

CHAPTER I

I GRABBED HITLER FROM BEHIND BY THE HAIR AND WOULDN'T LET GO.

"OW! YOU'RE HURTING ME," HE CRIED.

"Coward! Baby! Nazi pig! You'll pay for what you've done to Russia! Now turn around. And if you make one false move, this bayonet goes right into your gut."

"Be careful. You could hurt me," he whined.

"Don't tempt me," I snarled, poking a stick into his back.

"Why do I always have to be Hitler? Why can't I be the Russian general for a change?" Misha asked. It was a fair question. His brother, Alik, and I made him play Hitler all the time. We blamed it on his dark hair; we said it matched the mustache made of brown cloth we pasted on his upper lip.

In truth it was because he was eleven years old and we were twelve, and we could always talk him into it. Alik liked playing Stalin, the boss of all Russia, while I preferred to call myself General Ivan, mostly because I liked the sound of my name with a fancy title in front of it.

"Do you know who I feel sorry for?" Alik asked. "Blondi, Hitler's dog." We'd seen pictures of them once in the newspaper. She was a beautiful German shepherd.

"Poor Blondi," I agreed. "Can you imagine having to lick his hand all the time?"

"Ewww!" groaned Misha. "I'd bite it right off!"

"Or having to do what he told you to do or be punished?" Alik continued.

“I’d run away,” I said. “Hey, that’s an idea. Let’s pretend Blondi ran away to Leningrad. She’s here now, lost in our city. We have to find her before Hitler does. Come on!”

Misha ripped his mustache from his lip, yelling, “I’m not Hitler anymore!” And off we ran. Life had never been more exciting than it was since the war began three months ago. Mothers worked in their factories eleven hours a day now instead of eight. Fathers were at the front, and schools were closed — or in our case, destroyed by a bomb.

“We are so lucky that happened!” we said when we were alone. If adults were near, we said, “We are so lucky that happened on a Saturday when no one was in school.” Either way, we had a freedom we’d never experienced before.

That’s not to say we weren’t busy. All through the summer of 1941 we proudly filled sandbags, collected bottles, planted vegetables, and sewed bandages for the wounded. We were fascinated by the searchlights that scanned the sky at night. They were like giant swords of light that could protect us from anything.

The war had its difficulties, too. Food rationing had started immediately after the Germans invaded Russia in June. For growing boys who could eat five meals a day and still have room for dessert, this wasn’t what you’d call good news, but no one went hungry.

There had been a few bombing raids, like the one that destroyed our school, and by early September the Germans were close enough to shoot artillery at us from the south. Yet somehow it was all tolerable. We had no doubt we were ready for the Germans and whatever they had planned for us.

That all changed on September 8, 1941, the day Leningrad

was surrounded, cut off from the rest of the world. That was the night the Germans began teaching us what bombing really meant.



That evening, Alik and Misha, who lived next door, had come over to play. My mother's shift at the Kirov Works factory had ended, but she wasn't home yet. Alik and I were practicing a new song on our concertinas, little accordion-like instruments. Misha didn't play an instrument, but he shook a tambourine every once in a while as accompaniment.

"Sit down, Ivan," Alik demanded after he'd missed his chord change and we had to stop and start over again.

"I play better standing up," I said.

"You show off better standing up."

"Maybe I do!" I twirled around, squeezing the luscious sound out of my concertina. "You should try it sometime."

"Let's start at the beginning again." He sighed. "I know what the notes are, I just . . . forget."

"Sure." I sat down across from him on a wooden chair in the room that served as our kitchen, living room, and my bedroom. "Watch my left hand; do what I do. We sing in unison for the first four lines," I reminded Alik. He nodded. We played a brief introduction and then sang.

My dear sunflower,

With your golden hair,

Sing to me

In the evening air.

Your dark eyes sparkle over skin so fair. . . .

The front door opened abruptly and in came Olga Osipenko, followed by her small black dog, Oskar. I loved Oskar and had taught him several tricks.

“Here, boy,” I said, clapping my hands. He jumped into my lap but slid off because there wasn’t room for both him and the concertina. Misha bent down, picked him up, and laughed as Oskar began to lick his face. I watched them jealously. We’d never been able to have a pet because my mother sneezed and sniffed if she petted a dog or cat, or was around one for very long.

“Don’t you have work to do?” Olga demanded, addressing the three of us, leaving the door open behind her. She was thirteen and in charge of the children’s work duties in our apartment building. Although a good group leader, sometimes she was very bossy.

“Did you forget how to knock?” I responded.

“We’re practicing a new song. Do you want to hear it?” Alik asked with his natural kindness.

“That’s a waste of time when there’s a war going on.”

Oskar jumped down from Misha’s arms and began to explore our apartment.

“It’s called culture, Olga.” I stood up and began playing my concertina. Maybe Olga didn’t understand, but I knew music was important for telling our stories and keeping our history alive.

She put her hands on her hips. “Did you complete your fire-watch hours on the roof?”

“Yes. Look at the paper hanging next to the door; we signed in and out,” Alik informed her as he played the melody to “My Sunflower.”

“What’s your assignment tomorrow?”

“Address removal,” I answered.

“Alik and Ivan and me — we’re painting all the addresses in Leningrad white, and the street signs, too,” Misha said in one long breath. “If the Germans get in, they won’t know where to go!” He slapped his tambourine for emphasis.

Alik began to play our sunflower song from the beginning. In full voice, Misha, Alik, and I sang, *“My dear sunflower, with your golden hair, sing to me in the evening air.”*

In through the open door came the tiny ancient woman known to the children in our building as Auntie Vera, or simply Auntie. She lived in the apartment above us. After my father died when I was three, she’d been a great help to my mother, acting as a friend and babysitter. She stopped in almost daily to visit or to share a meal with us.

Her small shoulders were already moving up and down to the song, a smile spreading across her face. “Beautiful,” she murmured. “Don’t stop.” She put a lumpy cloth bag on the table, which I guessed held her rations. She stretched out her arms. “Dance with me, Olga?”

The girl shook her head; Auntie Vera was unfazed. “Misha?” He put down his tambourine and joined hands with her. Alik and I both began playing more enthusiastically now that we had an audience of sorts. Even Oskar sat down in front of us as though to listen. I imagined how wonderful it would be to play for a room full of people one day. It was my secret dream to make my living by playing music. Well, either that or doing something with dogs — I could never quite make up my mind.

Then, at the open door, smiling at the scene before her through her weariness, was my mother. “Mama!” I called, continuing to play. “How do you like our new song? Come dance for us!”

She laughed as she set her heavy bags down on the kitchen table. “The only dancing I want to do is in my sleep! Hello, everyone. Hello, Oskar.” Oskar looked up at her and wagged his tail, although he knew by now she never petted him. After work my mother usually stopped at one or two stores to get our rations. She had to do this almost every day, as most stores stocked only one item: this one for bread, that one for cheese or butter, another for a small bit of meat. Precious hours she could have spent sleeping or home with me were wasted standing in line. It was a new demand of the war, but my mother was strong, and only a few years over thirty. Thankfully I was able to help her by standing in some of the food lines now that school was suspended.

I smiled as I looked at my friends, my mother, our cozy apartment, my little world. Rising out of my chair, I tried to infuse my music with the joy I felt.

“Ivan,” my mother said, “I like the new song you and —” She stopped talking and her head tilted suddenly to the side. She ran to the windows at the front of our apartment, stuck her head out as far as she could, and scanned the skies. I stopped playing and heard what she’d heard — a low drone, steady, getting progressively louder. The notes from Alik’s concertina faded; Auntie and Misha stopped dancing. Olga froze; Oskar ran to her side.

“The Germans,” I murmured, rushing to the window, leaning out to see if I could catch a glimpse of the planes.

“Yes,” she said, “but something’s different.” As if on cue, the sound of the incoming planes seemed to double. The air-raid sirens, wired into almost every street in Leningrad, began to

scream their warning. I spun around and saw my fear reflected in the terrified faces of my friends.

“Alik,” I cried, “where’s your mother?”

“At work,” he answered, as if he could hardly catch his breath.

“I’m going home!” Olga shouted, and she ran through the open front door, with Oskar close behind.

My mother took charge. “Ivan, help me put the covers over the windows. Auntie, take Misha and Alik and go into the bedroom. There are chairs in the closet. Wait there for us.” Auntie held out her arms to shepherd the two brothers into the closet we’d prepared for just such an emergency.

I leaned out the window again. The sky was dark with a dozen or more low-flying planes on their way to bomb us. The noise was triple what it was a minute ago, the air-raid sirens relentless.

“Ivan!” my mother shouted. “Help me!” She had picked up one of the large pieces of wood we had to cover our main windows in case of an air attack and was struggling to slide it into the slots we’d made to hold it. I grabbed the end nearest me, and we had it in place in seconds. The sound was a monstrous roar now; it felt like it was on top of us, under us, surrounding us, a violent hurricane of noise.

Just as we lifted the second piece of protective wood, a bomb hit nearby. “Hurry, Mama!” I cried as we tried again to slip the cover into its brackets. Another bomb hit and our building shook. We fell to the floor only seconds after we’d maneuvered the covering into place.

My mother jumped to her feet, grabbed my hand, and ran with me into the bedroom. We were thrown into the closet by

what felt like a shock wave, landing on the laps of Alik and Misha. I slipped down to sit on the floor; my mother settled herself into the chair next to Alik and put her arm around him protectively. Auntie prayed the old Russian Orthodox prayers quietly. It was dark in the closet, but I could see everyone until my mother said, "Ivan, close the door all the way." Then it was as dark as death.

The bombs were falling in such rapid succession that I lost count after the sixth or seventh one. Misha began to whimper. I leaned against my mother's legs in the dark. The building groaned; the air seemed to be seeping out of my lungs; there was pain in my ears. Then a bomb hit so hard, I was sure it had landed on our building. The bodies of my friends were thrown upon me, pushing the air out of my chest. I tried to yell "Get off me! Get off me!" No sound came out. I couldn't see. I couldn't move.

"Is anyone hurt?" It was the distraught voice of my mother. I felt someone being lifted off of me; air rushed back into my lungs.

"Alik," I heard my mother say, "are you all right?"

"Yes," he answered faintly.

"Misha?"

"Yes," he said, sounding as if he'd begun crying, and the weight became less.

"Auntie?"

"I'm here!" she said almost cheerily as the last of the bodies slipped off my back.

"Ivan," my mother said softly, fearfully, as she touched my shoulder and turned me over.

"I'm okay," I said faintly, coughing as the fine dust that covered my lips seeped into my throat when I spoke.