. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. The moisture in my nostrils had frozen. This was only November. The polar night would last until the beginning of March. The weather would get worse. How could we withstand it? We had to make it

through the first winter. I hurried with my bucket duty and returned to the jurta. I felt like Janina, whispering to Papa at night like she whispered to her dead doll.

November 20. Andrius's birthday. I had counted the days carefully. I wished him a happy birthday when I woke and thought about him while hauling logs during the day. At night, I sat by the light of the stove, reading *Dombey and Son*. Krasivaya. I still hadn't found the word. Maybe I'd find it if I jumped ahead. I flipped through some of the pages. A marking caught my eye. I leafed backward. Something was written in pencil in the margin on page 278.

Hello, Lina. You've gotten to page 278. That's pretty good!

I gasped, then pretended I was engrossed in the book. I looked at Andrius's handwriting. I ran my finger over his elongated letters in my name. Were there more? I knew I should read onward. I couldn't wait. I turned through the pages carefully, scanning the margins.

Page 300:

Are you really on page 300 or are you skipping ahead now?

I had to stifle my laughter.

Page 322:

Dombey and Son is boring. Admit it.

Page 364:

I'm thinking of you.

Page 412:

Are you maybe thinking of me?

I closed my eyes.

Yes, I'm thinking of you. Happy birthday, Andrius.

IT WAS MID-DECEMBER. Winter had us in its jaws. The repeater had frostbite. The tips of his fingers were puckered, jet black. Gray, bulbous lumps appeared on the end of his nose. We wrapped ourselves in every piece of clothing and rags we could find. We tied our feet in old fishing nets that had washed ashore. Everyone bickered in the jurta, getting on each other's nerves.

Small children began dying. Mother took her ration to a starving boy. He was already dead, his tiny hand outstretched, waiting for a piece of bread. We had no doctor or nurse in camp, only a veterinarian from Estonia. We relied on him. He did his best, but the conditions were unsanitary. He had no medicine.

Ivanov and the NKVD wouldn't step inside our jurtas. They yelled at us to leave the dead outside the door. "You're

all filthy pigs. You live in filth. It's no wonder you're dying."

Dysentery, typhus, and scurvy crawled into camp. Lice feasted on our open sores. One afternoon, one of the Finns left his wood chopping to urinate. Janina found him swinging from a pole. He had hanged himself with a fishing net.

We had to trek farther and farther to find wood. We were nearly five kilometers from camp. At the end of the day Janina clung by my side.

"Liale showed me something," she said.

"What's that?" I said, stuffing twigs into my pockets for our stove and my paintbrushes.

Janina looked around. "Come here. I'll show you."

She took my hand and walked me into the snow. She reached out her mitten, pointing.

"What is it?" I asked. My eyes scanned the snow.

"Shh . . ." She pulled me closer and pointed.

I saw it. A huge owl lay in the snow. Its white feathers blended so well that at first I didn't see it. Its body looked to be nearly two feet long. The large raptor had tiny brown speckles on its head and trunk.

"Is he sleeping?" asked Janina.

"I think it's dead," I replied. I took a stick from my pocket and poked at the wing. The owl didn't move. "Yes, it's dead."

"Do you think we should eat him?" asked Janina.

At first I was shocked. Then I imagined the plump body, roasting in our barrel, like a chicken. I poked at it again. I grabbed its wing and pulled. It was heavy, but slid across the snow.

"No! You can't drag him. The NKVD will see. They'll take him away from us," said Janina. "Hide him in your coat."

"Janina, this owl is enormous. I can't hide him in my coat." The thought of a dead owl in my coat made me shiver.

"But I'm so hungry," cried Janina. "Please? I'll walk in front of you. No one will see."

I was hungry, too. So was Mother. So was Jonas. I leaned over the owl and pushed its wings against its belly. It was stiff. Its face looked sharp, menacing. I didn't know if I could put it against my body. I looked at Janina. She nodded, her eyes wide.

I glanced around. "Unbutton my coat." Her little hands set to work.

I lifted the dead raptor and held it against my chest. Shivers of revulsion rolled through my body. "Hurry, button me up."

She couldn't button the coat. The owl was too large. I could barely get my coat around its body.

"Turn him around, so his face doesn't stick out," said Janina. "He'll blend in with the snow. Let's hurry."

Hurry? How was I supposed to walk five kilometers, pregnant with a dead owl, without the NKVD noticing? "Janina, slow down. I can't walk fast. It's too big." The horned beak poked at my chest. Its dead body was creepy. But I was so hungry.

Other deportees looked at me.

"Our mamas are sick. They need food. Will you help us?" explained Janina.

People I didn't know formed a circle around me, shelter-

ing me from view. They escorted me safely back to our jurta, undetected. They didn't ask for anything. They were happy to help someone, to succeed at something, even if they weren't to benefit. We'd been trying to touch the sky from the bottom of the ocean. I realized that if we boosted one another, maybe we'd get a little closer.

Janina's mother plucked the owl. We all crowded around the makeshift stove to smell it cook.

"It smells like a duck, don't you think?" said Jonas. "Let's pretend it's duck."

The taste of warm meat was heavenly. It didn't matter that it was a bit tough; the experience lasted longer because we had to chew. We imagined we were at a royal banquet.

"Can't you just taste the gooseberry marinade?" sighed Mrs. Rimas.

"This is wonderful. Thank you, Lina," said Mother.

"Thank Janina. She found the owl," I said.

"Liale found him," corrected Janina.

"Thanks, Janina!" said Jonas.

Janina beamed, holding a fistful of feathers.

CHRISTMAS CAME. We had made it halfway through winter. That was something to be grateful for.

The weather continued, relentless. Just as one storm passed, another queued at its heels. We lived the life of penguins, freezing under layers of ice and snow. Mrs. Rimas stood outside the bakery. The smell of butter and cocoa made her cry. The NKVD made cakes and pastries in their bakery. They ate fish, drank hot coffee, and enjoyed canned meats and vegetables from America. After a meal, they'd play cards, smoke cigarettes, maybe a cigar, and drink a snifter of brandy. Then they'd light the fire in their brick barracks and cover themselves with their fur blankets.

My drawings became smaller. I didn't have much paper. Mother didn't have much energy. She couldn't even sit up for the Kucios Christmas celebration. She had lain too long. Her

hair was frozen to a board. She drifted in and out of sleep, waking only to blow a kiss when she felt us near.

The lice brought typhus. The repeater fell ill. He insisted on leaving our jurta.

"You're such nice people. It's too dangerous for you all. Dangerous," he said.

"Yes, get out of here," said the bald man.

He moved to a jurta where people had similar symptoms—fever, rash, some delirium. Mrs. Rimas and I helped him walk.

Four days later, I saw his naked body, eyes wide open, stacked in a heap of corpses. His frostbitten hand was missing. White foxes had eaten into his stomach, exposing his innards and staining the snow with blood.

I turned and covered my eyes.

"Lina, please take those books off the table," said Mother.

"I can't stand to see such ghastly images, not at breakfast."

"But that's what inspired Edvard Munch's art. He saw these images not as death, but as birth," I said.

"Off the table," said Mother.

Papa chuckled behind his newspaper.

"But Papa, listen to what Munch said."

Papa lowered the newspaper.

I turned to the page. "He said, 'From my rotting body flowers shall grow, and I am in them and that is eternity.' Isn't that beautiful?"

Papa smiled at me. "You're beautiful because you see it that way."

*"Lina, take the books off the table, please," said Mother.
Papa winked at me.*

"We must do something!" I cried to Jonas and Mrs. Rimas.
"We can't let people die like this."

"We'll do our best. That's all we have," said Mrs. Rimas.
"And we'll pray for a miracle."

"No! Don't talk like that. We will survive," I said. "Right, Jonas?"

Jonas nodded.

"Are you feeling unwell?" I asked him.

"I'm fine," he replied.

That night, I sat with Mother's head in my lap. Lice marched triumphantly across her forehead. I flicked them off.

"Did you apologize?" asked Mother, gazing at me through heavy eyelids.

"To whom?"

"To Nikolai. You told him you hated him."

"I do hate him," I said. "He could help us. He chooses not to."

"He helped me," said Mother softly.

I looked down at her.

"That day when I went to meet the grouchy woman coming back from the village, it was dark. Some NKVD drove by. They began to taunt me. They lifted my dress. Nikolai came. He shoed the others off. He drove me the rest of the way. I begged him to find news of your father. We met the grouchy woman on the road in the dark. Nikolai dropped us three kilo-

meters from camp. We walked the rest of the way. See," she said, lifting her face to mine, "that helped me. And I think the commander found out about it. Nikolai was punished for it. I think that's why he's here."

"He deserves to be here. Maybe he'll get sick and everyone will ignore him. Then he'll see how it feels. He could get a doctor for us!"

"Lina, think of what your father would say. A wrongdoing doesn't give us the right to do wrong. You know that."

I thought about Papa. She was right. He would say something like that.

Jonas walked into the jurta. "How is she?" he asked.

I put my hand on Mother's forehead. "She still has a high fever."

"Darling," said Mother to Jonas. "I'm so very cold. Are you cold?"

Jonas took off his coat and handed it to me. He lay down beside Mother, wrapping himself around her. "Okay, put the coat on top of us. Get the small hide from Ulyushka," said Jonas.

"Ulyushka," said Mother fondly.

"I'll warm you, Mother," said Jonas, kissing her cheek.

"I feel better already," she said.

I PRACTICED THE Russian words. *Doctor. Medicine. Mother. Please.* My stomach jumped. I clutched the stone. I heard Andrius's voice. *Don't give them anything, Lina. Not even your fear.*

It wasn't just Mother. The man who wound his watch was sick. Janina's mother was sick. If I could just get some medicine. I hated the thought of asking them for anything. The NKVD had killed Papa. I hated them for it. I couldn't let them do the same to Mother.

I saw Kretzsky near the NKVD barracks. He stood with Ivanov. I waited. I wanted to speak to Kretzsky alone. Time passed. I had to go to work in order to get my ration. I trudged through the snow toward them.

"Look, it's a little pig," said Ivanov.

"My mother is sick," I said.

"Really?" he said, feigning concern. "I think I know something that might help."

I looked at him.

"Give her plenty of sunshine, fresh fruits, and lots of vegetables." He laughed at his own sick joke.

"We need a doctor. We need medicine," I said, shivering.

"What else do you need? A bathhouse? A school? Well, you better get building. Davai!"

I looked at Kretzsky.

"Please, help me. We need a doctor. We need medicine. My mother is sick."

"There is no doctor," said Kretzsky.

"Medicine," I said. "We need medicine."

"Do you want another twenty years?" yelled Ivanov. "I can give you that. No bread today, you ingrate. Get to work! Davai!"

I didn't get a doctor. I didn't get medicine. I lost my ration and humiliated myself in the process. I began walking away from the barracks. I had forgotten what the sun felt like on my face. When I closed my eyes, I could see sunlight in Lithuania, and on Andrius's hair. But I couldn't imagine the sun on the Laptev Sea. Even if we did make it through the winter, would we have the strength to build things? Could we really build a bathhouse and a school? Who would be left to teach?

I couldn't lose Mother. I would fight. I would do whatever it took. She trembled, slipping in and out of sleep. Jonas and I sandwiched her between us, trying to warm and comfort her. Mrs. Rimas heated bricks to warm her feet. Janina picked the lice off her eyelashes.

The bald man leaned over and tucked his ration under Mother's hand. "Come on, woman. You're better than this. You've got children to take care of, for God's sake," he said.

Hours passed. Mother's teeth chattered. Her lips turned blue.

"J-Jonas, keep this." She handed him Papa's wedding band. "It's full of love. Nothing is more important."

Mother's trembling increased. She whimpered between breaths. "Please," she pleaded, staring at us with urgent eyes. "Kostas."

We held her between us, our arms curled around her withered body.

Jonas breathed quickly. His frightened eyes searched mine. "No," he whispered. "Please."

80

JANUARY 5. Jonas held Mother through the lonely morning hours, rocking her gently, as she used to do with us. Mrs. Rimas tried to feed her and massage circulation into her limbs. She couldn't eat or speak. I warmed bricks and shuttled them back and forth from the stove. I sat next to her, rubbing her hands and telling stories from home. I described every room in our house in detail, even the pattern on the spoons in the kitchen drawer. "The cake is in the oven baking and it's hot in the kitchen, so you've decided to open the window over the sink and let the warm breeze in. You can hear children playing outside," I told her.

Later that morning Mother's breathing became increasingly labored.

"Warm more bricks, Lina," my brother told me. "She's too cold."

Suddenly, Mother looked up at Jonas. She opened her mouth. Not a sound came out. The trembling stopped. Her shoulders relaxed and her head fell against him. Her eyes faded to a hollow stare.

"Mother?" I said, moving closer.

Mrs. Rimas touched her hand to Mother's neck.

Jonas began to cry, cradling her in his eleven-year-old arms. Small whimpers became deep, racking sobs, shaking his entire body.

I lay down behind him, hugging him.

Mrs. Rimas knelt beside us. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," she began.

"Mother," cried Jonas.

Tears spilled down my cheeks.

"She had a beautiful spirit," said the man who wound his watch.

Janina stroked my hair.

"I love you, Mother," I whispered. "I love you, Papa."

Mrs. Rimas continued.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: For thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

"Amen."

It described Mother perfectly. Her cup overflowed with love for everyone and everything around her, even the enemy.

Mrs. Rimas began to cry. "Sweet Elena. She was so dear, so good to everyone."

"Please, don't let them take her body," said Jonas to Mrs. Rimas. "I want to bury her. We can't let her be eaten by foxes."

"We'll bury her," I assured Jonas through my tears. "We'll make a coffin. We'll use the boards we sleep on."

Jonas nodded.

The bald man stared blankly, and for once, said nothing.

"She looks pretty," said Jonas, standing at the side of Grandma's coffin. "Papa, does she know I'm here?"

"She does," said Papa, putting his arms around us. "She's watching from above."

Jonas looked up toward the ceiling and then to Papa.

"Remember last summer, when we flew the kite?" said Papa.

Jonas nodded.

"The wind came and I yelled to you that it was time. I told you to loosen your grip. The string started unwinding, and the wooden spool spun through your hands, remember? The kite went higher and higher. I had forgotten to tie the string to the spool. Do you remember what happened?"

"The kite disappeared up into the sky," said Jonas.

"Exactly. That's what happens when people die. Their spirit flies up into the blue sky," said Papa.

"Maybe Grandma found the kite," said Jonas.

"Maybe," said Papa.

The bald man sat, his elbows on his knees, talking to himself. "Why is it so hard to die?" he asked. "I helped turn you in. I said 'No' too late. I saw the lists."

Mrs. Rimas spun around. "What?"

He nodded. "They asked me to confirm people's professions. They asked me to list the teachers, lawyers, and military who lived nearby."

"And you did it?" I said.

Jonas held Mother, still crying.

"I told them I would," said the bald man. "And then I changed my mind."

"You traitor! You pathetic old man!" I said.

"Pathetic, and yet I survive. Surely, my survival is my punishment. That has to be it. This woman closes her eyes and she is gone. I've wished for death since the first day, and yet I survive. Can it really be so hard to die?"

81

I WOKE, UNEASY. The night had been unkind. I slept next to Mother's body, muffling my sobs so as not to scare Jonas. My beautiful mother—I would never see her smile again, feel her arms around me. I already missed her voice. My body felt hollow, like my sluggish heartbeat was bouncing and echoing through my vacant, aching limbs.

The bald man's questions kept me awake in thought. Was it harder to die, or harder to be the one who survived? I was sixteen, an orphan in Siberia, but I knew. It was the one thing I never questioned. I wanted to live. I wanted to see my brother grow up. I wanted to see Lithuania again. I wanted to see Joana. I wanted to smell the lily of the valley on the breeze beneath my window. I wanted to paint in the fields. I wanted to see Andrius with my drawings. There were only two possible outcomes in Siberia. Success meant survival. Failure meant death. I wanted life. I wanted to survive.

Part of me felt guilty. Was it selfish that I wanted to live, even though my parents were gone? Was it selfish to have wants beyond my family being together? I was now the guardian of my eleven-year-old brother. What would he do if I perished?

After work, Jonas helped the man who wound his watch make a coffin. Mrs. Rimas and I prepared Mother.

"Is there anything left in her suitcase?" asked Mrs. Rimas.

"I don't think so." I pulled Mother's suitcase from under the board she lay on. I was wrong. Inside were fresh, clean clothes. A light dress, silk stockings, shoes without scuffs, her tube of lipstick. There was also a man's shirt and tie. Papa's clothes. I began to cry.

Mrs. Rimas brought her hand to her mouth. "She really intended to return home."

I looked at Papa's shirt. I lifted it to my face. My mother was freezing. She could have worn these clothes. She kept them, to return to Lithuania in a clean set of clothes.

Mrs. Rimas pulled out the silk dress. "This is lovely. We'll put this on her."

I took Mother's coat off of her. She had worn the coat since the night we were deported. Stitch marks and stray threads pocked the inside where she had sewn in our valuables. I lifted the fabric of the lining. A few papers remained.

"Those are deeds to your home and property in Kaunas," said Mrs. Rimas, looking at the paperwork. "Keep them safe. You'll need them when you go home."

There was another small piece of paper. I unfolded it.

It was an address in Biberach, Germany.

"Germany. That has to be where my cousin is."

"Probably, but you mustn't write to that address," said Mrs. Rimas. "It could get them in trouble."

That night, Jonas and I stole shovels and ice picks from outside the NKVD barracks. "It has to be someplace we'll remember," I told him. "Because we're taking her body back to Lithuania with us." We walked to a little hill near the Laptev Sea.

"This has a nice view," said Jonas. "We'll remember this."

We dug all night, chipping away at the ice, digging as deep as we could. As morning approached, Mrs. Rimas and the man who wound his watch arrived to help. Even Janina and the bald man came to dig. The ice was so hard, the grave was fairly shallow.

The next morning Mrs. Rimas slipped Mother's wedding band off her finger. "Keep this. Bury it with her when you take her back home."

We carried the coffin out of the jurta and walked slowly through the snow toward the hill. Jonas and I held the front, Mrs. Rimas and the man who wound his watch held the center, and the bald man carried the back. Janina trailed beside me. People joined us. I didn't know them. They prayed for Mother. Soon, a large procession walked behind us. We passed the NKVD barracks. Kretzsky talked with guards on the porch. He saw us and stopped talking. I looked ahead and walked toward the cold hole in the ground.

I PAINTED A MAP to the gravesite using the ash mixture and a feather from the owl. Mother's absence left a gaping hole, a mouth missing its front tooth. The eternal grayness in camp became a shade darker. Amidst the polar night, our only sun had slipped under a cloud.

"We could drown ourselves," said the bald man. "That would be easy, right?"

No one responded.

"Don't ignore me, girl!"

"I'm not ignoring you. Don't you understand? We're all tired of you!" I said.

I was so very tired. Mentally, physically, emotionally, I was tired. "You always talk of death and of us killing ourselves. Haven't you figured it out? We're not interested in dying," I said.

"But I'm interested!" he insisted.

"Maybe you don't really want to die," said Jonas. "Maybe you just think you deserve to."

The bald man looked up at Jonas and then at me.

"You think of nothing but yourself. If you want to kill yourself, what's keeping you?" I said. Silence sat between our stares.

"Fear," he said.

Two nights after we buried Mother, there was a whistle on the air. A storm would arrive the next day. I bundled in all that I could find and set out into the blackness to steal wood from the NKVD building. Each day, when chopping and delivering wood, we dumped extra behind the pile. It was understood that if someone was brave enough to steal it, it was there. A man in group twenty-six got caught stealing wood. They sentenced him to an additional five years. Five years for one log. It could have been fifty. Our sentences were dictated by our survival.

I walked toward the NKVD barrack, making a wide circle to arrive at the back, close to the woodpile. My face and ears were wrapped in a cloth, with only my eyes exposed. I wore Mother's hat. A figure scurried past me, carrying a large plank of wood. Brave. The planks were leaned up against the barracks. I turned near the back of the woodpile. I stopped. A figure in a long coat stood behind the giant stacks of wood. It was impossible to see in the darkness. I turned slowly to leave, trying not to make a sound.

"Who's there? Show yourself!"

I turned around.

"Group number?" he demanded.

"Eleven," I said, backing away.

The figure moved closer. "Vilkas?"

I didn't respond. He stepped toward me. I saw his eyes under the large fur hat. Kretzsky.

He stumbled and I heard swishing. He carried a bottle.

"Stealing?" he asked, taking a swig.

I said nothing.

"I can't arrange for you to draw a portrait here. No one wants one," said Kretzsky.

"You think I want to draw for you?"

"Why not?" he said. "It kept you warm. You got food. And you drew a nice, realistic portrait." He laughed.

"Realistic? I don't want to be forced to draw that way." Why was I even talking to him? I turned to leave.

"Your mother," he said.

I stopped.

"She was a good woman. I could see she used to be very pretty."

I spun around. "What do you mean? She was always pretty! It's you that's ugly. You couldn't see her beauty, or anyone else's for that matter!"

"No, I saw it. She was pretty. Krasivaya."

No. Not that word. I was supposed to learn it on my own. Not from Kretzsky.

"It means beautiful, but with strength," he slurred. "Unique."

I couldn't look at him. I looked at the logs. I wanted to grab one. I wanted to smash him across the face, like the can of sardines.

"So, you hate me?" He laughed.

How could Mother have tolerated Kretzsky? She claimed he had helped her.

"I hate me, too," he said.

I looked up.

"You want to draw me like this? Like your beloved Munch?" he asked. His face looked puffy. I could barely understand his slurred Russian. "I know about your drawings." He pointed a shaky finger at me. "I've seen them all."

He knew about my drawings. "How did you know about my father?" I asked.

He ignored my question.

"My mother, she was an artist, too," he said, gesturing with the bottle. "But she is with yours—dead."

"I'm sorry," I said instinctively. Why did I say that? I didn't care.

"You're sorry?" He snorted in disbelief, tucking the bottle under his arm and rubbing his gloves together. "My mother, she was Polish. She died when I was five. My father is Russian. He remarried a Russian when I was six. My mother wasn't even cold a year. Some of my mother's relatives are in Kolyma. I was supposed to go there, to help them. That's why I wanted to leave the barge in Jakutsk. But now I'm here. So, you're not the only one who is in prison."

He took another long swig of the bottle. "You want to steal

wood, Vilkas?" He opened his arms. "Steal wood." He waved his hand toward the pile. "Davai."

My ears burned. My eyelids stung from the cold. I walked to the woodpile.

"The woman my father married, she hates me, too. She hates Poles."

I took a log. He didn't stop me. I began to pile wood. I heard a sound. Kretzsky's back was turned, the bottle hanging from his hand. Was he sick? I took a step away with the logs. I heard it again. Kretzsky wasn't sick. He was crying.

Leave, Lina. Hurry! Take the wood. Just go. I took a step, to leave him. Instead, my legs walked toward him, still holding the wood. What was I doing? The sound coming from Kretzsky was uncomfortable, stifled.

"Nikolai."

He didn't look at me.

I stood there, silent. "Nikolai." I reached out from under the wood. I put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," I finally said.

We stood in the darkness, saying nothing.

I turned to leave him.

"Vilkas."

I turned.

"I'm sorry for your mother," he said.

I nodded. "Me, too."

83

I HAD PLAYED through scenarios of how I would get back at the NKVD, how I would stomp on the Soviets if I ever had a chance. I had a chance. I could have laughed at him, thrown wood at him, spit in his face. The man threw things at me, humiliated me. I hated him, right? I should have turned and walked away. I should have felt good inside. I didn't. The sound of his crying physically pained me. What was wrong with me?

I told no one of the incident. The next day, Kretzsky was gone.

February arrived. Janina was fighting scurvy. The man who wound his watch had dysentery. Mrs. Rimas and I tended to them as best we could. Janina spoke to her dead dolly for hours, sometimes yelling or laughing. After a few days she stopped speaking.

"What are we to do?" I said to Jonas. "Janina's getting sicker by the minute."

He looked at me.

"What is it?" I said.

"I have the spots again," he said.

"Where? Let me see."

The scurvy spots had reappeared on Jonas's stomach. Clumps of his hair had fallen out.

"There are no tomatoes this time," said Jonas. "Andrius isn't here." He started shaking his head.

I grabbed my brother by the shoulders. "Jonas, listen to me. We are going to live. Do you hear me? We're going home. We're not going to die. We're going home to our house, and we're going to sleep in our beds with the goose-down comforters. We will. All right?"

"How will we live alone, without Mother and Papa?" he asked.

"Auntie and Uncle. And Joana. They'll help. We'll have Auntie's apple cakes and doughnuts with jam inside. The ones you like, okay? And Andrius will help us."

Jonas nodded.

"Say it. Say, 'We're going home.'"

"We're going home," repeated Jonas.

I hugged him, kissing the scabbed bald spot on his head. "Here." I took the stone from Andrius out of my pocket and held it up to Jonas. He seemed dazed and didn't take the stone.

My stomach sank. What would I do? I had no medicine.

Everyone was ill. Would I be the only one left, alone with the bald man?

We took turns going for rations. I begged at other jurtas as Mother had done on the beet farm. I walked into a jurta. Two women sat amongst four people who were covered as if sleeping. They were all dead.

"Please, don't tell," they pleaded. "We want to bury them once the storm ends. If the NKVD discover they're dead, they'll throw them out into the snow."

"I won't tell," I assured them.

The storm raged. The sound of the wind echoed between my stinging ears. The wind blew so cold, like white fire. I fought my way back to our jurta. Bodies, stacked like firewood, were covered in snow outside the huts. The man who wound his watch hadn't returned.

"I'll go look for him," I said to Mrs. Rimas.

"He could barely walk," said the bald man. "He probably went to the closest jurta when the winds came. Don't risk it."

"We have to help one another!" I told him. But how could I expect him, of all people, to understand?

"You need to stay here. Jonas is not well." Mrs. Rimas looked over to Janina.

"Her mother?" I asked.

"I took her to the typhus hut," whispered Mrs. Rimas.

I sat next to my brother. I rearranged the rags and fishing nets he was covered with.

"I'm so tired, Lina," he said. "My gums hurt and my teeth ache."

"I know. As soon as the storm ends, I'll search for some food. You need fish. There's plenty of it, barrels. I just need to steal some."

"I'm s-so cold," said Jonas, shivering. "And I can't straighten my legs."

I heated chunks of brick and put them under his feet. I took a brick to Janina. Scurvy bruising spotted her face and neck. The tip of her tiny nose was black with frostbite.

I kept the fire going. It did little to help. I could use only a small amount of wood, to save what we had. I didn't know how long this storm would last. I looked at the empty spot where my mother had lain, Janina's mother, the man who wound his watch, the repeater. Large gaps had appeared on the floor of the jurta.

I lay next to Jonas, covering him with my body as we had done for Mother. I wrapped my arms around him, holding his hands in mine. The wind slapped against our disintegrating jurta. Snow blew in around us.

It couldn't end like this. It couldn't. What was life asking of me? How could I respond when I didn't know the question?

"I love you," I whispered to Jonas.

84

THE STORM DREW back a day later. Jonas could barely speak. My joints were locked, as if frozen.

"We have to work today," said Mrs. Rimas. "We need rations, wood."

"Yes," agreed the bald man.

I knew they were right. But I wasn't sure I had the strength. I looked over at Jonas. He lay completely still on a plank, his cheeks hollow, his mouth agape. Suddenly, his eyes opened with a void stare.

"Jonas?" I said, sitting up quickly.

A loud commotion stirred outside. I heard male voices and shouting. Jonas's legs moved slightly. "It's okay," I told him, trying to warm his feet.

The door to our jurta flew open. A man leaned in. He wore civilian clothing—a fur-lined coat and a thick, full hat.

"Any sick in here?" he said in Russian.

"Yes!" said Mrs. Rimas. "We're sick. We need help."

The man walked in. He carried a lantern.

"Please," I said. "My brother and this little girl have scurvy. And we can't find one of our friends."

The man made his way over to Jonas and Janina. He exhaled, letting out a string of Russian expletives. He yelled something. An NKVD stuck his head in the door.

"Fish!" he commanded. "Raw fish for these little ones, immediately. Who else is sick?" He looked at me.

"I'm okay," I said.

"What's your name?"

"Lina Vilkas."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

He surveyed the situation. "I'm going to help you, but there are hundreds sick and dead. I need assistance. Are there any doctors or nurses in camp?"

"No, only a veterinarian. But—" I stopped. Maybe he was dead.

"A veterinarian? That's all?" He looked down, shaking his head.

"We can help," said Mrs. Rimas. "We can walk."

"What about you, old man? I need teams of people to make soup and cut fish. These children need ascorbic acid."

He had asked the wrong person. The bald man wouldn't help anyone. Not even himself.

He raised his head. "Yes, I will help," said the bald man.

I looked at him. He stood up.

"I will help, as long as we tend to these children first," said the bald man, pointing to Jonas and Janina.

The doctor nodded, kneeling to Jonas.

"Will the NKVD allow you to help us?" I asked the doctor.

"They have to. I am an inspection officer. I could make a report to the tribunal. They want me to leave and report that everything is fine here, that I saw nothing out of the ordinary. That's what they expect."

His hand moved quickly toward me. I put up my palms, shielding myself.

"I am Dr. Samodurov." His hand was extended, for a handshake. I stared at it, stunned by his show of respect.

We worked under his supervision. That day we each had a bowl of pea soup and half a kilo of fish. He helped us store fish for the upcoming storms and plot out a burial yard for more than a hundred bodies, including the man who wound his watch. He had frozen to death. The doctor enlisted the help of Evenks, native hunters and fishermen, who lived less than thirty kilometers away. They came on sleds with dogs and brought coats, boots, and supplies.

After ten days he said he had to move on, that there were other camps with deportees who were suffering. I gave him all the letters I had written to Andrius. He said he would mail them.

"And your father?" he asked.

"He died in prison, in Krasnoyarsk."

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Ivanov told my mother."

"Ivanov did? Hmm," said the doctor, shaking his head.

"Do you think he was lying?" I asked quickly.

"Oh, I don't know, Lina. I've been to a lot of prisons and camps, none as remote as this, but there are hundreds of thousands of people. I heard a famous accordion player had been shot, only to meet him a couple of months later in a prison."

My heart leapt. "That's what I told my mother. Maybe Ivanov was wrong!"

"Well, I don't know, Lina. But let's just say I've met a lot of dead people."

I nodded and smiled, unable to contain the fountain of hope he had just given me.

"Dr. Samodurov, how did you find us?" I asked him.

"Nikolai Kretzsky," was all he said.

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JONAS SLOWLY BEGAN to heal. Janina was speaking again. We buried the man who wound his watch. I clung to the story of the accordion player and visualized my drawings making their way into Papa's hands.

I drew more and more, thinking that come spring, perhaps I might be able to send off a message somehow.

"You told me those Evenks on the sleds helped the doctor," said Jonas. "Maybe they would help us, too. It sounds like they have a lot of supplies."

Yes. Maybe they would help us.

I had a recurring dream. I saw a male figure coming toward me in the camp through the swirling ice and snow. I always woke before I could see his face, but once I thought I heard Papa's voice.

"Now, what sort of sensible girl stands in the middle of the road when it's snowing?"

"Only one whose father is late," I teased.

Papa's face appeared, frosty and red. He carried a small bundle of hay.

"I'm not late," he said, putting his arm around me. "I'm right on time."

I left the jurta to chop wood. I began my walk through the snow, five kilometers to the tree line. That's when I saw it. A tiny sliver of gold appeared between shades of gray on the horizon. I stared at the amber band of sunlight, smiling. The sun had returned.

I closed my eyes. I felt Andrius moving close. "I'll see you," he said.

"Yes, I will see you," I whispered. "I will."

I reached into my pocket and squeezed the stone.

EPILOGUE

APRIL 25, 1995 KAUNAS, LITHUANIA

"What are you doing? Keep moving or we won't finish today," said the man. Construction vehicles roared behind him.

"I found something," said the digger, staring into the hole. He knelt down for a closer look.

"What is it?"

"I don't know." The man lifted a wooden box from the ground. He pried the hinged top open and looked inside. He removed a large glass jar full of papers. He opened the jar and began to read.

Dear Friend,

The writings and drawings you hold in your hands were buried in the year 1954, after returning from Siberia with my brother, where we were imprisoned for twelve years. There are many thousands of us, nearly all dead. Those alive cannot speak. Though we committed no offense, we are viewed as criminals. Even now, speaking of the terrors we have experienced would result in our death. So we put our trust in you, the person who discovers this capsule of memories sometime in the future. We trust you with truth,

for contained herein is exactly that—the truth.

My husband, Andrius, says that evil will rule until good men or women choose to act. I believe him. This testimony was written to create an absolute record, to speak in a world where our voices have been extinguished. These writings may shock or horrify you, but that is not my intention. It is my greatest hope that the pages in this jar stir your deepest well of human compassion. I hope they prompt you to do something, to tell someone. Only then can we ensure that this kind of evil is never allowed to repeat itself.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Lina Arvydas

9th day of July, 1954—Kaunas

AUTHOR'S NOTE

“In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.” —*Albert Camus*

In 1939, the Soviet Union occupied the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Shortly thereafter, the Kremlin drafted lists of people considered anti-Soviet who would be murdered, sent to prison, or deported into slavery in Siberia. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, military servicemen, writers, business owners, musicians, artists, and even librarians were all considered anti-Soviet and were added to the growing list slated for wholesale extermination. The first deportations took place on June 14, 1941.

My father is the son of a Lithuanian military officer. Like Joana, he escaped with his parents through Germany into refugee camps. Like Lina, members of his family were deported and imprisoned. The horrors the deportees endured were ghastly. Meanwhile, the Soviets ravaged their countries, burning their libraries and destroying their churches. Caught between the Soviet and Nazi empires and forgotten by the world, the Baltic states simply disappeared from maps.

I took two trips to Lithuania to research this book. I met with family members, survivors of the deportations, survivors of the

gulags, psychologists, historians, and government officials. Many of the events and situations I describe in the novel are experiences related to me by survivors and their families, experiences they said were shared by many deportees across Siberia. Although the characters in this story are fictional, Dr. Samodurov is not. He arrived in the Arctic just in time to save many lives.

Those who survived spent ten to fifteen years in Siberia. Upon returning in the mid-1950s, the Lithuanians found that Soviets had occupied their homes, were enjoying all of their belongings, and had even assumed their names. Everything was lost. The returning deportees were treated as criminals. They were forced to live in restricted areas, and were under constant surveillance by the KGB, formerly the NKVD. Speaking about their experience meant immediate imprisonment or deportation back to Siberia. As a result, the horrors they endured went dormant, a hideous secret shared by millions of people.

Like Lina and Andrius, some deportees married and found comfort in knowing looks and whispers in bed late at night. Beautiful children, like Jonas and Janina, grew up in forced-labor camps and returned to Lithuania as adults. Countless mothers and wives like Elena perished. Brave souls, who feared the truth might be lost forever, buried journals and drawings on Baltic soil, risking death if their capsules were discovered by the KGB. Like Lina, many channeled emotion and fear into art and music, the only way they could express themselves, keeping their nation alive in their hearts. Paintings and drawings were not shared publicly. Art was passed secretly, encoded with messages and news from the various prison camps.

Sketches of symbols from their homeland were sometimes enough to push a deportee onward, to fight for another day.

It is estimated that Josef Stalin killed more than twenty million people during his reign of terror. The Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia lost more than a third of their population during the Soviet annihilation. The deportations reached as far as Finland. To this day, many Russians deny they ever deported a single person. But most Baltic people harbor no grudge, resentment, or ill will. They are grateful to the Soviets who showed compassion. Their freedom is precious, and they are learning to live within it. For some, the liberties we have as American citizens came at the expense of people who lie in unmarked graves in Siberia. Like Joana for Lina, our freedom cost them theirs.

Some wars are about bombing. For the people of the Baltics, this war was about believing. In 1991, after fifty years of brutal occupation, the three Baltic countries regained their independence, peacefully and with dignity. They chose hope over hate and showed the world that even through the darkest night, there is light. Please research it. Tell someone. These three tiny nations have taught us that love is the most powerful army. Whether love of friend, love of country, love of God, or even love of enemy—love reveals to us the truly miraculous nature of the human spirit.

Ruta E. Sepėtytė

