

TRAPPED IN HITLER'S WEB

A novel by
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CHAPTER ONE

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

October 1942, Nazi-Occupied Lviv, Ukraine

I stood beside Nathan and stared at the ad plastered on the wall outside the Reich Employment Office. The poster urged Ukrainians to sign up for work in the Reich. The Germans would feed us, pay us, and give us free time on Sundays. It seemed almost too good to be true.

“We *have* to do it,” whispered Nathan, squeezing my hand. “I’ve got Bohdan’s identity papers. I’ll be safe.”

What choice did we have? If we stayed in the woods much longer, we’d freeze to death. But we couldn’t go back to our homes in Viteretz, not while the Nazis were killing Jews. It had started slowly, after the Germans occupied our town. Nathan was Jewish. And even though he was now passing himself off as Bohdan Sawchuk, everyone in Viteretz knew that the real Bohdan had been killed by the

Soviets. And what would the cruel German Commandant do to me, Mama, and my big sister, Krystia, for helping Nathan survive? No. We couldn't return there.

Mama and Krystia.

Just the thought of them made my heart ache. I longed to be home again, to snuggle up at night together, to share a story over a bowl of warm kasha. Poor Mama would have so much work to do without me there to help her. I even missed arguing with Krystia. Was she happy that she now got our bed all to herself? The sooner this war ended, the better, and then we could all get back to a normal life.

But right now, I had to help Nathan stay alive.

We had to hide, but Nathan's false papers would only work if we didn't draw any attention to ourselves.

Two Ukrainians going to the Reich for work would seem like a normal choice—even a good one—to a Nazi. Could going into the heart of Hitler's Reich be our salvation? I hoped and prayed that our plan to hide in plain sight would work.

So here we stood, wearing everything we owned. I had on my threadbare skirt and blouse plus the oversized jacket and boots that my Auntie Iryna had given me during the short time we were in hiding with the help of the Underground; my hair was in one long braid down my back. Nathan had escaped the Nazis with nothing but

his underwear. When he came to our house to beg me, Mama, and Krystia for refuge, we had dressed him in clothing from our relatives who had already been killed in the war—mostly Uncle Roman's, but some from cousin Josip as well. In our pockets were some coins paid to us in the back streets of Lviv in exchange for things foraged from the woods—mushrooms, nuts, and berries.

How I wished I were as brave as Krystia. She wouldn't hesitate, but would just plunge ahead in spite of danger. I straightened my spine and pretended I was her. I marched up the stone steps, pulled the door open, and stepped inside, Nathan beside me.

A few people stood in line and we got in behind them. The officer at the desk looked at both of our passports side by side. "You're young to be going to Germany," he said. "But you look healthy and I won't argue."

He filled out a form and handed it to me. As he worked on Nathan's form, I held my breath, worried that he'd realize that Nathan wasn't Bohdan Sawchuk. But he completed it with the same ease as mine and handed it back.

"Take these to her," he said, pointing to a woman with a typewriter at the far end of the room. "She'll make up your official work documents."

As we waited our turn in front of the typist's desk, I examined the officer's handwritten form and realized with

a sinking heart that I had been assigned to a metalworks factory, which would be hard work even for an adult. Nathan's assignment was the same as mine. A hard fate, yes, but better than staying in Viteretz. We'd be paid and fed and have a warm place to sleep, which was more than we'd had for months.

The person in front of us finished, and I was now face-to-face with the typist, her dark blond hair coiled on top of her head and a pair of severe black glasses perched on the tip of her nose. I handed her my paper.

"You're not from Lemberg but from Liebhaft, I see," she said, using the new German names for Lviv and Viteretz as she smoothed the form out on her desk. "You've volunteered, and you're just eleven years old," she said in a lower voice, almost to herself.

"I'll be twelve in two months." The words burst out against my will.

She inserted a card into the typewriter and keyed in the words from the form, but she paused partway through. She slid open the top drawer of her desk and appeared to be looking at something in there before keying in more information. When she was finished, she pulled the card out of the typewriter carriage and set it on the desk in front of me. With her other hand, she flipped open a metal container, revealing a dark blue square.

“Put your index finger on this ink pad,” she said. “And then place your inky finger on this spot.”

I did as she said. She picked up the new document and waved it to dry the ink of my fingerprint. As she handed it back to me, her firm expression briefly flickered into a smile.

She took Nathan’s passport next. She put her finger on the year of his birth, and for a moment I nearly panicked. But then she looked up at him and said, “You’re a young one too. Just twelve and volunteering to go to the Reich for work.” Her tone sounded almost sympathetic.

I held my breath as she prepared Nathan’s papers, hoping and praying that his false identity would pass scrutiny. I exhaled in relief when she finished typing up his card and had him make a fingerprint just as I had done.

“You need to be at the train station by noon today,” she said. “Pack enough food for a two-day journey. I’m glad to see that you’ve both got shoes and a warm jacket. You’ll need them.”

CHAPTER TWO

NICOLETTA

I didn't realize just how scared I was until we got back out onto the street. I bent over, clutching my waist, heaving. I felt like I was about to throw up.

"It's okay," said Nathan, rubbing my back. "We've got our cards."

These work cards were like gold. As far as the Nazis were concerned, having them proved we weren't runaways. More important, Nathan's was proof he wasn't Jewish.

I stood up straight and filled my lungs with cool air, trying to calm myself. "Let's hope we did the right thing."

"Just think," Nathan said as he took his coins out of his pocket. "Soon, we'll be making money. We should send this home."

Was it possible? And who was still alive back home? We'd hidden from the Nazis with the Underground for just a few days last spring and then struck out on our own.

Every once in a while over the summer months, we'd made contact with them. In July we'd heard that Mr. Segal, Nathan's father, was still alive, and my mother and sister were too. That was the last we heard. I looked up to see the time on the City Hall clock tower. It was ten a.m., two hours until the train.

"Come with me," I said, my hand on Nathan's elbow.

We weaved our way through the backstreets of Lviv to a place that I knew only from Auntie Iryna's careful description. I led Nathan through an alleyway behind a street of stores and a restaurant. Between two metal cans piled high with rank and rotting food was a door marked BISTRO MYKOLA—DELIVERIES ONLY.

I tapped on it. No answer.

"What are we doing here?" asked Nathan.

"The owner knows Auntie Iryna," I said. "And I'm hoping she'll send a message back home for us." Auntie Iryna had described this woman's appearance in detail and I could only hope that I'd recognize her on sight.

I tapped more firmly on the door, but there was still no answer.

"Are you sure it's even locked?" asked Nathan. He pulled on the handle. It opened.

We stepped inside, and I called out, "Hello, is anybody here?"

A woman appeared, looking flustered. “We have no food for beggars,” she said, trying to shove us back out the door and close it in our faces.

She was in her twenties, with dark eyes and silver-framed oval glasses and light hair in braids, just as Auntie had described. This woman was definitely Auntie’s friend.

“You are Nicoletta Tokarowetz,” I said. “And I’m Maria Fediuk, Iryna Fediuk’s niece.”

The woman’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

She didn’t look convinced. Since she was working with the Underground, she’d expect me to know the code words, but we hadn’t had contact with the Underground for a while and the code words were constantly changing. I did know the pattern though. When we were staying with the Underground, we had been cycling through classic quotes from Ukrainian poets, so maybe a quote from a poet at the end of the alphabet would get the point across.

“I haven’t seen a *falcon* for some months now,” I told her, “falcon” being our local code word for the Underground Army. “But I have a heart that does not die.”

“From the hands of death?” she asked.

“Immortality,” I answered.

She nodded. “Not the most current, but it will do.”

Nathan looked from me to Nicoletta.

“Quotes from Lesia Ukrainka,” I told him.

“Who’s your friend?” she asked.

“I’m Bohdan Sawchuk,” he said, stepping forward and bowing slightly.

“Bohdan Sawchuk of Viteretz?” Nicoletta asked. “The same Bohdan who was executed by the Soviets in June 1941? Who are you *really*?”

His face paled, and at first, he didn’t answer but looked between me and Nicoletta and reconsidered. “I’m Nathan Segal,” he said.

“The photographer’s son?” asked Nicoletta.

“Yes.”

“He’s still supplying photographs for the false papers.”

Nathan gripped Nicoletta’s hands. “So he’s alive?”

“As of last week, yes. That’s when our network last got a batch of photos from the ghetto.”

“Have you heard anything about Krystia or Mama?” I asked.

“Both still alive,” said Nicoletta. “Both still working with us.”

My knees felt weak with relief from the news and I might have fallen if Nathan hadn’t grabbed my elbow to steady me.

“Come and rest for a minute,” said Nicoletta. She ushered us both through the steamy kitchen to a table close by the sink. We sat down, and Nicoletta poured tea. She

dropped a lump of sugar in each of our cups and set a thin vanilla cookie on our saucers. Everything about this was a treat. We hadn't been able to make a fire in the woods in case we were caught, so we hadn't had anything hot to eat or drink in months. I hadn't seen sugar in a very long time. And a cookie? I felt like I was dreaming.

"Black market. Only the best will do for my Nazi clientele," Nicoletta said with a bitter edge. "Now tell me why you're here."

"Can you get a message to Auntie Iryna?" I asked.

She nodded.

I took out my work card and set it on the table. "We're going to the Reich," I said. "We want our parents to know how to find us when the war ends."

Nicoletta examined my work card. "How fortunate you are," she said. "You've been given farmwork in the Austrian Alps—far away from the fighting."

"What?" I pulled the card back. She was right. "The officer assigned me to a metalworks factory in Germany," I said. "The typist must have switched it."

Nathan took his card out. "Mine now says farmwork too. At the Huber farm in Thaur, Ostmark."

"Ostmark is the Nazi name for Austria," said Nicoletta. "That's where Maria has also been assigned. That typist is a very good person." She slid the cards back across the

table. "I've overheard my German customers talk about evacuating their wives and children to that region for safety. I can't think of a better place for you to be."

I clutched my work card in my hands. Could we really have such good luck? I said a silent prayer of thanks to that typist.

"When does your train leave?" asked Nicoletta.

"At noon," said Nathan.

"We'd better hurry, then," she said, glancing at a clock on the wall. She got up from the table and came back with a pen and paper. Nathan couldn't risk writing directly to his father in case the letter got into Nazi hands, but I wrote my note:

Mama, don't worry. Assigned to the Huber farm near Thaur in Austria. I've heard it's not a bad place. N sends love to father. Will write when we can. Love, M.

From my pocket, I pulled out my coins.

"Here," said Nathan, emptying his pockets. "Send these as well."

I was about to put the coins in the envelope when Nicoletta took them from me. She went to her cash drawer and changed them for a twenty zloty note. "Coins are bulky. Makes it harder to hide the envelope." She sealed the note and the paper money into the envelope and put it into her pocket.

“Thank you for delivering our letter,” I said. “And thank you for the tea and cookies.”

Nicoletta walked us to the back door, and just before we stepped out, she said, “Wait.”

Moments later she came back with two wrapped packages. “Cheese and buns,” she said, giving one to each of us. “It’s not much, but I hope it will get you through your train ride.”

“Thank you,” we both said, overwhelmed by this generosity from a person we had just met. I shoved mine into my coat pocket, and Nathan did the same.

“Stay safe,” said Nicoletta, closing the door.

I heard a scrape of metal—she had remembered to lock the door from the inside this time.