

ESCAPE FROM STALINGRAD

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CHAPTER

1

AUGUST 1942

Will you fight to defend the motherland?"

The commissar pauses to let his question sink in. His bright eyes sweep the faces of the crowd at the edge of the square beneath the towering copper statue of Vladimir Lenin. The founder of Soviet Russia points into the glorious future, and the shadow of his finger gently nudges Artem Romanovich Sokolov.

Artem steps aside so that the shadow falls to the pavement. At the same time, he turns the commissar's word over in his mind.

Motherland.

Rodina.

Artem has heard the word spoken aloud his entire twelve-year-old life, yet he's never really pondered its meaning. He glances up at the

impassive face of his own mother—as carved and stonelike as the statue that looms above them all—and then out at the bone-white buildings that line the square. He scans the distant rooftops. A trio of white-winged birds alights upon a chimney top.

Cranes, Artem thinks, feeling for the sketch pad tucked into his shirt pocket. *Those migratory ones with the black necks . . .*

He racks his brain for the name of their species. It is rare to see them inside the city. With the name of the birds on the tip of his tongue, he watches them lift off from the chimney and glide south along the square. Their shadows flicker across the central fountain as they wheel away out of view. *Flying south a few months early*. Artem wonders if they, too, have gotten word of the Nazi invasion—the hundreds of thousands of German soldiers and Panzer tanks that have already overrun Rostov, a mere three hundred kilometers from Stalingrad.

“Yes, comrade commissar!” The reply comes in unison from each citizen’s throat with triumphant force. Pulled from his thoughts, Artem’s voice trails the crowd, too late. His older brother, Vasily, glares down at him—but Artem can see the amusement in the way his brother’s eyebrow lifts. He can also see the little red mark on the underside of his brother’s jaw where Vasily cut himself shaving. At seventeen and very fair-haired, Vasily barely needs to shave at all, but this morning he lathered up and dragged the razor across his skin before putting on his new Red Army uniform.

“I know you will,” the commissar assures the crowd. “I can see the spirit of the revolution still burns in each and every one of you gathered here today.”

Morning sun glints off the red star medallion on the front of the commissar’s cap. Unlike some of the other political officers, this commissar does not strut around driving Party slogans like hammered railroad ties

into the brains of the citizens of Stalingrad. This commissar does not even stand on a podium, though one has been wheeled into place for the morning's assembly. He does not pace like a military commander inspecting his ranks. He walks among his fellow citizens. He is a man of the people, like Comrade Stalin. He even slouches a bit. He takes off his cap, glances up at the relentless sun, scratches at his thick head of hair. He draws the attention of the crowd to a red banner that hangs like a lolling tongue from a balcony: a military council poster. Artem's sharp eyes take in the words.

WE SHALL NEVER SURRENDER THE CITY OF OUR BIRTH.

The commissar strides through the crowd as it gently parts to let him through. He flings an arm to gesture beyond the central fountain at a neat row of spruce trees pruned into oblong shapes.

"These trees were planted in 1925, on the day they changed the name of your glorious city from Tsaritsyn to Stalingrad to honor Comrade Stalin himself. He who so bravely defended the city during the revolution. These trees belong to you. They spring from the soil of your history. Will you let the Nazi tanks bulldoze them?"

"No, comrade commissar!" This time, Artem's voice rings out in time with the others'. Vasily places his hand on Artem's shoulder and gives it a squeeze.

The commissar moves through the crowd. He is not a tall man and he disappears into the throng. Artem stands on tiptoes. A moment later he spots the red star on the man's cap, bobbing lightly in the sea of his fellow citizens, all of them turned out in public squares across the city by order of the defense committee to receive their assignments. Artem loses sight of the red star again, just as the man's voice rises furiously.

"The Palace of Pioneers!" the commissar calls out. Artem feels a jolt of excitement at the mention of his favorite place in Stalingrad. He has

spent countless hours in the building's laboratory, studying the natural sciences, dissecting owl pellets, and drawing the skeletons of rodents while his schoolmates practice piano, ballet, and chess. "Where your children hone the skills that will feed our Soviet culture for decades to come, and the talents to power our science academies to new heights! Will you let it become a boardinghouse for Nazi officers?"

"No, comrade commissar!"

A ripple of energy moves through the crowd as if blasted from the shadowy fingertip of Lenin himself.

The commissar's voice rings out louder and closer. "Will you let it become a place of light and learning and joy for the Nazi children of the Third Reich?"

"No, comrade commissar!"

The man in front of Artem abruptly steps to the side to reveal the commissar. Artem's eyes move up from the shadow at his feet to note the red stripes on the sleeves of the officer's sharply creased tunic, the shine of the brim of his cap, the glint in his eyes as he lowers his gaze to Artem. Vasily's hand gives him a subtle push. Artem does not dare take his attention away from the commissar, but at the same time, those cranes flash across his vision. Oh, to be able to fly away, to join the flock and soar out over the empty steppe, far from advancing Nazis and Red Army commissars and a city about to become a battleground.

What would happen if he voiced such thoughts to a man like the commissar? He would bring shame to his entire family, for one. Such thoughts are defeatist. Cowardly.

Treasonous.

The commissar drops to one knee. His head is at the same height as Artem's. The crowd forms a circle around them. Artem does his best not to squirm under the political officer's gaze.

“What is your name?” he asks with what sounds like genuine interest. Vasily gives his shoulder another squeeze. Artem swallows.

“Artem Romanovich Sokolov.”

“Artem Romanovich, what do you like best about our city?”

“The animals,” he says without hesitation.

The commissar blinks. He clearly did not expect this answer, but he recovers quickly and gives Artem a gentle smile. “Which ones?”

“The sparrows and the cranes. The bullfrogs on the banks of the Volga. The stray dogs up on the Mamayev Kurgan.” He pauses. “My cat, Misha.”

“Misha,” the commissar repeats.

A few of the men nearby start to chuckle. Artem feels, all at once, like a very small boy, a little snot-nosed kid thrust into a serious, grown-up situation.

Artem stands as straight as he can. “It’s because I want to be a veterinarian,” he explains to the commissar. A sense of how to speak to such men, which every Soviet citizen understands practically from birth, takes over. He adds a line the political officer would surely approve of. “I want to make sure the oxen and horses of our collective farms are healthy so they can work hard.”

The commissar nods sharply. His bright eyes seem to sparkle. Artem notes that one of his eyes is blue, the other brown. Just behind him, he can sense a release of tension from Vasily and his mother. A breathing out.

The commissar rises to his feet and holds up a hand to silence the murmuring crowd.

“You see how the dreams of the state, the dreams of the Party, and the dreams of this boy, Artem Romanovich, are as one? They cannot be separated. This boy is Russia.” He points at Artem, mirroring the statue at

Artem's back, whose long shadow creeps out over the crowd. The commissar raises his voice. "This boy is all of us." He shouts, "And we are the *motherland!*"

A ragged cheer sweeps the crowd—the high-pitched hooting and clapping of a football match joining with the *URRAH* of the infantry charge from soldiers like his brother.

Something stirs inside Artem—a similar feeling to when he's been observing a sparrow's nest for hours and the mother bird flies home with food for her babies. Exhilaration at the natural order of things playing out before his eyes. A process that's secret and also universal.

All across Russia, from the steppes to the streets of great cities, civilians and soldiers alike are called upon to repel the Nazi hordes piercing the heart of the Rodina.

Artem feels strong hands under his arms. Vasily lifts him up with one smooth motion so he can see the commissar bound to the front of the crowd. Now, at last, the man takes the podium.

"Will you fight for Artem Romanovich and the animals?" the commissar thunders. He grips the sides of the podium and leans forward, wide-eyed.

Cries of "Yes, comrade commissar!" mingle with long, unbroken shouts.

"Will you fight for your mothers, your fathers, your sons, your daughters"—the commissar is overtaken by the screaming crowd. His voice rises into hysteria—"your *babushkas* in their easy chairs?!"

Artem, held aloft by his brother, is carried even higher by the fierceness of the crowd's conviction. Even his mother is joining the chorus, her reedy voice unleashed upon the morning air. The commissar waves his arms, gesturing at the statue and beyond, out to the cold and choppy Volga river, north toward the massive labyrinth of factories and workers' huts.

Across the square, a stooped old man tosses bits of bread to the ducks that hang around the central fountain. Artem finds that it makes him angry. Who is this old man to go about his business as if the Nazis weren't practically at the gates of the city?

Suddenly, the commissar gestures for quiet. The crowd simmers down. The aftermath of their passion seems to hang in the air like mist.

The commissar continues in a more measured voice. "In his Order Number 227, Comrade Stalin has made things very plain. *Not one step back.*" He turns his head from side to side. His red star flashes. "Anyone who retreats—anyone who *speaks of retreat*—is a coward and a traitor. Cowards and traitors will be shot. It's as simple as that. There is no land for you beyond the Volga. Your land is here. To let it fall into Nazi hands is death. To run away from the battle is death!"

The commissar goes on about the grim fates awaiting panic-mongers and defeatists. The crowd falls silent. Each of them, Artem guesses, is trying to locate their courage like he is, as if it's something he can draw up from inside himself like water from a well. Still held high in his brother's strong arms, Artem spies a single crane, left behind, perched regally upon a balcony. A moment later it flies away to join its brothers and sisters somewhere in the safety of the endless, silent steppe.