THE WAR BELOW

A novel by

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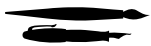

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CHAPTER ONE
CHILL

The corpses around me provided an odd sort of comfort. These people had been my friends and fellow captives. We had worked alongside each other during long, harsh months in the Nazi slave camp, helping each other when we could.

Above me was Josip, who had been injured with me in the bomb blast at the factory. In life, he'd tried to protect us younger boys from the harshest jobs, and now, in death, his body was my shield.

Below me were two women and one man who had all died slowly from lack of food. I felt guilty, lying on top of them. They deserved more respect than that, but would I have been smothered if I had hidden any deeper in this death wagon? I said a silent prayer for their souls.

Shuffling footsteps close by . . .

I held my breath and closed my eyes. I forced my face to take on the slackness of death. The canvas rustled as it was pulled aside and I tried not to flinch as a beam of light penetrated my eyelids. A guttural grunt. Canvas rustling back in place, returning the truck bed to a welcome darkness.

The *snick* of a truck door opening and the *smack* of it closing. The engine roaring to life and the smell of diesel fuel. We were moving. But within moments the truck idled to a stop, the engine still grumbling. Fear threatened to grip me, but I had no time for that. What if the canvas was opened again? I had to look dead. Forcing my body into limpness, I closed my eyes once more.

An exchange of laughter and words in German between the driver and someone else—likely one of the guards at the gate. I held my breath and emptied my mind, then waited for what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only a minute.

The truck engine roared once again, and we were moving. Relief washed over me, but I knew that my challenges had just begun.

I had to get out of this truck once it was a kilometer or two away from the camp. If I was still here when it got to its destination, I would be burned alive.

I gently rolled Josip's body away from me and tried to sit up, but I was stiff and chilled and dizzy. I wore nothing

but a thin hospital gown, and the jagged row of stitches holding together the wound in my thigh throbbed. The truck pitched and bumped along the bomb-pitted road and I felt queasy from the sweet smell of the corpses.

Crawling amidst the dead, I got to the back of the truck bed and shifted onto my knees. The canvas was tied from the outside, so I worked one arm through where the fabric ended and groped around for the knotted rope outside. As the driver swerved and swayed, probably trying to miss the bigger holes in the road, I grabbed on to the side of the truck bed so I wouldn't fall, and worked at loosening a single knot. It had begun to rain, making it hard to get a grip on the rope, but finally I managed to loosen the canvas enough.

I squeezed my body out between the canvas and the metal, balanced my bare feet on a tiny bit of ledge, and took in one long gulp of cold, clean air. Rain washed over me.

My plan was to hold on and prepare for a careful fall, but just then the truck hit a pothole. I flew through the air and crashed down in the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO
STARS

A plop of rain landed on my nose. My eyes flew open but my arms and legs refused to move. Where was I? The star-peppered sky loomed huge above me. One of the stars grew bigger and brighter and that's when I truly woke up.

It was heading right for me.

My muscles screamed as I rolled off the road and fell down into a ditch. The ground shook as the bomb hit, frighteningly close. Ignoring the pain, I pulled myself onto my feet. Where I had lain just seconds ago was now a smoking pit.

A bigger bomb landed somewhere in the distance, lighting up the farmers' fields and a patchwork of familiar factories up ahead.

Another white explosion on the road. My knees buckled and I fell to the ground.

What madness had made me escape the labor camp?

Yes, life had been harsh there and yes, people like me who were given the worst jobs rarely survived. But my friend Lida was back there. Maybe I should have stayed in the hospital. Maybe they wouldn't have killed me.

Poor Lida. Even though she had urged me to go, I felt like such a bad friend for deserting her.

She thought of me as her big brother Luka and I loved her with all my heart. Was she sleeping safe in her barracks right now? I hoped that she would understand why I had no choice. Josip hadn't been badly injured, yet the care he received hadn't made him any better. I didn't trust them at the hospital. So when the chance came for me to get out, I had to do it. Maybe Lida would escape somehow as well.

Surely the war would end soon, and I had to get back to Kyiv to find my father. I'd walk the whole way there if I had to.

Lida would have to understand. "Stay safe, dear Lida," I prayed. "We will meet again, either here or in the next world . . ."

As another bomb exploded somewhere in the distance and the sky lit up again, I saw a range of mountains far away. Nearer to me, there were brown fields, slick with rain. I had my bearings. I was about two kilometers away from the work camp.

Before I had been injured, I'd ridden a crowded train each day into the city and those train tracks were parallel to the road the truck had taken. It was where I and other slave laborers had worked twelve-hour shifts in a metal-works factory, making bomb parts. Most mornings we were too tired and hungry to say much to each other, but once, Josip had pointed out the train window. "Those mountains, Luka," he'd said. "They connect to our own Carpathians."

Another worker had grunted in agreement. "Too bad they're so far away."

The bombs stopped and blackness descended once again. I ran the palm of my hand down the ragged wound on my leg. Some of the stitches had opened up, but the wound itself did not seem to be bleeding. I could feel the sting of scrapes along my spine and shoulders, but as I flexed and stretched, I realized how lucky my fall had been. Mud is softer than dry road, after all. I forced myself to stand, and headed for the field.

My bare feet sank into the stony muck of a farmer's field and it took much effort to pull them out and keep on walking. I found a sturdy branch and used it as a staff. It sank deep into the mud too, but it was better than nothing. The wound throbbed and I was chilled from the rain, but

I focused on putting one foot in front of the other. I had to hide before daylight.

Just then I heard the rumbling of a truck coming down the road. I threw myself down into the muck. I didn't have to see it to know that the truck was filled with Nazi soldiers on patrol.

When the truck was past me, I got back up and slowly, carefully, with the mountains as my beacon, trudged on. I knew I couldn't get to the mountains right away, but by keeping them in sight, at least I'd be walking away from the slave-labor camp and away from the city. That was all I could think of.

As my eyes got used to the darkness and my head cleared from the fall, I realized that I wasn't stepping only on mud and stones, I was walking through a giant vegetable field! I fell to my knees, scraped through the mud, and found what I thought was a weighty potato bigger than my fist.

Memories filled my imagination—fresh *pyrohy* drizzled with bacon fat, a dollop of sour cream on the side. Mama's smiling face . . .

I took a big bite. Bitter and all too familiar. Not a potato at all, but a turnip. Of all the fields in the Reich, why did I end up in one filled with turnips? At the camp,

we'd had watery turnip soup each and every day. At least this was a fresh turnip, almost sweet, not old and cooked to mush. And it was, after all, food.

The sky lit up for a single second. Those mountains were so far away, but they were my link to home. Were the Nazis there as well? It was rough terrain, hard to navigate if you weren't a local. Maybe they had left the mountains free.

I couldn't finish the entire turnip but didn't want to throw it away, so I carried what was left and kept trudging on, hoping to find a good hiding place.

A sudden stab of pain in my heel. My knees buckled and I fell down into the muck. I ran my fingertips over my heel and pulled out a shard of glass, throwing it angrily into the field.

Ignoring the pain, I squeezed the injured flesh as if it were a pimple, to make the blood gush out. It hurt, but I kept on squeezing because I could feel a bit of glass still lodged in there and I wouldn't be able to put my heel down as long as it was there. Finally, I felt a sliver ooze out. I flicked it away, then pushed around on the wound, searching for more, but I had gotten it all. I propped my injured foot up with my other knee and let the blood drip down as I racked my brain, wondering what I should do next.

You have the tools to heal yourself. My father's voice, from the depths of my memory.

I closed my eyes and thought of him. Tato wasn't the kind of person who gave up.

"Do they expect me to destroy all my medicines and my books?" he says to Mama. "These took me years to collect and formulate. I can help many people—especially now that we're at war."

"You'll be arrested for hoarding," says Mama. "You know what the Soviet police said—we must destroy everything before the Nazis invade Kyiv."

"So we Kyivans are not worth saving?"

"Please, Volodya, just do as they say."

"If I do, people will die."

The next day, Tato grips my hand and Mama's as we stand in the street, watching Sasha and Misha, two local bullies who now wear NKVD uniforms, smash in our windows and toss out Tato's precious collection of natural-remedy books. They rip his handwritten journal and toss it onto the pile of books in the street and then set it on fire. As the books burn, they throw his tinctures into the fire. How I hate these Communist Secret Police.

"I don't need those things," Tato says too loudly. "I can heal people without them."

And he does. Using items at hand—boot black and cobwebs and birch leaves and nettle—he teaches me his techniques. He keeps on helping people until one of our neighbors accuses him of being a Nazi spy.

Sasha, dressed in his uniform, comes to our door. We have no idea what he is looking for. Haven't they already destroyed everything of value?

But as they move shelves and look in hiding spots, a chill goes through me. Tato has hidden a leather-bound remedy book that has been passed down from healers in our family, one generation to the next, for hundreds of years. I am amazed at the detailed drawings of herbs and flowers and the funny script that looks like it has been written with a paintbrush. The book was written by a German nun in the Middle Ages. It has nothing to do with the Nazis.

"I knew it!" shouts Sasha, yanking the fragile old book out of a deep drawer. "This is in German."

He tears it to shreds, scattering bits of paper all over our floor and onto the front step. He puts handcuffs on Tato's wrists and parades him through the streets as a traitor.

And then Tato disappears . . .

I opened my eyes and tried to think like Tato.

The mud.

I plunged my hand deep into the muck and pulled out a fairly solid and drier chunk of soil. I crumbled it, then applied it to my heel, soaking up the excess blood. After a minute, I scraped the mud off and replaced it with a fresh handful, making sure to pack it right into the cut to stanch

the bleeding. I tore off a strip of cloth from my gown and bound my heel as tightly as I could.

I got up and continued walking, limping and leaning heavily on the stick, barely noticing the cold and rain.

As dawn broke, I noticed an odd sparkling up ahead. Fragments of glass clinging to the skeleton of a long, low building. Huge jagged shards sticking up in the muddy ground. That one shard of glass that I'd stepped on had traveled a long way from the explosion, and I realized how lucky I had been. What if I had stepped on all these shards in the dark? My feet would have been sliced open and I would have bled to death on the spot.

I kept my distance from the building and continued walking. All at once I realized: This had been a greenhouse. There might still be some berries or vegetables mixed with the glass. My mouth watered at the thought. But it didn't matter now—it was all destroyed. I didn't blame the British and Americans for bombing German farms. Maybe if their soldiers couldn't eat, they'd stop fighting. I just wished there were a way to bomb the Nazis without bombing their prisoners.

I kept on going—on the lookout for a barn or haystack—anyplace where I could collapse and hide.

Just when I was nearly beyond exhaustion, the field

gave way to a rolling grassy area. I hobbled to the top of a small knoll. Before me stood a large farmhouse that had seen better days. Its windows were covered with tar paper—that was a good thing, seeing as I would have been in full view from where I stood.

Near the farmhouse were a couple of buildings. The one closest to it had a bombed-in roof. Between me and the buildings was a trough with a water pump. I was tempted to pump myself some water—I would have loved a drink. But I couldn't risk it.

I ducked behind the closest building. The sky lit up for a moment from a distant explosion, revealing a barn on the other side of the grassy area. It was weather-worn but sturdy. No bomb had damaged it yet.

I limped across the yard to the barn's small side door. I lifted the latch and waited, holding the door open just a crack. If there was a dog in there, I wanted to know about it before I went in.

One second . . . Two . . . Three.

No dog.

I stepped inside.