

TRAITORS AMONG US

A novel by
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CHAPTER SIX- RUN!

MARIA

The two Red Army soldiers, Misha and Vlad, stood in front of our sorry group, rifles poised.

“Don’t even think about trying to escape,” said Misha. “Your job here is to clear the road so we can continue on.”

It was a treacherous job dismantling the rubble pile one brick at a time with my bare hands. Many of the bricks had shattered, leaving sharp, jagged edges, and the concrete had split into heavy chunks. I could carry bricks myself if I was careful with them, but the chunks of concrete were too heavy. Depending on the size of the chunk, it took two or three of us to carry each one out of the way. It took hours to clear the worst of it. As we worked, I tried to get an idea of the countryside, looking for a place that we might run to. The cow pasture itself was too exposed, but

beyond it was a hilly area covered with bushes; from what I could see it looked like the best place to hide if I got the chance.

I caught Krystia's eye as she limped past me, the final bricks in each hand. I pretended to brush some hair out of my eye but pointed toward the hilly area. She looked that way and nodded so slightly that only I could see.

"No dawdling," said Vlad. He pushed my shoulder. "Time to get back in the truck."

I turned toward him but cast my eyes to the ground. "How much farther is the journey, comrade?" I asked him.

He seemed to like it that I called him comrade because when he answered, his tone was less harsh. "A few more hours, depending on the road," he said.

"We've all been traveling for so long. Would it be possible for us to have some water and perhaps a chance to relieve ourselves before we get back in the truck?" I asked.

"There's no water," he said. "But I guess you should have a chance to pee." He shaded his eyes with his hand, scanning the area for a good spot. "You can go behind that bush, one at a time," he said, pointing to a sorry-looking shrub not far from the dead cow. "Don't try to escape. I'll shoot you without a moment's hesitation."

I went first, and as I squatted in the privacy of the bush, I wondered how we might distract the two soldiers.

But when I finished and stepped away from the bush, Vlad was watching me.

Krystia was next in line, and when she was finished, we sat side by side on the edge of the truck, our legs dangling. Elias, Finn, and Sophie took their turns behind the bush and then came back. Elias sat beside us, as did Finn, but Sophie clambered into the truck and slumped down in a far dark corner by herself.

The two soldiers stood together about halfway between the truck and the bush, their rifles pointed to the ground. I could tell they were both keeping an eye on us, but they were also chatting.

When it was Olga's turn, instead of going to the bush, she approached me and Krystia, balancing Piotr on her hip with one hand. In her other hand she carried her shoes. She set the shoes on Krystia's lap and whispered, "Put the shoes on quickly, now. I'm giving you and Maria a chance to escape."

How was she giving us a chance to escape? And why had she given her shoes to Krystia? Her words made no sense. Krystia seemed confused as well. She tried to give the shoes back, but Olga thrust them back into her hands.

"Now," hissed Olga. *"Put. On. The. Shoes!"*

Krystia, her face tense with emotion, slipped on both shoes. They seemed to fit her perfectly, but I couldn't

understand why Olga would give them away. My own shoes were nearly falling apart, but they were more precious than gold.

Olga's shoulders relaxed once she saw the shoes on my sister's feet. She grabbed Krystia's arm and said, "Thank you for your kindness. Good luck to you and your sister. I'll see you in heaven."

Krystia's face went pale. She gripped Olga's hand. "Don't do it," she said.

But Olga shrugged her off.

Misha came up to us. "Get inside," he said. "It's time to go."

Right then, Olga wrapped both her arms tightly around Piotr and bolted.

I stood in shock as she hobbled barefoot toward the hill. She'd taken a dozen steps or more by the time the soldiers seemed to understand what was happening.

"Stop!" Misha shouted. "I'll shoot."

"But she has a child!" I screamed. "You might shoot him by mistake."

The soldier didn't acknowledge my words. He aimed his rifle at Olga's back and pulled the trigger. A loud shot rang out.

The bullet missed Olga by a hair, but it seemed to startle her. She stumbled, but found her footing, and kept on running. Piotr flailed and screamed.

Misha dropped his rifle and ran after Olga. When he got close enough, he drew out his pistol and fired.

Olga crumpled and fell, right on top of Piotr. Her back blossomed in red.

Misha pulled Olga's body off Piotr's. A blotch of red covered his chest as well. One of the bullets must have gone right through Olga and hit the boy.

Krystia cried, "You killed a child!"

Vlad, who was standing close to us, looked at Krystia with a flash of anger, then he smashed the butt of his rifle into the side of her head. I grabbed her just in time to break her fall.

"Back in the truck, now!" shouted the soldier.

Elias and Finn helped me lift Krystia inside. We were barely all in before the doors slammed shut. The truck began to move.