maps
and
snakes

29

THE SHACK WAS approximately ten feet by twelve feet. Lodged in the corner was a small stove surrounded by a couple of pots and dirty tins. A pallet of straw sat next to the wall near the stove. There was no pillow, only a worn quilted coverlet. Two tiny windows were created out of bits of glass that had been puttied together.

"There's nothing here," I said. "There isn't a sink, a table, or a wardrobe. Is that where she sleeps?" I asked. "Where will we sleep? Where is the bathroom?"

"Where can we eat?" said Jonas.

"I'm not certain," said Mother, looking in the pots. "This is filthy. But nothing a little cleaning can't fix, right?"

"Well, it's nice to be off that train," said Jonas.

The young blond NKVD burst through the door. "Elena Vilkas," he said.

Mother looked up at the guard.

"Elena Vilkas!" he repeated, louder this time.

"Yes, that's me," said Mother. They began speaking in Russian, then arguing.

"What is it, Mother?" asked Jonas.

Mother gathered us into her arms. "Don't worry, love. We'll stay together."

The guard yelled, "Davai!" waving us out of the hut.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The commander wants to see me. I told him we all had to go together," said Mother.

The commander. My stomach rolled. "I'll stay here. I'll be fine," I said.

"No, we must all stay together," said Jonas.

We followed the blond guard between battered shacks until we reached a log building in much better condition than the others. A few NKVD gathered near the door smoking cigarettes. They leered at Mother. She surveyed the building and the guards.

"Stay here," she said. "I'll be right back."

"No," said Jonas. "We're coming in with you."

Mother looked toward the lusty guards, then at me.

A guard stepped down from the door. "Davai!" he yelled, pulling Mother by the elbow toward the building.

"I'll be right back," said Mother over her shoulder before she disappeared through the door.

"I'll be right back," said Mother.

"But what do you think?" I asked.

"I think you look lovely," said Mother, stepping back to admire the dress.

"Good," said the tailor, placing pins back into his small satin pin cushion. "All done, Lina. You can change now, but be careful, it's just pinned, not stitched."

"Meet me on the sidewalk," said Mother over her shoulder before she disappeared through the door.

"Your mother has excellent taste in dresses," said the tailor.

He was right. The dress was beautiful. The soft gray color made my eyes stand out.

I changed out of the dress and walked outside to meet Mother. She wasn't there. I peered down the row of brightly colored shops but didn't see her. Down the street, a door opened and Mother emerged. Her blue hat matched her dress, which fluttered around her legs as she walked toward me. She held up two ice cream cones and smiled, a shopping bag dangling from her arm.

"The boys are having their day and we'll have ours," said Mother, her red lipstick shining. She handed me a cone and steered us over to a bench. "Let's sit."

Papa and Jonas had gone to a soccer match, and Mother and I had spent the morning shopping. I licked the creamy vanilla ice cream and leaned back against the warm bench.

"It feels good to sit," sighed Mother. She looked over to me. "Okay, the dress is finished—what else did we have to do?"

"I need charcoal," I reminded her.

"Ah, that's right," said Mother. "Charcoal for my artist."

"We should have gone with her," said Jonas.

He was right. But I didn't want to be near the commander. Mother knew it. I should have gone in with her. Now she was alone with them, unprotected, and it was my fault. I tugged Jonas over to the side of the building near a dirty window.

"Stay here so the blond guard can see you," I told Jonas.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"I'm going to look in the window, to make sure Mother's all right."

"No, Lina!"

"Stay there," I told him.

The blond guard looked no more than twenty. He was the one who had turned away when we took our clothes off. He took out a pocketknife and began scraping underneath his fingernails. I edged over toward the window and stood on my toes. Mother sat in a chair and stared into her lap. The commander sat on the edge of a desk in front of her. He flipped through a file while speaking to Mother. He closed the file and balanced it on his thigh. I looked over at the guard, then stretched a bit higher for a better view.

"Stop it, Lina. Andrius says they'll shoot us if you make trouble," whispered Jonas.

"I'm not making trouble," I said, moving back to my brother. "I just wanted to make sure she was all right."

"Well, remember what happened to Ona," said Jonas.

What *had* happened to Ona? Was she in heaven with her daughter and my grandma? Or was she floating amongst the trains and masses of Lithuanians, searching for her husband?

Those were questions for Papa. He always listened intently

to my questions, nodding and then pausing carefully before answering. Who would answer my questions now?

The weather was warm, despite the cloudy sky. In the distance, beyond the shacks, I saw spruce and pine trees interspersed with farmlands. I looked around, memorizing the landscape to draw it for Papa. I wondered where Andrius and his mother were.

Some of the buildings were in better shape than ours. One had a log fence around it and another, a small garden. I'd draw them—sad and shriveled with barely a spot of color.

The door to the building opened and Mother emerged. The commander walked out and leaned against the door frame, watching her walk. Mother's jaw clenched. She nodded as she came toward us. The commander called something to her from the door. She ignored him and grabbed our hands.

"Take us back to the hut," she said, turning to the blond guard. He didn't move.

"I know the way," said Jonas, starting off through the dirt. "Follow me."

"Are you okay?" I asked Mother once we began walking.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice low.

My shoulders dropped as weight escaped them. "What did he want?"

"Not here," she said.

30

"THEY WANT ME to work with them," said Mother once Jonas had returned us to the shack.

"Work with them?" I said.

"Yes, well, they want me to work *for* them," she said. "Translating documents, and also speaking with the other Lithuanians who are here," she said.

I thought of the file that the commander held.

"What will you get for doing it?" asked Jonas.

"I'm not going to be their translator," said Mother. "I said no. They also asked me to listen to people's conversations and report them to the commander."

"To be a snitch?" said Jonas.

"Yes," said Mother.

"They want you to spy on everyone and report to them?" I asked.

Mother nodded. "They promised preferential treatment if I agreed."

"Pigs!" I shrieked.

"Lina! Lower your voice," said Mother.

"They think you would help them after what they've done to us?" I said.

"But Mother, maybe you will need the special treatment," said Jonas with concerned eyes.

"They don't mean it," I snapped. "They're all liars, Jonas. They wouldn't give her anything."

"Jonas," said Mother, stroking my brother's face. "I can't trust them. Stalin has told the NKVD that Lithuanians are the enemy. The commander and the guards look at us as beneath them. Do you understand?"

"Andrius already told me that," said Jonas.

"Andrius is a very smart boy. We must speak only to one another," said Mother, turning to me, "and please, Lina, be careful with anything you write or draw."

We dug through our suitcases and organized what we could sell if the need arose. I looked at my copy of *The Pickwick Papers*. Pages 6–11 were torn out. Page 12 had a smudge of dirt on it.

I grasped the gold picture frame and took it out of the suitcase, staring at my father's face. I wondered where the handkerchief was. I had to send more.

"Kostas," said Mother, looking over my shoulder. I handed her the frame. Her index finger lovingly traced my father's face

and then her mother's. "It's wonderful that you brought this. You have no idea how it lifts my spirit. Please, keep it safe."

I opened the tablet of writing paper I had packed. *14 June, 1941. Dear Joana* stood alone on the first page, a title without a story. I had written that nearly two months ago, the night we were taken. Where was Joana, and where were the rest of our relatives? What would I write now if I were to finish it? Would I tell her that the Soviets had forced us into cattle cars and held us prisoner for six weeks with barely any food or water? Would I mention that they wanted Mother to spy for them? And what about the baby that died in our car and how the NKVD shot Ona in the head? I heard Mother's voice, warning me to be careful, but my hand began to move.

31

THE ALTAIAN WOMAN returned and clattered around. She put a pot on the stove. We watched as she boiled two potatoes and gnawed on a stump of bread.

"Mother," said Jonas, "will there be potatoes for us tonight?"

When we asked, we were told we had to work to earn food.

"If you worked for the NKVD, Mother, would they give you food?" asked Jonas.

"No, my dear. They would give me empty promises," she replied, "which is worse than an empty belly."

Mother paid the woman for a single potato, then again for the privilege to boil the potato. It was ridiculous.

"How much money do we have left?" I asked.

"Barely any," she said.

We tried to sleep, huddled against Mother on the floor of bare boards. The peasant woman slurped and snored, sunken

in her bed of straw. Her sour breath filled the small room. Was she born here in Siberia? Had she ever known a life other than this? I stared into the dark and tried to paint images with my mind on the black canvas.

"Open it, darling!"

"I can't, I'm too nervous," I told Mother.

"She wanted to wait until you got home," Mother told Papa. "She's been holding that envelope for hours."

"Open it, Lina!" urged Jonas.

"What if they didn't accept me?" I said, my damp fingers clutching the envelope.

"Well, then you'll be accepted next year," said Mother.

"You won't know as long as the envelope is sealed," said Papa.

"Open it!" said Jonas, handing the letter opener to me.

I slid the silver blade under the flap on the back of the envelope. Ever since Mrs. Pranas had mailed my application, I had thought of little else. Studying with the best artists in Europe. It was such an opportunity. I sliced open the top of the envelope and removed a single sheet of folded paper. My eyes scanned quickly across the type.

"Dear Miss Vilkas,

"Thank you for your recent application for the summer arts program. Your samples are most impressive. It is with great pleasure that we offer you a place in our—"

"Yes! They said yes!" I screamed.

"I knew it!" said Papa.

"Congratulations, Lina," said Jonas, slinging his arm around me.

"I can't wait to tell Joana," I said.

"That's wonderful, darling!" said Mother. "We have to celebrate."

"We have a cake," said Jonas.

"Well, I was just certain we'd be celebrating." Mother winked.

Papa beamed. "You, my dear, are blessed with a gift," he said, taking my hands. "There are great things in store for you, Lina."

I turned my head toward a rustling sound. The Altaian woman waddled to the corner, grunted, and peed into a tin can.

32

IT WAS STILL DARK when the NKVD began yelling. They ordered us out of the shack, shouting at us to form a line. We scrambled to fall in with the others. My Russian vocabulary was growing. In addition to *davai*, I had learned other important words, such as *nyet*, which meant "no"; *sveenya*, which meant "pig"; and of course *fasheest*, "fascist." Miss Grybas and the grouchy woman were already in line. Mrs. Rimas waved to Mother. I looked around for Andrius and his mother. They weren't there. Neither was the bald man.

The commander walked up and down the line, chewing on his toothpick. He looked us over and made comments to the other guards.

"What's he saying, Elena?" asked Mrs. Rimas.

"He's dividing us up for work detail," said Mother.

The commander approached Mother and yelled in her face. He pulled Mother, Mrs. Rimas, and the grouchy woman out of the line. The young blond guard pulled me out of line and pushed me toward Mother. He divided up the rest. Jonas was in a group with two elderly women.

"Davai!" The young blond guard handed Mother a belted piece of canvas and marched our group away.

"Meet us back at the shack," yelled Mother to Jonas. How would that be possible? Mother and I couldn't even find our way back from the NKVD building. It was Jonas who showed us the way. We would surely be lost.

My stomach turned with hunger. My legs dragged. Mother and Mrs. Rimas whispered back and forth in Lithuanian behind the blond guard. After walking a few kilometers we arrived at a clearing in the woods. The guard grabbed the canvas from Mother and threw it on the ground. He yelled a command.

"He says, 'dig,'" said Mother.

"Dig? Dig where?" asked Mrs. Rimas.

"Here, I guess," said Mother. "He says if we want to eat, we must dig. Our ration depends on our progress."

"What are we to dig with?" I asked.

Mother asked the blond guard. He kicked the heap of canvas. Mother unfolded it and found several rusty hand shovels, the kind used in a flower garden. The handles were missing.

Mother said something to the guard that prompted an irate "Davai" and the kicking of the shovels into our shins.

"Get out of my way," said the grouchy woman. "I'm going to get this over with. I need to eat and so do my girls." She got

down on her hands and knees and started chipping away at the earth with the tiny shovel. We all followed. The guard sat under a tree and watched, smoking cigarettes.

"Where are the potatoes and the beets?" I asked Mother.

"Well, they are clearly punishing me," said Mother.

"Punishing you?" asked Mrs. Rimas. Mother whispered in her ear about the commander's offer to work for him.

"But Elena, you could have gotten preferential treatment," said Mrs. Rimas. "And most likely, extra food."

"A guilty conscience is not worth extra food," said Mother. "Think of the demands that could be made of me in that office. And think of what could happen to people. I don't need that on my soul. I'll persevere like everyone else."

"A woman said there's a town five kilometers away. There's a store, a post office, and a school," said Mrs. Rimas.

"Perhaps we could walk there," said Mother, "and send letters. Maybe someone has heard from the men."

"Be careful, Elena. Sending letters may endanger the people back home," said Mrs. Rimas. "Don't put anything in writing, ever."

I looked at my feet. I had been writing down everything and had already filled several pages with descriptions and drawings.

"No," whispered Mother. She looked to the grouchy woman pounding the dirt and leaned toward Mrs. Rimas. "I have a contact."

What did Mother mean, she had a "contact"? Who was her contact? And the war—now the Germans were in Lithuania.

What was Hitler doing? I wondered what had happened to our house and everything we left behind. And why were we digging this stupid hole?

"Well, at least your housemate talks to you," said Mother. "Ours is a beastly thing that grabbed Lina by the hair."

"The villagers are not happy," said Mrs. Rimas. "But they were expecting us. Apparently, several truckloads of Estonians were dumped in a nearby village a few days ago."

Mother's shovel paused. "Estonians?"

"Yes," whispered Mrs. Rimas. "They've deported people from Estonia and Latvia, too."

Mother sighed. "I feared that might happen. It's madness. How many will they deport?"

"Elena, there will be hundreds of thousands," said Mrs. Rimas.

"Quit your gossiping and get to work," barked the grouchy woman. "I want to eat."

33

WE HAD DUG a pit more than two feet deep when a truck brought a small bucket of water. The guard gave us a break. Blisters wept on my hands. Our fingers were caked with dirt. They wouldn't give us a ladle or cup. We bent like dogs, each taking turns lapping out of the bucket while the blond guard drank leisurely from a large canteen. The water smelled fishy, but I didn't care. My knees looked like raw meat, and my back ached from bending for hours.

We were digging in a small clearing, surrounded by woods. Mother asked permission to go to the bathroom and then pulled me, along with Mrs. Rimas, into the trees. We squatted, our dresses bunched around our waists, to relieve ourselves.

We faced each other, all on our haunches. "Elena, can you pass the talcum, please?" said Mrs. Rimas, wiping herself with a leaf.

We began to laugh. It was such a ridiculous sight, grabbing our knees in a circle. We actually laughed. Mother laughed so hard that her ringlets fell loose from the kerchief she had tied around her hair.

"Our sense of humor," said Mother, her eyes pooled with laughing tears. "They can't take that away from us, right?"

We roared with laughter. The lantern flames flickered in the dark. Joana's brother pumped a playful tune on the accordion. My uncle, who had indulged in blackberry liquor, danced a disjointed jig around the backyard of the cottage, trying to imitate our mothers. He pretended to hold a skirt and looped from side to side.

"Come," whispered Joana, grabbing my hand. "Let's take a walk."

We locked arms and walked between the dark cottages down to the beach. Sand crawled into my shoes. We stood on the shore, the water lapping near our feet. The Baltic Sea glistened in the moonlight.

"The way the moon is shining on the water, it's like it's beckoning us in," sighed Joana.

"It is. It's calling us," I said, memorizing the light and shadow to paint later. I kicked off my sandals. "Let's go."

"I don't have my bathing suit," said Joana.

"Neither do I. So what?"

"So what? Lina, we can't swim naked," she said.

"Who said anything about swimming naked?" I asked. I waded into the black water in my dress.

"Lina! For goodness' sake, what are you doing?" gasped Joana.

I held out my arms and traced the moon shadows on the water. My skirt lifted, weightless. "C'mon, it's lovely!" I dived under the surface.

Joana kicked off her shoes and waded into the water up to her ankles. The light reflected off of her long brown hair and tall frame.

"Come in, it's beautiful!" I said. She waded in slowly, too slowly. I jumped up and pulled her in. She screamed and laughed. Joana's laugh could be singled out in a crowd. It had a raw freedom that echoed around me.

"You're crazy!" she said.

"Why am I crazy? It looked so beautiful; I wanted to be part of it," I said.

"Will you paint us like this?" asked Joana.

"Yes, I'll call it . . . Two Heads, Bobbing in Black," I said, flicking water at her.

"I don't want to go home. It's just too perfect here," she said, swirling her arms through the water. "Shh, someone's coming."

"Where?" I said, spinning around.

"There, in the trees," she whispered. Two figures emerged from the trees in front of the beach. "Lina, it's him! The tall one. The one I told you about. The one I saw in town! What do we do?"

Two boys walked to shore, looking out at us.

"A bit late for a swim, isn't it?" said the tall boy.

"Not at all," I said.

"Oh, really, do you always go swimming after dark?" he asked.

"I go swimming whenever I feel like it," I said.

"And what about your older sister there? Does she always go swimming at night?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself?" I said. Joana kicked me underwater.

"You should be careful. You don't want someone to see you without clothes." He grinned.

"Really? You mean like this?" I jumped and stood up in the water. My wet dress clung to me like melted taffy to paper. I flung my arm in the water, trying to get them both wet.

"Crazy kid." He laughed, dodging the water.

"C'mon," said his friend. "We'll be late for the meeting."

"A meeting? What sort of meeting is going on at this hour?" I asked.

The boys dropped their heads for a moment. "We have to go. Good-bye, older sister," said the tall boy to Joana before turning to walk down the beach with his friend.

"Bye," said Joana.

We laughed so hard I thought surely our parents would hear us. We jumped out of the water, grabbed our sandals, and ran back through the sand onto the shadowy path. Frogs and crickets chirped and warbled all around us. Joana grabbed my arm, pulling me to a stop in the dark. "Don't tell our parents."

"Joana, we're soaking wet. They'll know we went swimming," I said.

"No, I mean about the boys . . . and what they said," she said.

"All right, older sister, I won't tell," I said, grinning. We ran through the dark, laughing all the way back to the cottage.

What did Joana know about the boys and their meeting that I didn't?

The laughter had died. "Lina, let's go, dear," said Mother.

I looked back to the hole. What if we were digging our own grave?

34

I FOUND A STICK and snapped it in half. I sat down and used it to draw in a patch of hard dirt. I drew our house, garden, and the trees before it was time to return to work. I pushed small stones into the earth with my thumb, creating a pathway to our front door, and lined the roof with twigs.

"We must prepare," said Mother. "The winter will be beyond anything we've experienced. Temperatures will be below freezing. There will be no food."

"Winter?" I said, leaning back on my heels. "Are you joking? You think we'll still be here when winter comes? Mother, no!" Winter was months away. I couldn't bear the thought of living in that shack, digging holes for months, and trying to avoid the commander. I glanced over to the blond guard. He was looking at my drawing in the dirt.

"I hope not," said Mother, lowering her voice. "But what

if we are? If we're not prepared, we'll surely freeze or starve." Mother had the grouchy woman's attention.

"The snowstorms in Siberia are treacherous," said Mrs. Rimas, nodding.

"I don't know how the shacks withstand it," said Mother.

"Why don't we build our own building?" I asked. "We can build a log house like the kolkhoz office, with a chimney and a stove. We can all live together."

"Stupid girl. They'll never give us time to build something of our own, and if we did build something, they'd take it for themselves," said the grouchy woman. "Keep digging."

It began to rain. Water plopped on our heads and shoulders. We opened our mouths to drink.

"This is insanity," said Mrs. Rimas.

Mother shouted over to the blond guard. The butt of his cigarette glowed under the shelter of the tree branches.

"He says we must dig faster," said Mother, raising her voice as the rain poured down in sheets. "That the soil will be soft now."

"Bastard," said Mrs. Rimas.

I looked over and saw our house melting in the dirt. My drawing stick rolled away, propelled by the wind and rain.

I put my head down and dug. I jabbed the small shovel into the earth, harder and harder, pretending the soil was the commander. My fingers cramped and my arms shook with exhaustion. The hem of my dress was ripped, and my face and neck were sunburned from the morning sun.

When the rain stopped, we marched back to the camp,

covered in mud up to our waists. My stomach convulsed with hunger. Mrs. Rimas slung the canvas over her shoulder and we dragged along, our hands cramped, still locked on to the shovel blades we had gripped for nearly twelve hours.

We entered the camp near the back. I recognized the bald man's shack with its brown door and was able to direct Mother toward ours. Jonas was inside waiting for us. Every pot was brimming with water.

"You're back!" he shouted. "I was worried you wouldn't find the hut."

Mother wrapped her arms around Jonas, kissing his hair.

"It was still raining when I got back," explained Jonas. "I dragged the pots outside so we could have water."

"Very smart, love. Have you had some to drink?" asked Mother.

"Plenty," he said, looking at me in my bedraggled state. "You can have a nice bath."

We drank from a large pot before washing our legs off. Mother insisted I drink more, even when I felt I couldn't.

Jonas sat cross-legged on the boards. One of Mother's scarves was spread out in front of him. In the center was a lonely piece of bread, with a small flower next to it.

Mother looked down at the bread and the wilted flower. "What sort of banquet do we have here?" she said.

"I received a ration coupon for my work today. I worked with two ladies making shoes," said Jonas, smiling. "Are you hungry? You look tired."

"I'm so hungry," I said, staring at the solitary piece of

bread. If Jonas received bread for working indoors on shoes, we must certainly be getting an entire turkey, I thought.

"We are each entitled to three hundred grams of bread for our work," explained Jonas. "You have to collect your ration coupon at the kolkhoz office."

"That's . . . that's all?" asked Mother.

Jonas nodded.

Three hundred grams of dry bread. I couldn't believe it. That's all we got after digging for hours. They were starving us and would probably dump us into the holes we dug. "It's not enough," I said.

"We'll find something more," said Mother.

Fortunately, the commander wasn't at the log building when we arrived. We were given our coupons without having to beg or dance. We followed the other workers into a nearby building. The bread was weighed and distributed to us. I could almost close my palm around the entire ration. On the way back, we saw Miss Grybas in back of her shack. She waved us over. Her arms and dress were filthy. She had been working in the beet fields all day. Her face twisted with revulsion when she saw us. "What are they doing to you?"

"Making us dig," said Mother, pushing her mud-encrusted hair away from her face. "In the rain."

"Quickly!" she said, pulling us toward her. Her hands trembled. "I could be in awful trouble taking risks like this for you. I hope you know that." She reached into her brassiere and pulled out a few small beets and passed them quickly to Mother. She then raised her dress and took two more from her

underwear. "Now hurry, go!" she said. I heard the bald man yelling in the shack behind us.

We scurried back to our hut to begin our feast. I was too hungry to care that I hated beets. I didn't even care that they had been transported in someone's sweaty underwear.

35

"LINA, PUT THIS in your pocket and take it to Mr. Stalas," said Mother, handing me a beet.

The bald man. I couldn't. I just couldn't do it. "Mother, I'm too tired." I lay on the planks, my cheek flush to the wood.

"I brought some straw for us to sleep on," announced Jonas. "The women told me where I could find it. I'll bring more tomorrow," he said.

"Lina, hurry, before it gets too dark. Take it to Mr. Stalas," said Mother, organizing the straw with Jonas.

I walked into the bald man's shack. A woman and two wailing babies took up most of the gray space. Mr. Stalas was cramped in the corner, his broken leg splinted with a board.

"What took you so long?" he said. "Are you trying to starve me? Are you in cahoots with them? What torture. Crying day and night. I'd trade the rotting baby for this rubbish."

I dropped the beet onto his lap and turned to leave.

"What happened to your hands?" he said. "They're disgusting."

"I've been working all day," I snapped. "Unlike you."

"What do they have you doing?" he asked.

"Digging holes," I said.

"Digging, eh?" he mumbled. "Interesting, I thought they'd have pulled your mother."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your mother is a smart woman. She studied in Moscow. The damn Soviets know everything about us. They know about our families. Don't think they won't take advantage of that."

I thought about Papa. "I need to get word to my father so he can find us."

"Find you? Don't be stupid," he scoffed.

"He will. He'll know how to find us. You don't know my father," I said.

The bald man looked down.

"Do you?"

"Have those guards gotten to you and your mother yet?" he asked. I looked at him. "Between your legs, have they gotten to you yet?"

I huffed in disgust. I couldn't take it anymore. I left him and walked out of the hut.

"Hey."

I turned toward the voice. Andrius was leaning up against the shack.

"Hi," I said, looking over to him.

"You look horrible," he said.

I was too exhausted to muster a clever reply. I nodded.

"What are they having you do?"

"We're digging holes," I said. "Jonas made shoes all day."

"I cut trees in the forest," he said. Andrius looked dirty, but untouched by the guards. His face and arms were tan, making his eyes appear very blue. I pulled a clump of dirt from my hair.

"Which shack are you in?" I asked.

"Somewhere over there," he said, without motioning in any particular direction. "Are you digging with that blond NKVD?"

"*With* him? That's a joke. He's not digging," I said. "He just stands around smoking and yelling at us."

"His name is Kretzsky," said Andrius. "The commander, he's Komorov. I'm trying to find out more."

"Where are you getting information? Is there any news of the men?" I asked, thinking of Papa. He shook his head.

"There's supposed to be a village nearby, with a post office," I said. "Have you heard that? I want to send a letter to my cousin."

"The Soviets will read everything you write. They've got people to translate. So be careful what you say."

I looked down, thinking of the NKVD asking Mother to be a translator. Our personal correspondence wasn't personal. Privacy was but a memory. It wasn't even rationed, like sleep or bread. I thought about telling Andrius that the NKVD had asked Mother to spy.

"Here," he said, holding out his hand. He opened his palm to reveal three cigarettes.

"You're giving me cigarettes?" I asked.

"Well, what did you think, that I had a roasted duck in my pocket?"

"No, I meant . . . Thank you."

"Sure. They're for your brother and your mother. Are they doing okay?"

I nodded, kicking at the dirt. "Where'd you get the cigarettes?" I asked.

"Around."

"How's your mom?"

"Fine," he said quickly. "Look, I gotta go. Tell Jonas I said hi. And try not to ruin the cigarettes with your blister juice," he teased.

I staggered back to our shack, trying to see which way Andrius went. Where was his hut?

I gave Mother the three cigarettes. "From Andrius," I said.

"How sweet of him," said Mother. "Where did he get them?"

"You saw Andrius?" said Jonas. "Is he okay?"

"He's okay. He chopped wood all day in the forest. He said to tell you hello."

The Altaian woman toddled over and thrust her hand out to Mother. They had a brief exchange interspersed with "nyets" and stomps from the Altaian woman's foot.

"Elena," said Mother, pointing to her own chest. "Lina, Jonas," she said, pointing to us.

"Ulyushka!" the woman said, thrusting her palm to Mother.

Mother gave her a cigarette.

"Why are you giving her a cigarette?" asked Jonas.

"She says it's payment toward rent," said Mother. "Her name is Ulyushka."

"Is that her first or last name?" I asked.

"I don't know. But if we're to live here, we must be able to address one another properly."

I arranged my raincoat over some of the straw that Jonas had brought. I lay down. I hated the way Mother had said, "If we're to live here," like we were staying. I also heard Mother say *spaseeba*, which meant "thank you" in Russian. I looked over and saw her sharing a match with Ulyushka. Mother pulled two graceful puffs through her long fingers and then put it out quickly, rationing her own cigarette.

"Lina," whispered Jonas. "Did Andrius look okay?"

"He looked fine," I said, thinking of his tan face.

I was lying in bed, waiting for the sound. I heard soft footsteps outside. The curtain billowed up, revealing Joana's tanned face in the window.

"Come out," she said. "Let's sit on the porch."

I crept out of our bedroom and onto the porch of the cottage. Joana draped askew in the rocker, gliding back and forth. I sat in the chair next to her, pulling my knees up and tucking my bare feet under my cotton nightgown. The rocker croaked a steady rhythm while Joana stared off into the darkness.

"So? How was it?" I asked.

"He's wonderful," she sighed.

"Really?" I said. "Is he smart? He's not one of those dumb boys who drink beer at the beach all day, is he?"

"Oh no," she breathed. "He's in his first year at university. He wants to study engineering."

"Hmph. And he doesn't have a girlfriend?" I asked.

"Lina, stop trying to find something wrong with him."

"I'm not. I'm just asking," I said.

"One day, someone will catch your eye, Lina, and hopefully when it happens, you won't be so critical."

"I'm not critical," I said. "I just want to make sure he's good enough for you."

"He has a younger brother," said Joana, grinning at me.

"Really?" I crinkled my nose.

"See? You're already critical and you haven't even met him."

"I'm not being critical! So where is this younger brother?"

"He'll be here next week. Do you want to meet him?"

"I don't know, maybe. It depends what he's like," I said.

"Well, you won't know until you meet him, will you?" teased Joana.

36

WE WERE ASLEEP WHEN it happened. I had rinsed off my blisters and started a letter to Joana. But I was too tired. I fell asleep. The next thing I knew, the NKVD was yelling at me, pushing me to get outside.

"Mother, what's happening?" said Jonas.

"They say we must report to the kolkhoz office immediately."

"Davai!" shouted a guard holding a lantern. They became impatient. One drew a pistol.

"*Da!* Yes!" said Mother. "Hurry, children! Move!" We scrambled out of our straw. Ulyushka rolled over, turning her back to us. I looked over to my suitcase, grateful I had hidden my drawings.

Others were also herded from their huts. We walked in a line down the dirt path toward the kolkhoz office. I heard the bald man yelling somewhere behind us.

They packed us into the main room of the log building.

The gray-haired man who wound his watch stood in the corner. The little girl with the dolly waved excitedly to me, as if reunited with a long-lost friend. A wide bruise blossomed across her cheek. We were instructed to wait quietly until the others arrived.

The log walls were chinked with gray paste. At the head of the room, a desk with a black chair took up much of the floor. Portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin hung above the desk.

Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili. He called himself Josef Stalin, which meant "Man of Steel." I stared at the picture. He seemed to stare back. His right eyebrow arched, challenging me. I looked at his bushy mustache and dark, stony eyes. The portrait showed him almost smirking. Was that intentional? I wondered about the artists who painted Stalin. Were they grateful to be in his presence, or terrified of the outcome if he found their portraits unbecoming? The picture of Stalin was crooked.

The door opened. The bald man hobbled in on his broken leg.

"And not one of you thought to help me!" he yelled.

Komorov, the commander, marched in, followed by several NKVD carrying rifles. The blond guard, Kretzsky, was at the end of the line carrying a stack of papers. How did Andrius learn their names? I looked around for Andrius and his mother. They weren't there.

Komorov began speaking. Everyone turned toward Mother. The commander paused and raised his eyebrow at her, twirling the ever-present toothpick on his tongue.

Mother's face tightened. "He says we've been brought here for paperwork."

"Paperwork?" said Mrs. Rimas. "At this hour?"

Komorov continued speaking. Kretzsky held up a typewritten document.

"We are all to sign that document," said Mother.

"What does it say?" the crowd demanded.

"It says three things," said Mother, staring at Komorov. He continued speaking, with Mother translating in between for the group.

"First, we sign that we agree to join this collective farm." There were rumbles within the room. People turned back to the commander as he spoke. His arm casually moved his uniform aside, displaying the gun at his hip. The crowd shifted.

"Second," said Mother, "we sign that we agree to pay a war tax of two hundred rubles per person, children included."

"Where are we to get two hundred rubles?" said the bald man. "They've already stolen all that we had."

Chattering ensued. An NKVD pounded the butt of his rifle on the desk. The room quieted.

I looked at Komorov as he spoke. He stared straight at Mother, as if he were deeply enjoying what he was saying to her. Mother paused. Her mouth sagged.

"Well, what is it? What's the third, Elena?" said Mrs. Rimas.

"We agree that we are criminals." Mother paused. "And that our sentence shall be . . . twenty-five years' hard labor."

Shouts and wails erupted in the small room. Someone

began to hyperventilate. The crowd pushed forward toward the desk, arguing. The NKVD lifted their rifles, pointing them at us. My jaw unlatched. Twenty-five years? We were going to be imprisoned for twenty-five years? That meant I would be older than Mother when we were released. I reached out to Jonas to steady myself. He wasn't there. He had collapsed at my feet.

I couldn't pull a deep breath. The room began to fold in around me. I was sliding, tangled in panic's undertow.

"SILENCE!" yelled a male voice. Everyone turned. It was the gray-haired man who wound his watch.

"Calm yourselves," he said slowly. "We do no good by becoming hysterical. We can't think clearly if we panic. It's scaring the children."

I looked at the little girl with the dolly. She clung to her mother's dress, tears spilling onto her bruised face.

The man lowered his voice and spoke calmly. "We are intelligent, dignified people. That is why they have deported us. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Alexandras Lukas. I am an attorney from Kaunas." The crowd quieted. Mother and I helped Jonas to his feet.

The commander, Komorov, yelled from the desk at the front of the room.

"Mrs. Vilkas, please tell the commander that I am explaining the situation to our friends," said Mr. Lukas. Mother translated. Kretzsky, the young blond guard, chewed his thumbnail.

"I'm not signing any document," said Miss Grybas. "They made us sign a registration document at the teachers'

conference. Look where it got me. That's how they collected the names of all the teachers to deport."

"They'll kill us if we don't sign," said the grouchy woman.

"I don't believe so," said the gray-haired man. "Not before winter. We are in the first week of August. There is much work to be done. We are good, strong workers. We are farming for them, building structures for them. It is to their benefit to use us, at least until winter comes."

"He's right," said the bald man. "First they'll grind us from grain to flour, then they'll kill us. Who wants to wait around for that? Not me."

"They shot the girl who had the baby," huffed the grouchy woman.

"They shot Ona because she lost her senses," said Mr. Lukas. "She was out of control. We are not out of control. We are intelligent, rational people."

"So we shouldn't sign?" someone asked.

"No. I believe we should sit down in an orderly manner. Mrs. Vilkas will explain that we are not ready to sign paperwork."

"Not ready?" said Mrs. Rimas.

"I agree," said Mother. "We must not completely refuse. And we must show that we are not hysterical. Form three lines."

The NKVD held up their rifles, unsure what we might do. We sat down in straight lines in front of the desk, under portraits of Russia's leaders. The guards looked at one another, dumbfounded. We sat calmly. We had regained a slice of dignity. I put my arm around Jonas.

"Mrs. Vilkas, please ask Commander Komorov what the charges are," said the gray-haired man. Mother translated. Komorov sat on the edge of the desk, swinging his boot.

"He says we are charged under Article 58 of the Soviet Penal Code for counterrevolutionary activities against the USSR," said Mother.

"That doesn't carry a twenty-five-year sentence," muttered the bald man.

"Tell him we will work for them and we will provide good labor, but we are not yet ready to sign," said Mr. Lukas.

Mother translated. "He says we must sign now."

"I am not signing a paper condemning me to twenty-five years," said Miss Grybas.

"Nor am I," I said.

"So what do we do?" asked Mrs. Rimas.

"We wait here quietly until we are dismissed," said Mr. Lukas, winding his watch.

And so we waited.

"Where's Andrius?" whispered Jonas.

"I don't know," I said. I had heard the bald man ask the same question.

We sat on the floor of the kolkhoz office. Every few minutes, Komorov would slap or kick someone, trying to bully them into signing. No one did. I winced with his every step. Sweat trickled across the nape of my neck and along my spine. I tried to keep my head down, afraid that Komorov would notice me. Those who fell asleep were beaten.

Hours passed. We sat obediently, like schoolchildren in

front of the principal. Finally, Komorov spoke to Kretzsky.

"He's telling the young guard to take over," Mother translated.

Komorov marched over to Mother. He grabbed her by the arm and spit something that resembled an oyster onto her face. Then he left.

Mother quickly wiped off the slime, as if it didn't bother her at all. It bothered me. I wanted to roll the hate up into my mouth and spit it back in his face.

37

AT SUNRISE THEY TOLD us it was time to go back to work. Tired but relieved, we dragged ourselves to our shack. Ulyushka was already gone. The hut smelled of rotten eggs. We drank some of the rainwater and ate a stub of bread Mother had saved. Despite my washing efforts, my dress was still stiff with mud. My hands looked like a small animal had chewed on them. Yellow pus leaked from the blisters.

I tried my best to clean the sores with the rainwater. It didn't help. Mother said I needed to form calluses.

"Just do the best you can, dear," said Mother. "Move your arm as if you're digging, but don't press. I'll do the work." We set off out of the hut, walking toward the lineup for work detail.

Mrs. Rimas walked toward us, her face covered in fear. Then I saw it, the body of a man with a stake driven through

his chest into the side of the kolkhoz office. His arms and legs dangled like a limp marionette. Blood soaked through his shirt and dripped to form a stain beneath him. Buzzards feasted on his fleshy bullet wounds. One pecked at his empty eye socket.

"Who is he?" I asked.

Mother gasped, grabbed me, and tried to cover my eyes.

"He wrote a letter," whispered Mrs. Rimas.

I moved past Mother, looking at the piece of paper tacked up, fluttering next to the dead man. I saw handwriting and a very crude diagram.

"He wrote a letter to the partisans—the Lithuanian freedom fighters. The NKVD found it," said Mrs. Rimas.

"Who translated it for them?" whispered Mother. Mrs. Rimas shrugged.

My stomach dropped, thinking of my drawings. I felt nauseous and put my hand to my mouth.

The blond guard, Kretzsky, stared at me. He looked tired and angry. Our standoff had deprived him of sleep. He marched us out to the clearing at a faster pace than normal, yelling and pushing at us.

We arrived at the large pit we had dug the day before. Looking at it, I estimated that four men lying down could fit inside. Kretzsky instructed us to dig another pit next to the first. I couldn't erase the image of the dead man from my mind. His diagram was nothing more than a few crude lines. I thought of my drawings, lifelike and full of pain, sitting in my suitcase. I had to hide them.

I yawned and hacked away at the dirt. Mother said the

time went faster if we talked about things that made us happy. She said it gave us strength.

"I want to find that village," I said. "Maybe we can buy food or send letters."

"How can we go anywhere, when all we do is work?" said the grouchy woman. "And if we don't work, we don't eat."

"I'll try to ask the woman I live with," said Mrs. Rimas.

"Be careful who you ask," said Mother. "We don't know who we can trust."

I missed Papa. He would know who we could ask and who we should stay away from.

We dug and dug until the water arrived. Commander Komorov was on the truck. He walked around the holes, inspecting them. I eyed the bucket of water. My hair stuck to my face. I wanted to submerge my head and drink. Komorov barked a command. Kretzsky shifted his feet. Komorov repeated the command.

Mother's face was suddenly the color of chalk. "He says . . . we must get in the first hole," she said, clenching her dress.

"For what?" I asked.

Komorov yelled and pulled a pistol from his belt. He pointed it at Mother. She jumped down into the first hole. The pistol moved to my head. I jumped in. He continued until all four of us were in the hole. He laughed and gave another instruction.

"We must put our hands on our heads," said Mother.

"No, dear God," said Mrs. Rimas, shaking.

Komorov walked around the hole, looking at us, point-

ing the pistol. He told us to lie down. We lay next to each other. Mother grasped my hand. I stared up. The sky was blue behind the silhouette of his large, square frame. He circled the hole again.

"I love you, Lina," whispered Mother.

"Our Father, who art in heaven," began Mrs. Rimas.

BANG!

He shot into the hole. Dirt crumbled down from above our heads. Mrs. Rimas screamed. Komorov told us to shut up. He circled around and around, muttering that we were disgusting pigs. Suddenly, he began kicking dirt from the large pile into the hole. He laughed and kicked faster and faster. The soil landed on my feet, then on my dress, then on my chest. He kicked furiously, covering us in dirt, still pointing the gun at our faces. If I sat up, I'd be shot. If I didn't sit up, I'd be buried alive. I closed my eyes. A heavy load of dirt sat on my body. Then finally, dirt fell onto my face.

BANG!

More dirt crumbled above our heads. Komorov laughed wildly, kicking dirt onto our faces. Dirt covered my nose. I opened my mouth to breathe and choked on the soil.

I heard Komorov cackling and then hacking. He laughed and coughed, trying to regain composure, as if he had outdone himself. Kretzsky said something.

BANG!

Then it was quiet. We lay there, buried in our own efforts. I heard a muffled rumble of the truck driving away. I couldn't open my eyes. I felt Mother squeezing my hand. She was still

alive. I squeezed back. Then I heard Kretzsky's voice above us. Mother sat up and frantically began wiping dirt from my face. She pulled me up. I hugged her, not wanting to let go. Mrs. Rimas dug the grouchy woman out. She wheezed and coughed up dirt.

"It's okay, darling," said Mother, rocking me into her. "He's just trying to scare us. He wants us to sign those documents."

I couldn't cry. I couldn't even speak.

"Davai," said Kretzsky softly. He reached out his hand.

I looked up at his outstretched arm. I hesitated. He reached down farther. I grabbed his forearm. He grasped mine. I dug my toe into the dirt and let him pull me out. I stood at the side of the hole, face-to-face with Kretzsky. We stared at each other.

"Get me out of here!" yelled the grouchy woman. I looked away, where the truck had driven off. Kretzsky sent us back to digging. No one spoke for the rest of the day.

38

"WHAT'S WRONG?" asked Jonas when we arrived back at the shack.

"Nothing, dear," said Mother.

Jonas looked from Mother to me, searching our faces for answers.

"We're just tired." Mother smiled.

"Just tired," I told Jonas.

Jonas motioned us over to his pallet of straw. Inside his small cap were three large potatoes. He put his finger to his lips so our gasps wouldn't be audible. He didn't want Ulyushka to take the potatoes for rent.

"Where did you get them?" I whispered.

"Darling, thank you!" said Mother. "And I think we have just enough rainwater left. We'll make a nice potato soup."

Mother grabbed the coat out of her suitcase. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To take food to Mr. Stalas," she said.

I checked my suitcase, thinking of the dead man knifed up against the kolkhoz office. My drawings were undisturbed. The lining on the bottom of my suitcase was held down by snaps. I tore each drawing and page of writing from my tablet, slid it under the lining, and snapped it back in place. I would hide my messages to Papa until I found a way to send something.

I helped Jonas set the water to boil. Then it occurred to me. Miss Grybas wasn't able to give us beets today. Mother didn't take a potato. So what was she feeding the bald man?

I walked through the huts and quickly ducked out of sight. Mother was talking to Andrius in front of the bald man's shack. She was no longer holding her coat. I couldn't hear their conversation. Andrius looked concerned. He discreetly handed a bundle to Mother. She reached out and patted his shoulder. Andrius turned to leave. I ducked behind the shack. Once Mother passed, I peeked out and began to follow him.

Andrius walked down the row of barracks. I stayed well behind, just close enough to see where he was going. He made his way to the edge of the camp, then continued on to a large log building with windows. He stopped and looked around. I ducked behind the edge of a shack. It looked like Andrius entered the building from the rear. I crept closer and hid behind a bush.

I squinted to peer in the window. A group of NKVD sat around a table. I looked to the back of the building. No, Andrius couldn't have gone inside an NKVD building. I was

just about to follow him farther. Then I saw her. Mrs. Arvydas appeared in the window carrying a tray of glasses. Her hair was clean and styled. Her clothes were pressed. She was wearing makeup. She smiled and distributed the drinks to the NKVD.

Andrius and his mother were working with the Soviets.

39

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN grateful for the potato soup that night. But all I could think about was Andrius. How could he do it? How could he work with them? Did he live in that building? I thought about lying in that hole while Andrius lay in a bed, a Soviet bed. I kicked at my itchy straw, staring at the rusted ceiling.

"Mother, do you think they'll let us sleep tonight? Or will they insist we go to the office to sign the papers?" asked Jonas.

"I don't know," said Mother. She turned her head to me. "Andrius gave me that nice bread we had with our soup. It's very courageous of him to take risks like that for us."

"Oh, he's courageous, isn't he?"

"What do you mean by that?" said Jonas. "He is courageous. He gets us food nearly every day."

"He sure looks like he's eating well, doesn't he? I think he's actually gained weight," I said.

"And be glad of that," said Mother. "Be glad that not everyone is desperate for food like we are."

"Yes, I'm very glad the NKVD aren't hungry. If they were hungry, how would they have the strength to bury us alive?" I said.

"What?" said Jonas.

Ulyushka yelled at us to be quiet.

"Hush, Lina. Let's say our prayers and give thanks for that wonderful meal. Let's pray that your father is just as well."

We slept through the night. The next morning, Officer Kretzsky told Mother that we were to join the other women in the beet fields. I was thrilled. We bent and thrashed amongst the long green rows of sugar beets, using hoes without handles. Miss Grybas lectured us on the pace of our work. She told us that on the first day, someone leaned on the handle a moment to wipe their brow. The Soviets made them saw the handles off. I realized how difficult it was for Miss Grybas to steal beets for us. Armed guards stood watch. Although they seemed more interested in smoking and telling jokes, slipping a beet into my underwear unnoticed was no easy task. It poked out like an extra limb.

That evening, I refused to take food to Mr. Stalas. I told Mother I felt too sick to walk. I couldn't stand to see Andrius. He was a traitor. He was plump on Soviet food, eating from the hand that strangled us each and every day.

"I'll take Mr. Stalas his food," said Jonas after a few days.

"Lina, go with him," said Mother. "I don't want him to go alone." I walked with Jonas to the bald man's shack. Andrius was waiting outside.

"Hi," he said. I ignored him, left Jonas outside, and walked in to give Mr. Stalas his beets. He was standing up.

"There you are. Where have you been?" he said, leaning up against the wall. I noticed Mother's coat tucked into his bed of straw.

"Disappointed I'm not dead?" I said, handing him the beets.

"That's a sour mood," he said.

"Are you the only one who's allowed to be angry? I'm sick of this. I'm tired of the NKVD hounding us."

"Bah. They don't care if we sign," said the bald man. "Do you really think they need our permission, our signatures, to do what they're doing to us? Stalin needs to break our will. Don't you understand? He knows if we sign some stupid papers, we'll give up. He'll break us."

"How do you know?" I asked.

He waved me away. "It doesn't look good on you—anger," he said. "Now get out."

I walked out of the shack. "Let's go, Jonas."

"Wait," whispered Jonas, leaning in to me. "He brought us salami."

I folded my arms across my chest.

"I guess she's allergic to kindness," said Andrius.

"That's not what I'm allergic to. Where did you get your salami?" I said.

Andrius stared at me. "Jonas, can you leave us for a minute?" he said.

"No, he can't leave us. My mother doesn't want him to be alone. That's the only reason I came," I said.

"I'm fine," said Jonas. He turned and walked away.

"So, is that what you're eating these days?" I asked. "Soviet salami?"

"When I can get it," he said. He took out a cigarette and lit it. Andrius looked stronger, his arms muscular. He drew in a breath and blew a plume of smoke over our heads.

"And cigarettes, too," I commented. "Are you sleeping in a nice bed in that Soviet building?"

"You have no idea," he said.

"I don't? Well, you don't look tired or hungry. You weren't dragged to the kolkhoz office in the middle of the night and condemned to twenty-five years. So, are you reporting all of our conversations to them?"

"You think I'm spying?"

"Komorov asked Mother to spy and report to him. She said no."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Andrius, the crimson in his face rising.

"I don't?"

"No, you have no idea," he said.

"I don't see your mother working in the dirt—"

"No," said Andrius, leaning in, an inch from my face. "You know why?" A vein in his temple bulged. I felt his breath on my forehead.

"Yes, because—"

"Because they threatened to kill me unless she slept with them. And if they get tired of her, they still might kill me. So how would you feel, Lina, if your mother felt she had to prostitute herself to save your life?"

My jaw dropped.

The words flew out of his mouth. "How do you think my father would feel if he knew? How does my mother feel, lying with the men who murdered her husband? No, your mother might not translate for them, but what do you think she'd do if they held a knife to your brother's neck?"

"Andrius, I—"

"No, you have no idea. You have no idea how much I hate myself for putting my mother through this, how every day I think of ending my life so she can be free. But instead, my mother and I are using our misfortune to keep others alive. But you wouldn't understand that, would you? You're too selfish and self-centered. Poor you, digging all day long. You're just a spoiled kid." He turned and walked away.

40

THE STRAW PRICKLED AGAINST my face. Jonas had fallen asleep a long time ago. A soft whistle blew each time he exhaled. I tossed and turned.

"He's trying, Lina," said Mother.

"He's sleeping," I said.

"Andrius. He's trying and you're blocking him at every pass. Men aren't always graceful, you know."

"Mother, you don't understand," I said.

She ignored me and continued. "Well, I can see you're upset. Jonas said that you were nasty to Andrius. That's unfair. Sometimes kindness can be delivered in a clumsy way. But it's far more sincere in its clumsiness than those distinguished men you read about in books. Your father was very clumsy."

A tear rolled down my cheek.

She chuckled in the darkness. "He says I bewitched him the very instant he saw me. But do you know what really happened?

He tried to talk to me and fell out of a tree. He fell out of an oak tree and broke his arm."

"Mother, it's not like that," I said.

"Kostas," she sighed. "He was so clumsy, but he was so sincere. Sometimes there is such beauty in awkwardness. There's love and emotion trying to express itself, but at the time, it just ends up being awkward. Does that make sense?"

"Mmm, hmm," I said, trying to muffle my tears.

"Good men are often more practical than pretty," said Mother. "Andrius just happens to be both."

I couldn't sleep. Each time I closed my eyes I saw him winking at me, his beautiful face coming toward mine. The smell of his hair lingered around me.

"Are you awake?" I whispered.

Joana rolled over. "Yes, it's too hot to sleep," she said.

"I feel like I'm spinning. He's so . . . handsome," I told her.

She giggled, tucking her arms under her pillow. "And he dances even better than his older brother."

"How did we look together?" I asked.

"Like you were having a great time," she said. "Everyone could see that."

"I can't wait to see him tomorrow," I sighed. "He's just perfect."

The next day after lunch we ran back to the cottage to brush our hair. I nearly ran over Jonas on my way out.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"For a walk," I said, rushing after Joana.

I walked as fast as I could without breaking into a jog.

I tried not to crumple the drawing rolled in my hand. I had decided to draw him when I couldn't sleep. The portrait came out so well that Joana suggested I give it to him. She assured me he'd be impressed with my talent.

His brother rushed up to Joana, meeting her in the street.

"Hey, stranger," he said, smiling at Joana.

"Hi!" said Joana.

"Hi, Lina. What do you have there?" he said, motioning to the paper in my hand.

Joana looked over toward the ice cream shop. I moved around her to find him.

"Lina," she said, reaching out to hold me back.

It was too late. I had already seen. My prince had his arm around a girl with red hair. They were cozy, laughing, sharing an ice cream cone. My stomach plunged and twisted.

"I forgot something," I said, backing away. My fingers wrenched the portrait in my sweaty hand. "I'll be right back."

"I'll come with you," said Joana.

"No, that's all right," I said, hoping the blotches of heat I felt on my neck weren't visible. I attempted a smile. The sides of my mouth trembled. I turned and walked away, trying to keep my composure until I reached a safe distance.

Clenching my jaw didn't stop the tears. I stopped and leaned against a trash can on the street.

"Lina!" Joana caught up to me. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. I opened the crinkled portrait of his handsome face. I ripped it up and threw it away. Stray pieces escaped my grip and blew across the street. Boys were idiots. They were all idiots.

41

AUTUMN APPROACHED. The NKVD pushed us harder. If we so much as stumbled, they reduced our bread rations. Mother could close her thumb and middle finger around my forearm. I had no tears. The sensation of crying would fill me, but my eyes would only dry-heave and burn.

It was hard to imagine that war raged somewhere in Europe. We had a war of our own, waiting for the NKVD to choose the next victim, to throw us in the next hole. They enjoyed hitting and kicking us in the fields. One morning, they caught an old man eating a beet. A guard ripped out his front teeth with pliers. They made us watch. Every other night they woke us to sign the documents sentencing us to twenty-five years. We learned to sit in front of Komorov's desk and rest with our eyes open. I managed to escape the NKVD while sitting right in front of them.

My art teacher had said that if you breathed deeply and

imagined something, you could be there. You could see it, feel it. During our standoffs with the NKVD, I learned to do that. I clung to my rusted dreams during the times of silence. It was at gunpoint that I fell into every hope and allowed myself to wish from the deepest part of my heart. Komorov thought he was torturing us. But we were escaping into a stillness within ourselves. We found strength there.

Not everyone could sit still. People became restless, exhausted. Finally, some gave in.

"Traitors!" spit Miss Grybas under her breath, clucking her tongue. People argued about those who signed. The first night someone signed, I was furious. Mother told me to feel sorry for the person, that they had been pushed over the edge of their identity. I couldn't feel sorry for them. I couldn't understand.

Walking to the fields each morning, I could predict who would be the next to sign. Their faces sang songs of defeat. Mother saw it, too. She would chat with the person and work next to them in the field, trying to bolster their spirit. Sometimes it worked. Many times it didn't. At night I drew portraits of those who had signed and wrote about how the NKVD broke them down.

The NKVD's hostilities strengthened my defiance. Why would I give in to people who spit in my face and tormented me each and every day? What would I have left if I gave them my self-respect? I wondered what would happen if we were the only ones left who wouldn't sign.

The bald man moaned that we could believe no one. He accused everyone of being a spy. Trust crumbled. People began

to question each other's motives and planted seeds of doubt. I thought of Papa, telling me to be careful with my drawing.

Two nights later, the grouchy woman signed the papers. She bent over the desk. The pen trembled in her knobby hand. I thought she might change her mind, but suddenly she scribbled something and threw the pen down, committing herself and her little girls to twenty-five years. We stared at her. Mother bit her bottom lip and looked down. The grouchy woman began screaming, telling us we were imbeciles, that we were all going to die, so why didn't we eat well until then? One of her daughters began to cry. That night, I drew her face. Her mouth sagged, forlorn. The lines of her brow plunged with both anger and confusion.

Mother and Mrs. Rimas scavenged for news of the men or the war. Andrius passed information to Jonas. He ignored me. Mother wrote letters to Papa, even though she had no idea where to send them.

"If only we could get to that village, Elena," said Mrs. Rimas one night in the ration line. "We could mail our letters."

People who signed the twenty-five-year sentence were able to go to the village. We were not.

"Yes, we need to get to the village," I said, thinking of getting something to Papa.

"Send the whore, that Arvydas woman," said the bald man. "She'll hustle the best deals. Her Russian is probably pretty good by now."

"How dare you!" said Mrs. Rimas.

"You disgusting old man. Do you think she wants to sleep

with them?" I yelled. "Her son's life depends on it!" Jonas hung his head.

"You should feel sorry for Mrs. Arvydas," said Mother, "just as we feel sorry for you. Andrius and Mrs. Arvydas have put extra food in your mouth many a night. How can you be so ungrateful?"

"Well, then you'll have to bribe that cranky cow who signed," said the bald man. "You can buy her off to mail your letters."

We had all written letters that Mother planned to mail to her "contact," a distant relative who lived in the countryside. The hope was that Papa had done the same thing. We weren't able to sign our names or write anything specific. We knew the Soviets would read the notes. We wrote that we were all well, having a lovely time, learning good trade skills. I drew a picture of Grandma and wrote "Love from Grandma Altai" underneath with my scribbled signature. Surely Papa would recognize the face, my signature, and the word *Altai*. Hopefully the NKVD wouldn't.

42

MOTHER HELD THREE sterling silver serving pieces she had sewn into the coat. She had carried them since we were deported.

"Wedding gifts," she said, holding the silver, "from my parents." Mother offered one piece to the grouchy woman in exchange for mailing letters and picking up sundries and news when she went to the village. She accepted.

Everyone longed for news. The bald man told Mother of a secret pact between Russia and Germany. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, and others were divided between Hitler and Stalin. I drew the two of them, dividing countries like children dividing toys. Poland for you. Lithuania for me. Was it a game to them? The bald man said Hitler broke his agreement with Stalin, because Germany invaded Russia a week after we were deported. When I asked Mother how the bald man knew about the pact, she said she didn't know.

What had happened to our house and everything we owned since we were deported? Did Joana and my other relatives know what had happened? Maybe they were looking for us.

I was glad that Hitler had pushed Stalin out of Lithuania, but what was he doing there?

"Nothing could be worse than Stalin," said one of the men at the dining room table. "He is the epitome of evil."

"There is no better or worse," said Papa, his voice low. I leaned farther around the corner to listen.

"But Hitler won't uproot us," said the man.

"Maybe not you, but what about us Jews?" said Dr. Seltzer, my father's close friend. "You heard the circulation. Hitler made the Jews wear armbands."

"Martin's right," said my father. "And Hitler's setting up a system of ghettos in Poland."

"A system? Is that what you call it, Kostas? He's locked up hundreds of thousands of Jews in Lodz and sealed off even more in Warsaw," said Dr. Seltzer, his voice soaked with desperation.

"It was a bad choice of words. I'm sorry, Martin," said Papa. "My point is that we're dealing with two devils who both want to rule hell."

"But Kostas, to remain neutral or independent will be impossible," said a man.

"Lina!" whispered Mother, grabbing me by my collar. "Go to your room."

I didn't mind. The constant talk of politics bored me. I was only listening for my drawing game. I tried to draw their expressions simply by hearing the conversation but not seeing their faces. I had heard enough to draw Dr. Seltzer.

Jonas continued to work with the two Siberian women making shoes. They liked him. Everyone loved Jonas and his sweet disposition. The women advised that he'd best make boots for winter. They looked the other way when he set aside scraps of materials. Jonas was learning Russian much quicker than I was. He could understand a fair amount of conversation and could even use slang. I constantly asked him to translate. I hated the sound of the Russian language.

43

I THRASHED NEXT to Mother in the beet field. Black boots appeared near my feet. I looked up. Kretzsky. His yellow hair parted on the side and cascaded across his forehead. I wondered how old he was. He didn't look much older than Andrius.

"Vilkas," he said.

Mother looked up. He rattled off something in Russian, too quickly for me to understand. Mother looked down and then back at Kretzsky. She raised her voice and yelled out to the field. "They're looking for someone who can draw."

I froze. They had found my drawings.

"Do any of you draw?" she said, shading her eyes and looking across the field. What was Mother doing? No one responded.

Kretzsky's eyes narrowed, looking at me.

"They'll pay two cigarettes for someone to copy a map and a photograph—"

"I'll do it," I said quickly, dropping my hoe.

"No, Lina!" said Mother, grabbing my arm.

"Mother, a map," I whispered. "Maybe it will bring us news of the war or the men. And I won't have to be in this field." I thought about giving a cigarette to Andrius. I wanted to apologize.

"I'll go with her," said Mother in Russian.

"NYET!" yelled Kretzsky. He grabbed me by the arm. "Davai!" he yelled, pulling me away.

Kretzsky dragged me from the beet field. My arm ached under his grip. As soon as we disappeared from view, he let go of me. We walked in silence toward the kolkhoz office. Two NKVD approached down the row of shacks. One caught sight of us and shouted to Kretzsky.

He looked over to them, then back at me. His posture changed. "Davai!" yelled Kretzsky. He slapped me across the face. My cheek stung. My neck twisted from the unexpected blow.

The two NKVD drew near, watching. Kretzsky called me a fascist pig. They laughed. One of them asked for a match. Kretzsky lit the guard's cigarette. The NKVD brought his face an inch from mine. He muttered something in Russian, then blew a long stream of smoke in my face. I coughed. He took the burning cigarette and pointed the glowing tip at my cheek. Brown tar stains filled a crack between his front teeth. His lips were chapped and crusty. He stepped back, looking me over, nodding.

My heart hammered. Kretzsky laughed and slapped the

guard on the shoulder. The other NKVD raised his eyebrows and made obscene gestures with his fingers before laughing and walking away with his friend. My cheek throbbed.

Kretzsky's shoulders dropped. He stepped back and lit a cigarette. "Vilkas," he said, shaking his head and blowing smoke out of the corner of his mouth. He laughed, grabbed my arm, and dragged me toward the kolkhoz office.

What had I just agreed to?

44

I SAT AT A TABLE in the kolkhoz office. I shook out my hands, hoping to stop them from quivering. A map was placed to my upper left, and a photograph to my upper right. The map was of Siberia, the photo of a family. In the photograph, a black box had been drawn around the man's head.

An NKVD brought paper and a box with a nice selection of pens, pencils, and drafting supplies. I ran my fingers over the writing utensils, longing to use them for my own drawings. Kretzsky pointed to the map.

I had seen maps in school, but they had never interested me as this one did. I looked at the map of Siberia, shocked by its enormity. Where were we on the map? And where was Papa? I surveyed the details of the plot. Kretzsky pounded his fist on the table, impatient.

Several officers hovered around while I drew. They flipped

through files and pointed to locations on the map. The files had papers and photographs affixed to them. I stared at the cities on the map as I was drawing, trying to commit them to memory. I would re-create it on my own later.

Most of the officers left as soon as the map was finished. Kretzsky flipped through files, drinking coffee while I drew the man in the photograph. I closed my eyes and inhaled. The coffee smelled incredible. The room was warm like our kitchen at home. When I opened my eyes, Kretzsky was staring at me.

He set his coffee cup down on the table, examining the drawing. I looked at the man's face as it came to life on my page. He had bright eyes and a warm smile. His mouth was relaxed and calm, not pinched like Miss Grybas' or the bald man's. I wondered who he was and whether he was Lithuanian. I thought about creating something his wife and children would like to look at. Where was this gentleman, and why was he important? The ink from the pen flowed smoothly. I wanted that pen. When Kretzsky turned, I dropped it in my lap and leaned closer to the table.

I needed texture to capture the man's hair. I dipped my finger into Kretzsky's coffee cup, lifting grounds onto my finger. I dabbed them on top of my other hand and swished the brown around on my skin. I used the coffee grounds to blot texture into the hair. *Almost.* I leaned forward and brushed a bit of the grit with my pinky. It curved softly in a gentle sweep. *Perfect.* I heard footsteps. Two cigarettes appeared in front of me. I turned, startled. The commander stood behind me. My skin prickled at the sight of him, bristling on my arms and the

back of my neck. I pushed myself against the table, trying to conceal the pen in my lap. He raised his eyebrows at me, flashing the gold tooth under his lip.

"Finished," I said, sliding the drawing toward him.

"Da," he said, nodding. He stared at me, his toothpick bobbing on his tongue.

45

I WALKED BETWEEN the huts in the dark, making my way toward the NKVD building at the back of the camp. I heard voices mumbling behind the brittle walls. I hurried along the tree line, cradling the cigarettes and the pen in my pocket. I stopped behind a tree. The NKVD barracks looked like a hotel compared with our shacks. Kerosene lamps burned brightly. A group of NKVD sat on the porch playing cards and passing a flask.

I crept in the shadows to the back of the building. I heard something—crying, and whispers in Lithuanian. I turned the corner. Mrs. Arvydas sat on a crate, her shoulders rising and falling in rhythm with muffled sobs. Andrius knelt down in front of her, his hands clasping hers. I inched closer. His head snapped up.

"What do you want, Lina?" said Andrius.

"I . . . Mrs. Arvydas, are you all right?" She turned her head away from me.

"Leave, Lina," said Andrius.

"Can I help somehow?" I asked.

"No."

"Is there anything I can do?" I pressed.

"I said, leave!" Andrius stood up to face me.

I hung motionless. "I came to give you—" I reached in my pocket for the cigarettes.

Mrs. Arvydas turned her head to me. Her eye makeup ran down over a bloody welt that blazed across her cheek.

What had they done to her? I felt the cigarettes crush between my fingers. Andrius stared at me.

"I'm sorry." My voice caught and broke. "I'm really so sorry." I turned quickly and began to run. Images streaked and bled together, contorted by my speed—Ulyushka, grinning with yellow teeth; Ona in the dirt, her one dead eye open; the guard moving toward me, smoke blowing from his pursed lips—*Stop it, Lina*—Papa's battered face looking down at me from the hole; dead bodies lying next to the train tracks; the commander reaching for my breast. *STOP IT!* I couldn't.

I ran back to our shack.

"Lina, what's wrong?" asked Jonas.

"Nothing!"

I paced the floor. I hated this labor camp. Why were we here? I hated the commander. I hated Kretzsky. Ulyushka complained and stomped for me to sit down.

"SHUT UP, YOU WITCH!" I screamed.

I rifled through my suitcase. My hand knocked the stone from Andrius. I grabbed it. I thought about throwing it at Ulyushka. Instead, I tried to crush it. I didn't have the strength. I put it in my pocket and snatched my paper.

I found a sliver of light outside in back of our hut. I held the stolen pen above the paper. My hand began to move in short, scratchy strokes. I took a breath. Fluid strokes. Mrs. Arvydas slowly appeared on the page. Her long neck, her full lips. I thought of Munch as I sketched, his theory that pain, love, and despair were links in an endless chain.

My breathing slowed. I shaded her thick chestnut hair resting in a smooth curve against her face, a large bruise blazing across her cheek. I paused, looking over my shoulder to make certain I was alone. I drew her eye makeup, smudged by tears. In her watery eyes I drew the reflection of the commander, standing in front of her, his fist clenched. I continued to sketch, exhaled, and shook out my hands.

I returned to our shack and hid the pen and drawing in my suitcase. Jonas sat on the floor, bobbing his knee nervously. Ulyushka was asleep on her pallet, snoring.

"Where's Mother?" I asked.

"The grouchy woman went to the village today," said Jonas. "Mother walked down the road to meet her on the way back."

"It's late," I said. "She's not back?" I had given the grouchy woman a wood carving to pass along for Papa.

I walked outside and saw Mother coming toward the shack. She carried coats and boots. She smiled her huge smile when she saw me. Miss Grybas came scurrying toward us.

"Hurry!" she said. "Put those things out of sight. The NKVD is rounding everyone up to sign papers."

I didn't have a chance to tell Mother about Mrs. Arvydas. We put everything in the bald man's shack. Mother put her arms around me. Her dress hung on her thin frame, her hip bones protruding at the belted waistline.

"She mailed our letters!" whispered Mother, beaming. I nodded, hoping the handkerchief had passed across hundreds of miles already, ahead of the letters.

It wasn't five minutes before the NKVD burst into our hut, yelling for us to report to the office. Jonas and I marched along with Mother.

"And drawing the map this afternoon?" she asked.

"Easy," I said, thinking of the stolen pen hidden in my suitcase.

"I wasn't sure it was safe," said Mother. "But I guess I was wrong." She put her arms around us.

Sure, we were safe. Safe in the arms of hell.

"Tadas was sent to the principal today," announced Jonas at dinner. He wedged a huge piece of sausage into his small mouth.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he talked about hell," sputtered Jonas, juice from the plump sausage dribbling down his chin.

"Jonas, don't speak with your mouth full. Take smaller pieces," scolded Mother.

"Sorry," said Jonas with his mouth stuffed. "It's good." He

finished chewing. I took a bite of sausage. It was warm and the skin was deliciously salty.

"Tadas told one of the girls that hell is the worst place ever and there's no escape for all eternity."

"Now why would Tadas be talking of hell?" asked Papa, reaching for the vegetables.

"Because his father told him that if Stalin comes to Lithuania, we'll all end up there."

46

"IT'S CALLED TURACIAK," Mother told us the next day. "It's up in the hills. It's not large, but there's a post office and even a small schoolhouse."

"There's a school?" said Miss Grybas excitedly.

Jonas shot me a look. He had been asking about school since the beginning of September.

"Elena, you must tell them I'm a teacher," said Miss Grybas. "The children in the camp must go to school. We have to create some sort of school here."

"Did she mail the letters?" asked the bald man.

"Yes," said Mother. "And she wrote the post office address on the return."

"But how will we know if any letters arrive for us?" said Mrs. Rimas.

"Well, we'll have to continue to bribe someone who signed,"

said Miss Grybas with a grimace. "They'll check for our mail when they take their trips to the village."

"She said she met a Latvian woman whose husband is in a prison near Tomsk," said Mother.

"Oh, Elena, could our husbands be in Tomsk?" asked Mrs. Rimas, bringing her hand to her chest.

"Her husband wrote that he is spending time with many Lithuanian friends." Mother smiled. "But she said the letters were cryptic and arrived with markings."

"Of course they did," said the bald man. "They're censored. That Latvian woman better be careful what she writes. And you better be careful, too, unless you want to be shot in the head."

"Will you never stop?" I said.

"It's the truth. Your love letters could get them killed. And what of the war?" asked the bald man.

"The Germans have taken Kiev," said Mother.

"What are they doing there?" asked Jonas.

"What do you think they're doing? They're killing people. This is war!" said the bald man.

"Are the Germans killing people in Lithuania?" said Jonas.

"Stupid boy, don't you know?" said the bald man. "Hitler, he's killing the Jews. Lithuanians could be helping him!"

"What?" I said.

"What do you mean? Hitler pushed Stalin out of Lithuania," said Jonas.

"That doesn't make him a hero. Our country is doomed, don't you see? Our fate is death, no matter whose hands we fall into," said the bald man.

"Stop it!" yelled Miss Grybas. "I can't bear to hear about it."

"That's enough, Mr. Stalas," said Mother.

"What about America or Britain?" asked Mrs. Rimas. "Surely they'll help us."

"Nothing yet," said Mother. "But soon, I hope."

And that was the first news of Lithuania in months. Mother's spirits soared. Despite her hunger and blisters from hard work, she was effervescent. She walked with a bounce. Hope, like oxygen, kept her moving. I thought about Papa. Was he really in prison somewhere in Siberia? I recalled the map I had drawn for the NKVD, and then Stalin and Hitler dividing up Europe. Suddenly, a thought hit me. If Hitler was killing the Jews in Lithuania, what had happened to Dr. Seltzer?

The possibility of letters en route made for endless conversation. We learned the names of everyone's relatives, neighbors, coworkers—anyone who could possibly send a letter. Miss Grybas was sure the young man who had lived next door to her would send a letter.

"No, he won't. He probably never noticed you lived there," said the bald man. "You're not exactly the noticeable type."

Miss Grybas was not amused. Jonas and I laughed about it later. At night, we'd lie in our straw creating ridiculous scenarios of Miss Grybas romancing her young neighbor. Mother told us to stop, but sometimes I heard her giggling right along with us.

Temperatures dipped and the NKVD pushed us harder.

They even gave us an extra ration at one point because they wanted another barrack built before the snow came. We still refused to sign the papers. Andrius still refused to speak to me. We planted potatoes for spring, even though no one wanted to believe we might still be in Siberia when the cold broke.

The Soviets forced Mother to teach school to a mixed class of Altaian and Lithuanian children. Only the children whose parents signed were allowed to attend school. They forced her to teach in Russian, even though many children did not yet fully understand the language. The NKVD would not let Miss Grybas teach. It pained her. They told her if she signed, they would allow her to assist Mother. She wouldn't sign, but helped Mother with lesson plans in the evenings.

I was happy that Mother was able to teach in a covered shack. Jonas had been reassigned to chopping logs for firewood. The snow had arrived, and he came back each night wet and freezing. The tips of his frozen hair would simply break off. My joints became stiff from the cold. I was sure the insides of my bones were full of ice. They made a cracking, snapping sound when I stretched. Before we could get warm, we'd feel a horrible stinging sensation in our hands, feet, and face. The NKVD grew more irritable when the cold came. So did Ulyushka. She demanded rent whenever she felt like it. I literally wrestled my bread ration out of her hand on several occasions.

Jonas paid Ulyushka our rent with splinters and logs he stole from the cutting. Thankfully, he had made sturdy boots and shoes for us while working with the two Siberian women.

His Russian was quickly improving. I drew my little brother taller, his face somber.

I was assigned to hauling sixty-pound bags of grain on my back through the snow. Mrs. Rimas taught me how to pilfer some by moving the weave of the bag aside with a needle and then moving it back, undetected. We were quickly perfecting the art of scavenging. Jonas sneaked out each night to retrieve scraps of food from the NKVD's trash. Bugs and maggots didn't deter anyone. A couple of flicks of the finger and we stuffed it in our mouths. Sometimes, Jonas would return with care packages that Andrius and Mrs. Arvydas would hide in the trash. But aside from the occasional bounty from Andrius, we had become bottom-feeders, living off filth and rot.

47

AS THE BALD MAN predicted, we were able to continually bribe the grouchy woman into visiting the post office for us when she went to the village. For two months, our bribes returned nothing. We shivered in our shacks, warmed only by the promise of an eventual envelope carrying news from home. Temperatures lived well below zero. Jonas slept near the little stove, waking every few hours to add more wood. My toes were numb, the skin cracked.

Mrs. Rimas was the first to receive a letter. It was from a distant cousin and arrived mid-November. News traveled fast around the camp that a letter had arrived. Nearly twenty people pushed inside her shack to hear the news from Lithuania. Mrs. Rimas hadn't returned from the ration line. We waited. Andrius arrived. He squeezed in next to me. He produced stolen crackers from his pockets for everyone. We tried to

keep our voices down, but excitement percolated through the packed crowd.

I turned, accidentally elbowing Andrius. "Sorry," I said. He nodded.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Fine," he replied. The bald man entered the shack and complained there was no room. People pushed forward. I was smashed against the front of Andrius's coat.

"How's your mother?" I asked, glancing up at him.

"As well as can be expected," he said.

"What do they have you doing these days?" My chin was practically against his chest.

"Chopping down trees in the forest." He shifted his weight, looking down at me. "You?" he asked. I could feel a wisp of his breath on the top of my hair.

"Hauling bags of grain," I said. He nodded.

The envelope was handed around. Some people kissed it. It came to us. Andrius ran his finger over the Lithuanian stamp and postmark.

"Have you written to anyone?" I asked Andrius.

He shook his head. "We're not sure it's safe yet," he said.

Mrs. Rimas arrived. The group tried to part, but it was too crowded. I was shoved onto Andrius again. He grabbed me, trying to keep us from pushing the crowd like a line of dominoes. We steadied ourselves. He quickly let go.

Mrs. Rimas said a prayer before opening the envelope. As expected, some lines of the letter were crossed out with thick black ink. But enough was legible.

"'I have had two letters from our friend in Jonava,'" read Mrs. Rimas. "That has to be my husband," she cried. "He was born in Jonava. He's alive!" The women hugged.

"Keep reading!" yelled the bald man.

"'He said that he and some friends decided to visit a summer camp,'" said Mrs. Rimas.

"'He finds it to be beautiful,'" she continued. "'Just as described in Psalm 102.'"

"Someone get their Bible. Look up Psalm 102," said Miss Grybas. "There's some sort of message in that."

We helped decode the rest of the letter with Mrs. Rimas. Someone joked that the crowd was better than a stove for warmth. I stole glances at Andrius. His bone structure and eyes were strong, perfectly proportioned. It appeared he was able to shave from time to time. His skin was wind-burned like the rest of us, but his lips weren't thin or cracked like the NKVD. His wavy brown hair was clean compared with mine. He looked down. I looked away. I couldn't imagine how filthy I must have looked, or what he saw in my hair.

Jonas returned with Mother's Bible.

"Hurry!" someone said. "Psalm 102."

"I have it," said Jonas.

"Shh, let him read."

"Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee.

"Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call, answer me speedily.

"For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as a firebrand.

"My heart is stricken, and withered like grass; I forget to eat my bread.

"By reason of the voice of my groaning, my bones cleave to my flesh . . ."

Someone gasped. Jonas's voice trailed off. I clutched Andrius's arm.

"Keep going," said Mrs. Rimas. She wrung her hands.

The wind whistled and the walls of the hut shuddered. Jonas's voice grew faint.

"I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl in the desert.

"I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the housetop.

"Mine enemies reproach me all the day; and they that are mad against me are sworn against me.

"For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping.

"My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass."

"Make him stop," I whispered to Andrius, dropping my head against his coat. "Please." But he didn't stop.

Jonas finally finished. A gust of wind clattered against the roof.

"Amen," said Mrs. Rimas.

"Amen," echoed the others.

"He's starving," I said.

"So what? We're starving. I'm withered like grass, too," said the bald man. "He's no worse off than me."

"He's alive," said Andrius quietly.

I looked up at him. Of course. He wished his father was alive, even if he was starving.

"Yes, Andrius is right," said Mother. "He's alive! And your cousin has probably sent him word that you're alive, too!"

Mrs. Rimas read the letter again. Some people left the shack. Andrius was one of them. Jonas followed.

48

IT HAPPENED A WEEK later. Mother said she had seen signs. I saw nothing.

Miss Grybas waved frantically to me. She was trying to run through the snow.

"Lina, you must hurry! It's Jonas," she whispered.

Mother said she had noticed that his color had turned. Everyone's color had turned. Gray had crept beneath our skin, settling in dark trenches under our eyes.

Kretzsky wouldn't let me leave my work. "Please," I begged. "Jonas is sick." Couldn't he help, just this once?

He pointed back to the stack of grain sacks. The commander walked around, yelling and kicking at us to hurry. A snowstorm was coming. "Davai!" yelled Kretzsky.

By the time I returned to our shack, Mother was already there. Jonas was lying on her pallet of straw, nearly unconscious.

"What is it?" I asked, kneeling beside her.

"I don't know." She pulled up Jonas's pant leg. His shin was covered in spots. "It may be some sort of infection. He has a fever," she said, putting her hand on my brother's forehead. "Did you notice how irritable and tired he has become?"

"Honestly, no. We're all irritable and tired," I said. I looked at Jonas. How could I not have noticed? Sores lined his bottom lip, and his gums looked purple. Red spots dotted his hands and fingers.

"Lina, go get our bread rations. Your brother will need nourishment to fight this off. And see if you can find Mrs. Rimas."

I fought my way through the swirling snow in the dark, the wind stabbing at my face. The NKVD wouldn't give me three rations. Because Jonas collapsed on the job, they said, he had forfeited his ration. I tried to explain that he was ill. They waved me away.

Mrs. Rimas didn't know what it was, nor Miss Grybas. Jonas seemed to slip further from consciousness.

The bald man arrived. He loomed over Jonas. "Is it contagious? Does anyone else have spots? The boy could be the angel of death for us all. A girl died of dysentery a few days ago. Maybe that's what it is. I think they threw her in that hole you dug," he said. Mother ordered him out of the shack.

Ulyushka yelled at us to take Jonas outside in the snow. Mother yelled back and told her to sleep somewhere else if she was worried about contagion. Ulyushka stomped out. I sat next to Jonas, holding a snow-cooled cloth to his forehead. Mother knelt down and spoke softly, kissing his face and hands.

"Not my children," whispered Mother. "Please, God, spare him. He is so young. He's seen so little of life. Please . . . take me instead." Mother raised her head. Her face contorted with pain. "Kostas?"

It was late when the man who wound his watch arrived with a kerosene lamp. "Scurvy," he announced after looking at Jonas's gums. "It's advanced. His teeth are turning blue. Don't worry; it's not contagious. But you'd best find this boy something with vitamins before his organs shut down completely. He's malnourished. He could turn at any point."

My brother was a rendering from Psalm 102, "weak and withered like grass." Mother rushed out into the snow to beg, leaving me with Jonas. I laid compresses on his forehead. I tucked the stone from Andrius under his hand and told him that the sparkles inside would heal him. I recounted stories from our childhood and described our house, room by room. I took Mother's Bible and prayed for God to spare my brother. My worry made me nauseous. I grabbed my paper and began to sketch something for Jonas, something that would make him feel better. I had started a drawing of his bedroom when Andrius arrived.

"How long has he been like this?" he said, kneeling by Jonas.

"Since this afternoon," I replied.

"Can he hear me?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Jonas. You're going to be all right. We just need to find you something to eat and drink. Hang on, friend, do you hear me?" Jonas lay motionless.

Andrius took a cloth bundle from inside his coat. He unwrapped a small silver can and pulled a pocketknife from his pants. He punctured the top of the can.

"What is it?" I asked.

"He has to eat this," said Andrius, leaning toward my brother's face. "Jonas, if you can hear me, open your mouth."

Jonas didn't move.

"Jonas," I said. "Open your mouth. We have something that's going to help you."

His lips parted.

"That's good," said Andrius. He dipped the blade of the knife into the can. It reappeared with a juicy stewed tomato on it. The back of my jaws cramped. Tomatoes. I began to salivate. As soon as the tomato touched Jonas's mouth, his lips began to quiver. "Yes, chew it and swallow," said Andrius. He turned to me. "Do you have any water?"

"Yes, rainwater," I said.

"Give it to him," said Andrius. "He has to eat all of this."

I eyed the can of tomatoes. Juice spilled off of Andrius's knife and onto his fingers. "Where did you get them?" I asked.

He looked at me, disgusted. "I got them at the corner market. Haven't you been there?" He stared, then turned away. "Where do you think I got them? I stole them." He heaped the last of the tomatoes into my brother's mouth. Jonas drank the juice from the can. Andrius wiped the blade and juice from his

fingers on his trousers. I felt my body surge forward toward the juice.

Mother arrived with one of the Siberian shoemakers. Snow was piled atop their heads and shoulders. The woman ran to my brother, speaking quickly in Russian.

"I tried to explain what was wrong," said Mother, "but she insisted on seeing for herself."

"Andrius brought a can of tomatoes. He fed them to Jonas," I said.

"Tomatoes?" gasped Mother. "Oh, thank you! Thank you, dear, and please thank your mother for me."

The Siberian woman began speaking to Mother.

"There's a tea she thinks will heal him," translated Andrius. "She's asking your mother to help her collect the ingredients."

I nodded.

"Andrius, could you stay a bit longer?" asked Mother. "I know Jonas would feel so much better with you here. Lina, boil some water for the tea." Mother leaned over my brother. "Jonas, I'll be right back, darling. I'm going for a tea that will help you."

49

WE SAT IN SILENCE. Andrius stared at my brother, his fists clenched. What was he thinking? Was he mad that Jonas was sick? Was he mad that his mother was sleeping with the NKVD? Was he mad that his father was dead? Maybe he was just mad at me.

"Andrius."

He didn't look at me.

"Andrius, I'm a complete idiot."

He turned his head.

"You're so good to us, and I'm . . . I'm just an idiot." I looked down.

He said nothing.

"I jumped to a conclusion. I was stupid. I'm sorry I accused you of spying. I've felt horrible." He remained silent. "Andrius?"

"Okay, you're sorry," he said. He looked back to my brother.

"And . . . I'm sorry about your mother!" I blurted.

I grabbed my writing tablet. I sat down to finish the drawing of Jonas's room. At first, I was conscious of the silence. It hung heavy, awkward. As I continued to sketch, I slipped into my drawing. I became absorbed with capturing the folds of the blanket perfectly, softly. The desk and the books had to be just right. Jonas loved his desk and his books. I loved books. How I missed my books.

I held my schoolbag, protecting the books. I couldn't let it slap and bang in the usual way. After all, Edvard Munch was in my bag. I had waited nearly two months for my teacher to receive the books. They had finally arrived, from Oslo.

I knew my parents wouldn't appreciate Munch or his style. Some called it "degenerate art." But as soon as I saw photos of Anxiety, Despair, *and* The Scream, *I had to see more. His works wrenched and distorted, as if painted through neurosis. I was fascinated.*

I opened our front door. I saw the solitary envelope and raced toward the foyer table. I tore it open.

Dear Lina,

Happy New Year. I'm sorry I haven't written. Now that the Christmas holiday is passed, life seems on a more serious course. Mother and Father have been arguing. Father is constantly ill-tempered and rarely sleeps. He paces the house through all hours of the night and comes home at lunchtime to get the mail. He's boxed up most of his books, saying they

take up too much space. He even tried to box up some of my medical books. Has he gone mad? Things have changed since the annexation.

Lina, please draw a picture of the cottage in Nida for me. The warm and sunny memories of the summer will help push me through the cold to spring.

Please send me your news and let me know where your thoughts and drawings take you these days.

Your loving cousin,
Joana

"He told me about his airplane," said Andrius, pointing over my shoulder to the drawing. I had forgotten he was there.

I nodded. "He loves them."

"Can I see?"

"Sure," I said, handing him my tablet.

"It's good," said Andrius. His thumb was pressed against the edge of the tablet. "Can I look at the others?"

"Yes," I said, thankful there were only a few sketches I hadn't yet torn from the pad.

Andrius turned the page. I took the compress from Jonas's head and went to cool it in the snow. When I returned, Andrius was looking at a picture I had drawn of him. It was from the day Mrs. Rimas received the letter.

"It's a strange angle," he said, laughing quietly.

I sat down. "You're taller than me. That's how I saw it. And we were all packed pretty tight."

"So, you had a good angle of my nostrils," he said.

"Well, I was looking up at you. This angle would be different," I said, observing him.

He turned to me.

"See, you look different from this perspective," I said.

"Better or worse?" he asked.

Mother and the Siberian woman returned.

"Thank you, Andrius," said Mother.

He nodded. He leaned over and whispered something to Jonas. He left.

We steeped the leaves in the water I had boiled. Jonas drank it. Mother stayed propped at his side. I lay down but couldn't sleep. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw the painting of *The Scream* in my head, but the face was my face.

50

IT TOOK TWO WEEKS for Jonas to improve. His legs trembled when he walked. His voice was barely more than a whisper. In the meantime, Mother and I became weaker. We had to split our two bread rations to feed Jonas. At first, when we asked, people contributed a portion of what they had. But as the cold crept deeper into our shacks, it began to chill generosity. One day, I saw Miss Grybas turn her back and shove her entire bread ration into her mouth the moment it was handed to her. I couldn't blame her. I had often thought of doing the same thing. Mother and I didn't ask for contributions after that.

Despite our pleadings, the NKVD refused to give us food for Jonas. Mother even tried speaking to the commander. He laughed at her. He said something that upset her for days. We had nothing left to sell. We had bartered practically everything we owned with the Altaians for warm clothing. The lining of Mother's coat hung thin, like fluttering cheesecloth.

The approach of Christmas bolstered spirits. We gathered in each other's shacks to reminisce about the holidays in Lithuania. We talked endlessly about *Kucios*, our Christmas Eve celebration. It was decided that Kucios would be held in the bald man's shack. He grudgingly agreed.

We closed our eyes when listening to the descriptions of the twelve delicious dishes representing the twelve apostles. People rocked back and forth, nodding. Mother talked of the delicious poppy seed soup and cranberry pudding. Mrs. Rimas cried at the mention of the wafer and the traditional Christmas blessing, "God grant that we are all together again next year."

The guards warmed themselves with drink after work. They often forgot to check on us or didn't want to venture out into the biting, frosty winds. We gathered each night to hear about someone's holiday celebration. We grew to know each other through our longings and cherished memories. Mother insisted that we invite the grouchy woman to our meetings. She said that just because she had signed didn't mean she wasn't homesick. Snow fell and the temperatures plummeted, but work and the cold felt tolerable. We had something to look forward to—a small ritual that brought relief to our gray days and dark nights.

I had begun to steal logs to keep the stove fired. Mother constantly worried, but I assured her I was careful and that the NKVD were too lazy to come out into the cold. One night, I left the bald man's shack to get a log for the stove. I crept

around his shack. I heard movement and froze. Someone was standing in the shadows. Was it Kretzsky? My heart stopped . . . Was it the commander?

"It's just me, Lina."

I heard Andrius's voice in the darkness. He struck a match and lit a cigarette, briefly illuminating his face.

"You scared me," I said. "Why are you standing out here?"

"I listen from out here."

"Why don't you come inside? It's freezing," I said.

"They wouldn't want me inside. It's not fair. Everyone is so hungry."

"That's not true. We'd be happy to have you. We're just talking about Christmas."

"I know. I've heard. My mother begs me to bring her the stories each night."

"Really? If I hear about cranberry pudding one more time, I'll go crazy," I said, smiling. "I just need to get some wood."

"You mean steal some?" he said.

"Well, yes, I guess," I said.

He shook his head, chuckling. "You're really not scared, are you?"

"No," I said. "I'm cold." He laughed.

"Do you want to walk with me?" I asked.

"Nah, I better get back," he said. "Be careful. Good night."

Three days later Mrs. Arvydas and Andrius arrived with a bottle of vodka. The crowd fell silent when they walked through the door. Mrs. Arvydas wore stockings. Her hair was clean and curled. Andrius looked down. He stuffed his hands

in his pockets. I didn't care that she wore a clean dress and wasn't hungry. No one wanted to trade places with her.

"A toast," said Mother, lifting the bottle of vodka to Mrs. Arvydas. "To good friends."

Mrs. Arvydas smiled and nodded. Mother took a small sip from the bottle and then shimmied at the hips, delighted. We all joined in, taking small sips and laughing together, savoring the moment. Andrius leaned back against the wall, watching us and grinning.

That night, I fantasized about Papa joining us for the holiday. I imagined him trudging through the falling snow toward Altai, arriving in time for Christmas with my handkerchief in his breast pocket. *Hurry, Papa,* I urged. *Please hurry.*

"Don't worry, Lina, he'll be here soon," said Mother. "He's getting the hay for the table."

I stood at the window, looking out into the snow.

Jonas helped Mother in the dining room. "So we'll have twelve courses tomorrow. We'll be eating all day." He smacked his lips.

Mother smoothed the white tablecloth over the dining room table.

"Can I sit next to Grandma?" asked Jonas.

Papa's dark silhouette emerged on the street before I could protest and argue that I wanted to sit next to Grandma.

"He's coming!" I shouted. I grabbed my coat. I ran down the front steps and stood in the middle of the street. The small dark figure grew taller as it approached through the low light

of dusk and the curtain of falling snow. A tinkling of bells from a horse's harness floated from the street over.

I heard his voice before I could make out his face. "Now, what sort of sensible girl stands in the middle of the road when it's snowing?"

"Only one whose father is late," I teased.

Papa's face appeared, frosty and red. He carried a small bundle of hay.

"I'm not late," he said, putting his arm around me. "I'm right on time."

51

CHRISTMAS EVE ARRIVED. I worked all day chopping wood. Moisture from my nose froze, encrusted around my nostrils. I kept my mind busy trying to remember details about each Christmas at home. No one swallowed their bread ration in line that night. We greeted each other kindly and made our way back to our shacks. Jonas looked somewhat like himself again. We washed our hair in melted snow and scrubbed at our fingernails. Mother pinned her hair up and dotted lipstick on her lips. She rubbed a bit of the red into my cheeks for color.

"It's not perfect, but we do the best we can," said Mother, adjusting our clothes and hair.

"Get the family picture," said Jonas.

The others had the same idea. Photographs of families and loved ones were plentiful in the bald man's shack. I saw a photo of Mrs. Rimas and her husband. He was short, like

her. She was laughing in the photo. She looked so different, strong. Now she drooped, like someone had sucked air out of her. The bald man was particularly quiet.

We sat on the floor as if around a table. There was a white cloth in the center with hay and fir boughs in front of each person. One spot was left empty. A stub of tallow burned in front of it. Lithuanian tradition called for an empty place to be left at the table for family members who were gone or deceased. People placed photographs of their family and friends around the empty seat. I gently set our family photo at the empty setting.

I took out the bundle of food I had been saving and placed it on the table. Some people had small surprises—a potato they had saved or something they had pilfered. The grouchy woman displayed some biscuits she must have bought in the village. Mother thanked her and made a fuss.

"The Arvydas boy and his mother sent this," said the bald man. "For after dinner." He tossed something out. It landed with a thud. People gasped. I couldn't believe it. I was so shocked I started to laugh. It was chocolate. Real chocolate! And the bald man hadn't eaten it.

Jonas whooped.

"Shh . . . Jonas. Not too loud," said Mother. She looked at the package on the table. "Chocolate! How wonderful. Our cup runneth over."

The bald man put the bottle of vodka on the table.

"Now, you know better," scolded Miss Grybas. "Not for Kucios."

"How the hell should I know?" snapped the bald man.

"Maybe after dinner." Mother winked.

"I don't want any part of it," said the bald man. "I'm Jewish."

Everyone looked up.

"But . . . Mr. Stalas, why didn't you tell us?" asked Mother.

"Because it's none of your business," he snapped.

"But for days we've been meeting about Christmas. And you've been so kind to let us use your hut. If you had told us, we could have included a Hanukkah celebration," said Mother.

"Don't assume I haven't celebrated the Maccabees," said the bald man, pointing his finger. "I just don't blather on about it like you fools." The room fell quiet. "I don't wax on about my worship. It's personal. And honestly, poppy seed soup, bah."

People shifted uncomfortably. Jonas started to laugh. He hated poppy seed soup. The bald man joined in. Soon we were all laughing hysterically.

We sat for hours at our meal and makeshift table. We sang songs and carols. After much pressing, Mother persuaded the bald man to recite the Hebrew prayer *Ma'oz Tzur*. His voice lacked its usual pinched tone. He closed his eyes. The words quivered with emotion.

I stared at our family picture, sitting at the empty seat. We had always spent Christmas at home, with bells tinkling in the streets, and warm smells wafting from the kitchen. I pictured the dining room dark, the chandelier laced in cobwebs, and the table covered in a fine layer of dust. I thought of Papa.

What was he doing for Christmas? Did he have a tiny piece of chocolate to melt on his tongue?

The door to the shack blew open. The NKVD pushed inside, pointing guns at us.

"Davai!" yelled a guard, grabbing the man who wound his watch. People began to protest.

"Please, it's Christmas Eve," pleaded Mother. "Don't try to make us sign on Christmas Eve."

The guards yelled and began pushing people out of the shack. I wasn't leaving without Papa. I scrambled over to the other side of the table. I grabbed our family photo and stuffed it up my dress. I would hide it on the way to the kolkhoz office. Kretzsky didn't notice. He stood motionless, holding his rifle, staring at all the photographs.

52

THEY WORKED US hard on Christmas Day. I stumbled from fatigue, having had no sleep the night before. When I returned to the shack, I could barely walk. Mother had given Ulyushka a whole package of cigarettes for Christmas. She sat, with her feet propped up near the stove, smoking. Where had Mother gotten the cigarettes? I couldn't understand why Mother gave anything to Ulyushka.

Jonas arrived with Andrius.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

"Thank you for the chocolate," said Mother. "We were beside ourselves."

"Andrius, wait a minute," said Jonas. "I have something for you."

"I have something for you, too," I said. I reached into my suitcase and pulled out a sheet of paper. I handed it to Andrius.

"It's not very good," I said, "but it's a better angle. Smaller nostrils."

"It's great," said Andrius, looking at my drawing.

"Really?"

His eyes flashed up, locking on mine. "Thank you."

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out. "Merry Christmas," I finally said.

"Here," said Jonas, holding out his hand. "It was yours, then you gave it to Lina. She gave it to me when I was sick. I survived, so I figure it must be pretty lucky. I think it's your turn to have it." Jonas opened his fingers to reveal the stone with the sparkles inside. He handed it to Andrius.

"Thanks. I guess this thing is lucky," said Andrius, looking at the stone.

"Merry Christmas," said Jonas. "And thanks for the tomatoes."

"I'll walk back with you," said Mother. "I'd like to wish your mother a Merry Christmas, if she can steal away for a moment."

Jonas and I lay on our straw, bundled in our coats and boots.

"Remember when we used to sleep in pajamas?" asked Jonas.

"Yes, with goose-down covers," I said. My body sank into the straw and into the quiet. I felt the chill of the hard ground slowly creeping onto my back and up over my shoulders.

"I hope Papa has a goose-down blanket tonight," said Jonas.

"Me, too," I said. "Merry Christmas, Jonas."

"Merry Christmas, Lina."

"Merry Christmas, Papa," I whispered.

53

"LINA!" SAID ANDRIUS, running into our shack. "Hurry, they're coming for you."

"Who?" I asked, startled. I had just returned from work.

"The commander and Kretzsky are on their way now."

"What? Why?" gasped Mother.

I thought of the stolen ink pen, hidden in my suitcase. "It's . . . I . . . stole a pen," I said.

"You did what?" said Mother. "How could you be so foolish! Stealing from the NKVD?"

"It's not about a pen," said Andrius. "The commander wants you to draw his portrait."

I stopped and turned to Andrius. "What?"

"He's an egomaniac," said Andrius. "He went on about needing a portrait for the kolkhoz office, a portrait for his wife—"

"His wife?" said Jonas.

"I can't do it," I said. "I can't concentrate around him." I looked at Andrius. "He makes me uncomfortable."

"I'm going with you," said Mother.

"He won't allow it," said Andrius.

"I'll break my hands if I have to. I can't do it," I said.

"Lina, you will do nothing of the sort," said Mother.

"If you break your hands, you won't be able to work," said Andrius. "And if you can't work, you'll starve to death."

"Do they know she has other drawings?" Jonas said quietly. Andrius shook his head.

"Lina." Andrius lowered his voice. "You have to make the picture . . . flattering."

"You're telling me how to draw?" I said.

He sighed. "I like your drawings. Some are very realistic, but some, they're, well, twisted."

"But I draw what I see," I said.

"You know what I mean," said Andrius.

"And what am I going to get for this?" I asked. "I'm not doing this for a piece of bread or a couple of bent cigarettes."

We argued about what to ask for. Mother wanted postage stamps and seeds. Jonas wanted potatoes. I wanted our own shack and a goose-down blanket. I thought about what Andrius said and struggled to decide what was "flattering." Broad shoulders would signify power. His head turned slightly would accentuate his strong jawline. The uniform would be easy. I could draw it very accurately. It was his face that concerned me. When I imagined sketching the

commander, I had no problem, until I got to his head. My mind saw a clean and pressed uniform, with a nest of wicked snakes sprouting out of his neck, or a skull with hollow black eyes, smoking a cigarette. The impressions were strong. I longed to draw them. I needed to draw them. But I couldn't, not in front of the commander.

54

A FIRE CRACKLED in the kolkhoz office. The room smelled of burning timber. I took off my mittens and warmed my hands on the fire.

The commander marched in. He wore a spotless green uniform with blue piping. A black pullover strap cradled his pistol holder. I tried to make note quickly so I wouldn't have to look at him. Blue pants, a blue hat with a raspberry band above the brim. Two shiny gold medals hung on the left side of the uniform. And of course, the ever-present toothpick danced back and forth from each side of his mouth.

I dragged a chair near his desk and sat, motioning for the commander to be seated. He pulled his chair out and sat down in front of me, his knees nearly touching mine. I moved my chair back, pretending I was searching for the right angle.

"Coat," he said.

I looked up at him.

"Take it off."

I didn't move.

He nodded, his deep-set eyes glaring through me. He wrapped his tongue around the toothpick, swirling it from side to side.

I shook my head and rubbed my arms. "Cold," I said.

The commander rolled his eyes.

I took a deep breath and looked up at the commander. He stared at me.

"How old are you?" he asked, his eyes running over my body.

It started. Snakes slithered out of his collar and wrapped themselves around his face, hissing at me. I blinked. A gray skull sat on his neck, its jaws flapping, laughing.

I rubbed my eyes. There are no snakes. Don't draw the snakes. I now knew how Edvard Munch felt. "Paint it as you see it," he had said during his lifetime. "Even if it's a sunny day but you see darkness and shadows. Paint it as you see it." I blinked again. I can't, I thought. I can't draw it as I see it.

"I don't understand," I lied. I motioned for him to turn his head to the left.

I drew a loose outline. I'd have to start with the uniform. I couldn't look at his face. I tried to work quickly. I didn't want to spend a minute longer than necessary near the man. Sitting in front of him felt like a shiver that would never go away.

How can I do this in an hour? Focus, Lina. No snakes.

The commander was not a good sitter. He insisted on

frequent breaks to smoke. I found I could get him to sit longer if I showed him my progress from time to time. He was enchanted with himself, lost in his own ego.

After another fifteen minutes, the commander wanted a break. He reclaimed his toothpick from the desk and walked outside.

I looked at the drawing. He looked powerful, strong.

The commander returned. He had Kretzsky with him. He snapped the pad from my hands. He showed it to Kretzsky, swatting him on the shoulder with the back of his hand.

Kretzsky's face was turned to the drawing, but I could feel he was staring at me. The commander said something to Kretzsky. He replied. Kretzsky's speaking voice was very different from his commands. His tone was calm, young. I kept my head down.

The commander handed the pad back to me. He circled me, his black boots taking slow, even steps around my chair. He looked at my face and then barked a command at Kretzsky.

I started sketching his hat. That was the last piece. Kretzsky returned and handed the commander a file. Komorov opened the file and flipped through papers. He looked at me. What did it say in that file? What did he know about us? Did it say something about Papa?

I began sketching furiously. Hurry, davai, I told myself. The commander began asking questions. I could understand bits and pieces.

"Been drawing since child?"

Why did he want to know? I nodded, motioning for him to turn his head slightly. He obliged and posed.

"What you like to draw?" he asked.

Was he making conversation with me? I shrugged.

"Who is favorite artist?"

I stopped and looked up. "Munch," I told him.

"Munch, hmm." He nodded. "Don't know Munch."

The red stripe above his brim needed more detail. I didn't want to spend the time. I just shaded it all in quickly. I carefully tore the sheet from the pad. I handed the paper to the commander.

He dropped the file on the desk and grabbed the portrait. He walked around the office, admiring himself.

I stared at the file.

It was just sitting there, lying on the desk. There had to be something about Papa in that file, something that could help me get a drawing to him.

The commander gave Kretzsky an order. Bread. He told Kretzsky to give me bread. I was supposed to get more than bread.

The commander left the room. I began to protest.

Kretzsky pointed to the front door. "Davai!" he yelled, waving for me to leave. I saw Jonas waiting outside.

"But—" I started.

Kretzsky shouted something and exited behind the desk.

Jonas opened the door and peeked in. "He told us to go to the kitchen door. I heard him. We can get our bread there," he whispered.

"But we're supposed to get potatoes," I argued. The commander was a liar. I should have drawn the snakes. I turned to pick up my drawing pad. I saw the file on the desk.

"C'mon, Lina, I'm hungry," said Jonas.

"Okay," I said, pretending to gather my paper. I grabbed the file and shoved it in my coat.

"Yes, let's go," I said, rushing through the door. Jonas had no idea what I had done.

55

WE WALKED TO the NKVD barracks. I felt my heartbeat thump in my ears. I tried to calm myself, act normal. I looked over my shoulder. I saw Kretzsky exit the rear door of the kolkhoz office. He walked in the shadows to the barracks, his long wool coat swaying around his feet. We waited in back near the kitchen, as instructed.

"He may not come," I said, eager to run back to the shack.

"He has to come," said Jonas. "They owe us food for your drawing."

Kretzsky appeared at the back door. A loaf of bread sailed into the dirt. Couldn't he hand the bread to us? Would that be so difficult for him? I hated Kretzsky.

"C'mon, Jonas. Let's go," I said. Suddenly, potatoes rocketed at us. I heard laughter from inside the kitchen.

"Do you have to throw them?" I said, moving toward the dark doorway. The door closed.

"Look, there are several!" said Jonas, running to pick them up.

The door opened. A tin can smacked against my forehead. I heard clapping and felt a warm dripping above my eyebrow. Cans and garbage rained down around us. The NKVD amused themselves by pelting helpless children with garbage.

"They're drunk. Hurry, let's go! Before they start shooting," I said, not wanting to drop the file.

"Wait, some of it is food!" said Jonas, frantically collecting things off the ground. A sack flew out and hit Jonas in the shoulder, knocking him over. A cheer erupted from behind the door.

"Jonas!" I ran to him. Something wet hit me in the face.

Kretzsky appeared at the door and said something.

"Hurry," said Jonas. "He says we're stealing food and he's going to report us."

We scurried around, like hens in a yard, craning our necks for anything that touched the ground. I reached up to clear the smelly slop from my eyes. Rotten potato peels. I put my head down and ate them.

"Fasheest sveenya!" yelled Kretzsky. He slammed the door.

I gathered things in my skirt, holding my arm against my coat and the file. I took all I could carry, even empty cans for residue. The left side of my forehead throbbed. I reached up and felt a big, wet goose egg.

Andrius emerged from the side of the building. He looked around. "I see you got something for your drawing," he said.

I ignored him and quickly began snatching the potatoes with my free hand. I stuffed them into my pockets and skirt, desperate to get each one.

Andrius moved to lift the sack I was straddling. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry," he said gently. "We'll get it all."

I looked up at him.

"You're bleeding."

"It's nothing. I'm fine," I said, pulling potato rot from my hair.

Jonas scooped up the bread. Andrius picked up the big sack.

"What's in that?" asked Jonas.

"Flour," said Andrius. "I'll carry it back for you."

"Did you hurt your arm?" asked Andrius, watching me clutch my coat.

I shook my head.

We trudged through the snow in silence.

56

"HURRY, JONAS," I said as soon as we were a safe distance from the NKVD building. "Mother will be worried. Run ahead and let her know we're okay."

Jonas ran toward our shack. I slowed my pace. "They have a file on us," I said, watching my brother shrink in the distance.

"They have files on everyone," said Andrius. He tossed the sack of flour up, readjusting it on his shoulder.

"Maybe you could help me with something," I said.

Andrius shook his head, almost laughing. "I can't steal a file, Lina. That's a lot different from wood or a can of tomatoes. It's one thing to get in the kitchen, but—"

"I don't need you to take the file," I said, stopping short of our shack.

"What?" Andrius stopped.

"I don't need you to steal the file." I looked around and opened my coat slightly. "I already have it," I whispered. "It was on the commander's desk. I need you to put it back once I've read it."

Shock flooded Andrius's face. His head snapped from side to side, to see if we were alone. He pulled me behind a shack. "What's wrong with you! Do you want to get yourself killed?" he whispered.

"The bald man said it's all in our files, where we were sent, perhaps what happened to the rest of our family. It's all right here." I crouched down, letting go of the potatoes and other items I had been carrying. I reached into my coat.

"Lina, you can't do this. Give me the file. I'm taking it back."

Footsteps approached. Andrius stood in front of me. Someone passed.

He dropped the sack and reached for the file. I moved away from him and opened it. My hands trembled. There were photos of our family, and papers attached to the folder. My heart sank. It was all in Russian. I turned to Andrius. He grabbed the file from my hand.

"Please," I begged. "Tell me what it says."

"Are you really that selfish? Or are you just stupid? They'll kill you and your family," he said.

"No." I grabbed his arm. "Please, Andrius. It might help me find my father. You heard him on the train. I can help him find us. I can send him my drawings. I just need to know where he is. I . . . I know you can understand."

He stared at me and then opened the file. "I don't read Russian that well." His eyes quickly scanned the papers.

"What does it say?"

"Students at the Academy," he said, looking over his shoulder. "This word is 'artist.' That's you. Your father," he said, putting his finger under a word.

"Yes, what?" I said.

"Location."

I huddled near Andrius. "What does it say?"

"Krasnoyarsk. Prison."

"Papa's in Krasnoyarsk?" I remembered drawing Krasnoyarsk on the map for the NKVD.

"I think this word means 'offense' or 'charge,'" he said, pointing to some writing. "It says your father is—"

"Is what?"

"I don't know this word," whispered Andrius. He snapped the file shut and stuffed it in his coat.

"What else does it say?"

"That's all it says."

"Can you find out what the word is? The one about Papa?"

"What if I get caught with this?" said Andrius, suddenly full of anger.

What if he did get caught? What would they do to him? He turned to walk away. I grabbed him. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you so much."

He nodded, pulling away from me.

57

MOTHER WAS DELIGHTED with the food. We decided to eat most of it immediately, just in case the NKVD tried to take it back. The canned sardines were delicious, well worth the tender gash on my head. Their oil felt silky against my tongue.

Mother gave Ulyushka a potato. She invited her to share our meal. She knew Ulyushka was less likely to report that we had food if she ate some herself. I hated that Mother shared with Ulyushka. She had tried to throw Jonas out into the snow when he was sick. She didn't think twice about stealing from us. She never shared her food. She ate egg after egg, right in front of us. Yet Mother insisted on sharing with her.

I worried about Andrius, hoping he was able to return the file unnoticed. And what was the word that he had pointed to, the one he thought was "offense" or "charge"? I refused

to believe that Papa had done something wrong. I turned it over in my head. Mrs. Raskunas worked at the university with Papa. She wasn't deported. I saw her peeking out of her window the night we were taken away. So not everyone from the university was deported. Why Papa? I wanted to tell Mother that Papa was sent to Krasnoyarsk, but I couldn't. She'd be too worried about him being in prison, and she'd be angry that I had stolen the file. She would also worry about Andrius having it. I worried about Andrius.

That night, I tore more drawings from my tablet and hid them with the others under my suitcase lining. I had two pages left. My pencil hovered around the edge of the paper. I looked up. Mother and Jonas spoke quietly. I rolled the pencil between my fingers. I drew a collar. A snake began to draw itself, coiling upward. I quickly scratched it out.

The next afternoon I saw Andrius on my way back from work. I scanned his face for news of the file. He nodded. My shoulders relaxed. He had returned it. But had he found the meaning of the word? I smiled at him. He shook his head, annoyed, but kind of smiled, too.

I found a thin, flat piece of birch and brought it back to our hut. At night, I decorated the edges with Lithuanian embroidery patterns. I drew a picture of our house in Kaunas on it, along with other symbols of Lithuania. On the bottom I wrote, "Deliver to Krasnoyarsk Prison. With love from Miss Altai." I included my scribble signature, along with the date.

"What am I supposed to do with it?" asked the grouchy woman when I approached her.

"Just give it to a Lithuanian you see in the village," I said. "Tell them to pass it on. It has to get to Krasnoyarsk."

The grouchy woman looked at my drawings of the Lithuanian coat of arms, Trakai Castle, our patron saint, Casimir, and the stork, the national bird of Lithuania.

"Here," I said, extending a tattered piece of clothing bunched in my hand. "Maybe one of your girls can use this underskirt. I know it's not much, but—"

"Keep your slip," said the grouchy woman, still looking at my drawings. "I'll pass it along."

58

MARCH 22. MY SIXTEENTH birthday. My forgotten birthday. Mother and Jonas left the shack for work. Neither acknowledged my birthday. What did I expect, a celebration? We barely had a scrap to eat. Mother traded what she could for stamps to mail letters to Papa. I wouldn't say anything about it to Mother. She would feel horrible for having forgotten. The month before, I had reminded her it was Grandma's birthday. She felt guilty for days. After all, how could she forget her own mother's birthday?

I spent the day piling wood, imagining the party I'd have if we were still in Lithuania. People in school would wish me a happy birthday. Our family would dress in some of our finest clothes. Papa's friend would take photographs. We'd go to an expensive restaurant in Kaunas. The day would feel special, different. Joana would send a present.

I thought of my last birthday. Papa was late coming to the

restaurant. I told him I had received nothing from Joana. I noticed that he stiffened at the mention of my cousin. "She's probably just busy," he had said.

Stalin had taken my home and my father. Now he had taken my birthday. My feet dragged as I walked through the snow after work. I stopped for my ration. Jonas was in line.

"Hurry!" he said. "Mrs. Rimas received a letter from Lithuania. It's a thick one!"

"Today?" I asked.

"Yes!" he said. "Hurry! Meet me at the bald man's shack."

The line moved slowly. I thought about the last time Mrs. Rimas had received a letter. It was warm in her crowded shack. I wondered if Andrius would be there.

I got my ration and ran through the snow to the bald man's shack. Everyone huddled in a ball. I saw Jonas. I walked up behind him.

"What did I miss?" I whispered.

"Just this," he said.

The crowd parted. I saw Mother.

"Happy birthday!" everyone yelled.

A lump bobbed in my throat.

"Happy birthday, darling!" said Mother, throwing her arms around me.

"Happy birthday, Lina," said Jonas. "Did you think we forgot?"

"I did. I thought you forgot."

"We didn't forget," said Mother with a squeeze.

I looked around for Andrius. He wasn't there.

They sang a birthday song. We sat and ate our bread

together. The man who wound his watch told the story of his sixteenth birthday. Mrs. Rimas told of the buttercream frosting she made for cakes. She stood and demonstrated how she'd position the bowl on her hip and whip the spatula. Frosting. I remembered the creamy consistency and sweetness.

"We have a present for you," said Jonas.

"A present?" I asked.

"Well, it's not wrapped, but yes, it's a present," said Mother.

Mrs. Rimas handed me a bundle. It was a pad of paper and a stub of a pencil.

"Thank you! Where did you get it?" I asked.

"We can't tell our secrets," said Mother. "The paper is ruled, but it's all we could find."

"Oh, it's wonderful!" I said. "It doesn't matter that it has lines."

"You'll draw straighter." Jonas smiled.

"You must draw something to remember your birthday. This will be a unique one. Soon this will all be a memory," said Mother.

"A memory, bah. Enough celebration. Get out. I'm tired," complained the bald man.

"Thank you for hosting my party," I said.

He grimaced and flapped his hands, pushing us out the door.

We linked arms and started toward Ulyushka's. I looked up at the frosty gray sky. More snow was on the way.

"Lina." Andrius stepped out from behind the bald man's shack.

Mother and Jonas waved and continued on without me.

"Happy birthday," he said.

I moved toward him. "How did you know?"

"Jonas told me."

The tip of his nose was red. "You can come inside, you know," I told him.

"I know."

"Have you figured out the word in the file?" I asked.

"No, I didn't come for that. I came . . . to give you this." Andrius revealed something from behind his back. It was wrapped in a cloth. "Happy birthday."

"You brought me something? Thank you! I don't even know when your birthday is."

I took the package. Andrius turned to leave.

"Wait. Sit down," I said, motioning to a log in front of a shack.

We sat next to each other. Andrius's brow creased with uncertainty. I pulled the cloth back. I looked at him.

"I . . . I don't know what to say," I stuttered.

"Say you like it."

"I do like it!"

I loved it. It was a book. Dickens.

"It's not *The Pickwick Papers*. That's the one I smoked, right?" He laughed. "This one's *Dombey and Son*. It was the only Dickens I could find." He blew into his gloved hands and rubbed them together. His warm breath swirled like smoke in the cold air.

"It's perfect," I said. I opened the book. It was printed in Russian.

"So now you have to learn Russian or you won't be able to

read your present," he said.

I mocked a scowl. "Where did you get it?"

He pulled in a breath, shaking his head.

"Uh-oh. Should we smoke it right away?"

"Maybe," he said. "I tried to read a bit of it." He faked a yawn.

I laughed. "Well, Dickens can be a little slow at first." I stared at the book in my lap. The burgundy binding felt smooth and tight. The title was etched deep in gold print. It was beautiful, a real present, the perfect present. Suddenly, it felt like my birthday.

I looked at Andrius. "Thank you," I said. I put my mittens on his cheeks. I pulled his face to mine and kissed him. His nose was cold. His lips were warm and his skin smelled clean. My stomach fluttered. I pulled back, looking at his handsome face, and tried to remember how to breathe. "Really, thank you. It's a wonderful present."

Andrius sat on the log, stunned. I stood up.

"It's November twentieth," he said.

"What?"

"My birthday."

"I'll remember that. Good night." I turned and walked away. Snow began to fall.

"Don't smoke it all at once," I heard behind me.

"I won't," I called over my shoulder, hugging my treasure.

59

WE DUG THROUGH the snow and slosh for the sun to reach our little potato patch. The temperatures inched just above freezing according to a thermometer outside the kolkhoz office. I could unbutton my coat.

Mother ran into the hut, her face flushed, gripping an envelope. Her hand trembled. She had received a letter from our housekeeper's cousin, telling her through coded words that Papa was alive. She held me tight, saying "Yes" and "Thank you" over and over.

The letter made no mention of his location. I looked at the crease within her brow, newly carved since we had been deported. It was unfair to keep it from her. I told Mother that I had seen the file and that Papa was in Krasnoyarsk. Her first reaction was of anger, shocked at the risk I took, but over the following days her posture improved and her voice carried a

lilt of happiness. "He'll find us, Mother, he will!" I told her, thinking of the piece of birch already en route to Papa.

Activity increased in the camp. Deliveries came from Moscow. Andrius said some contained boxes of files. Guards left. New ones arrived. I wished Kretzsky would leave. I hated the constant fear, wondering if he would throw something at me. He did not leave. I noticed he and Andrius spoke from time to time. One day, while I walked to chop wood, trucks arrived with officers. I didn't recognize them. Their uniforms had different coloring. They walked with a tight gait.

After being forced to draw the commander, I drew whatever I saw or felt. Some drawings, like Munch's, were full of pain, others hopeful, longing. All were an accurate portrayal and would certainly be considered anti-Soviet. At night I would read half a page of *Dombey and Son*. I labored over each word. I constantly asked Mother to translate.

"It's old, very proper Russian," said Mother. "If you learn to speak from this book, you'll sound like a scholar."

Andrius began to meet me in the ration line. I chopped a little harder, hoping the day would move faster. I washed my face at night in the snow. I tried to brush my teeth and comb through my tangled hair.

"So, how many pages have you smoked so far?" his voice whispered behind me.

"Almost ten," I said over my shoulder.

"You must be nearly fluent in Russian by now," he teased, pulling on my hat.

"Peerestan," I said, smiling.

"Stop? Ah, very good. So you really did learn something. What about this word—*krásivaya*?"

I turned around. "What does that mean?"

"You'll have to learn it," said Andrius.

"Okay," I said. "I will."

"Without asking your mother," he said. "Promise?"

"All right," I said. "Say it again."

"Krasivaya. Really, you have to learn it on your own."

"I will."

"We'll see," he said, smiling as he walked away.

60

IT WAS THE FIRST WARM DAY of spring. Andrius met me in the ration line.

"I got through two pages last night, all by myself," I boasted, taking my chunk of bread.

Andrius wasn't smiling. "Lina," he said, taking my arm.

"What?"

"Not here." We walked away from the line. Andrius didn't speak. He gently steered me behind a nearby shack.

"What is it?" I asked.

He looked over his shoulder.

"What's going on?"

"They're moving people," he whispered.

"The NKVD?"

"Yes."

"Where?" I asked.

"I don't know yet." The light that had bounced through his eyes the day before had disappeared.

"Why are they moving people? How did you find out?"

"Lina," he said, holding on to my arm. His expression frightened me.

"What is it?"

He took my hand. "You're on the list."

"What list?"

"The list of people who are being moved. Jonas and your mother are on it, too."

"Do they know I took the file?" I asked. He shook his head. "Who told you?"

"That's all I know," he said. He looked down. His hand squeezed mine.

I looked at our clasped hands. "Andrius," I said slowly, "are you on the list?"

He looked up. He shook his head.

I dropped his hand. I ran past the tattered shacks. Mother. I had to tell Mother. Where were they taking us? Was it because we hadn't signed? Who else was on the list?

"Lina, calm yourself!" said Mother. "Slow down."

"They're taking us away. Andrius said so," I panted.

"Maybe we're going home," said Jonas.

"Exactly!" said Mother. "Maybe we're going someplace better."

"Maybe we're going to be with Papa," said Jonas.

"Mother, we haven't signed. You didn't see the look on Andrius's face," I said.

"Where is Andrius?" asked Jonas.

"I don't know," I said. "He's not on the list."

Mother left the shack to find Andrius and Mrs. Rimas. I paced the floor.

The floorboards creaked, complaining of Papa's pacing.

"Sweden is preferable," said Mother.

"It's not possible," explained Papa. "Germany is their only choice."

"Kostas, we have to help," said Mother.

"We are helping. They'll take a train to Poland, and we'll arrange passage to Germany from there."

"And the papers?" asked Mother.

"Arranged."

"I would feel better if it were Sweden," said Mother.

"It cannot be. It's Germany."

"Who's going to Germany?" I yelled from the dining room.

Silence.

"Lina, I didn't know you were in here," said Mother, coming out of the kitchen.

"I'm doing my homework."

"A colleague of your father's is going to Germany," said Mother.

"I'll be back for dinner." Papa kissed Mother on the cheek and rushed out the back door.

News of the impending move burned through the camp like a spark riding gasoline. People dashed in and out of huts. Speculations flew. Stories changed each minute. Others cropped up the next. Someone claimed additional NKVD had arrived in camp. Someone else said they saw a group of NKVD loading their rifles. No one knew the truth.

Ulyushka threw open the door of the shack. She spoke to Jonas and quickly exited.

"She's looking for Mother," said Jonas.

"Does she know something?" I asked.

Miss Grybas ran into our shack. "Where is your mother?" she asked.

"She went to find Andrius and Mrs. Rimas," I said.

"Mrs. Rimas is with us. Bring your mother to the bald man's shack."

We waited. I didn't know what to do. Should I put everything in my suitcase? Were we really leaving? Could Jonas be right? Could we be going home? We hadn't signed. I couldn't shake the image of concern on Andrius's face when he told me we were on the list. How did he know we were on it? How did he know he wasn't?

Mother returned. People stood elbow-to-elbow in the bald man's shack. The volume grew as we entered.

"Shh," said the man who wound his watch. "Everyone, please sit down. Let's hear from Elena."

"It's true," said Mother. "There is a list and there is word of moving people."

"How did Andrius find out about it?" asked Jonas.

"Mrs. Arvydas received some information." Mother looked away. "I don't know how she came by it. I am on the list. So are my children. Mrs. Rimas is on the list. Miss Grybas, you are not on the list. That's all I know."

People quickly began asking if they were on the list.

"Stop your yapping. She said that's all she knows," said the bald man.

"Interesting," said the man who wound his watch. "Miss Grybas is not on the list. She hasn't signed. So it's not just those who refuse to sign."

"Please," choked Miss Grybas, "don't leave me here."

"Quit blubbering. We don't know what's happening yet," said the bald man.

I tried to find the pattern. How were they sorting us for the impending move? But there wasn't a pattern. Stalin's psychology of terror seemed to rely on never knowing what to expect.

"We must be prepared," said Mr. Lukas, winding his watch. "Think of the journey we had in coming here. We're not nearly as strong. If we are to face that journey again, we must be prepared."

"You don't think they'll put us back in the train cars, do you?" gasped Mrs. Rimas. A wave of cries rippled through the group.

How could we be prepared? None of us had food. We were malnourished, weak. We had sold nearly all of our valuables.

"If it is true, and I am not leaving, I will sign the papers," announced Miss Grybas.

"No! You mustn't!" I said.

"Stop," said Mrs. Rimas. "You're not thinking clearly."

"I'm thinking very clearly," said Miss Grybas, sniffing back tears. "If you and Elena are gone, I will be nearly alone. If I sign, they will allow me to teach the children in the camp. Even if my Russian is poor, I can still teach. And if I'm alone, I'll need to have access to the village. They'll grant access only if I sign. That way, I can continue writing letters for all of us. It must be done."

"Let's not make any decisions yet," said Mother, patting Miss Grybas's hands.

"Maybe it's all a mistake," said Mrs. Rimas.

Mother looked down and closed her eyes.

61

ANDRIUS CAME TO OUR shack late that night and spoke to Mother outside.

"Andrius would like to speak with you," said Mother. Ulyushka said something to her in Russian. Mother nodded.

I walked outside. Andrius stood with his hands in his pockets.

"Hi." He chipped at the dirt with his shoe.

"Hi."

I stared down the row of shacks. A breeze lifted the ends of my hair. "It's getting warm," I finally said.

"Yeah," said Andrius, looking up at the sky. "Let's walk."

The snow had melted and the mud had firmed. Neither one of us spoke until we passed the bald man's shack.

"Do you know where they're taking us?" I asked.

"I think they're transferring you to another camp. It seems that some of the NKVD are going, too. They're packing up."

"I can't stop thinking of my father and what it said in the file."

"Lina, I figured out what the word in the file means," said Andrius.

I stopped, looking to him for the answer.

He reached out and gently moved my hair away from my eyes. "It means 'accessory,'" said Andrius.

"Accessory?"

"It probably means that he tried to help people who were in danger," said Andrius.

"Well, of course he'd do that. But you don't think he actually committed some kind of crime, do you?"

"Of course not! We're not criminals," he said. "Well, maybe you are—stealing logs, pens, and files." He looked over at me, suppressing a grin.

"Oh, you should talk—tomatoes, chocolate, vodka."

"Yeah, and who knows what else," said Andrius.

He took my hand and kissed it.

We walked hand in hand, neither one of us speaking. My pace slowed. "Andrius, I'm . . . scared."

He stopped and turned to me. "No. Don't be scared. Don't give them anything, Lina, not even your fear."

"I can't help it. I'm not even used to this camp. I miss home, I miss my father, I miss school, I miss my cousin." My breathing quickened.

"Shh," said Andrius. He pulled me to his chest. "Be careful

who you talk to. Don't let your guard down, okay?" he whispered. His arms tightened around me.

"I don't want to go," I said. We stood, quiet.

How did I get here? How did I end up in the arms of a boy I barely knew, but knew I didn't want to lose? I wondered what I would have thought of Andrius in Lithuania. Would I have liked him? Would he have liked me?

"I don't want you to go," he finally whispered, barely audible.

I closed my eyes. "Andrius, we have to get back home."

"I know," he said. "We will." He took my hand and we started back.

"I'll write to you. I'll send letters to the village," I said.

He nodded.

We arrived back at our shack. "Wait a minute," I told him. I went inside. I gathered all of my drawings, even the ones on small scraps, from underneath the lining in my suitcase. I tore papers out of my sketchbook. I walked outside and handed the stack to Andrius. The drawing of his mother, her face bruised, slipped out and wafted to the ground. Her eyes stared up at us from the dirt.

"What are you doing?" he asked, quickly picking up the drawing.

"Hide them. Keep them safe for me," I said, putting my hands on top of his. "I don't know where we're going. I don't want them to be destroyed. There's so much of me, of all of us, in these drawings. Can you find a safe place for them?"

He nodded. "There's a loose floorboard under my bunk.

It's where I hid *Dombey and Son*. Lina," he said slowly, looking down at the drawings. "You have to keep drawing. My mother says the world has no idea what the Soviets are doing to us. No one knows what our fathers have sacrificed. If other countries knew, they might help."

"I will," I said. "And I've been writing it all down. That's why you have to keep these safe for me. Hide them."

He nodded. "Just promise me you'll be careful," he said. "Don't be stupid and go looking for files or running under any trains."

We stared at each other.

"So, don't smoke any books without me, okay?" he said.

I smiled. "I won't. How long do you think we have?"

"I don't know. It could be any day."

I stood on my toes and kissed him.

"Krasivaya," he said into my ear, his nose tracing along my cheek. "Have you learned it yet?" He kissed my neck.

"Not yet," I said, closing my eyes.

Andrius exhaled and stepped back slowly. "Tell Jonas I'll come by to see him in the morning, okay?"

I nodded, the touch of his lips still warm against my neck.

He walked away in the dark, clutching my drawings under his coat. He turned and looked over his shoulder. I waved. He waved back. His silhouette became smaller and smaller and then finally, faded into the darkness.

62

THEY CAME BEFORE sunrise. They burst into our shack waving rifles, just as they had burst into our home ten months before. We had only minutes. This time I was ready.

Ulyushka rose from her pallet. She barked at Mother.

"Stop yelling. We're leaving," I told her.

She began handing Mother potatoes, beets, and other food she had stored. She handed Jonas a thick animal hide to put in his suitcase. She gave me a pencil. I couldn't believe it. Why was she giving us food? Mother tried to hug her. They barely embraced. Ulyushka pushed her away and stomped out.

The NKVD told us to stand and wait outside our shack. The man who wound his watch came walking toward us, suitcase in hand. He was on the list. Mrs. Rimas was behind him, followed by the girl with the dolly, her mother, and a stream of other people. We began a slow procession toward the kolkhoz

office, dragging our belongings. Faces looked years older than when we had arrived ten months before. Did I look older, too? Miss Grybas ran to us, crying.

"They've sent for you. You're going to America. I just know it. Please don't forget about me," she begged. "Please don't let me waste away here. I want to go home."

Mother and Mrs. Rimas hugged Miss Grybas. They assured her they would not forget her. I would never forget her, or the beets she hid under her dress.

We trudged on. I heard Miss Grybas's crying fade behind us. The grouchy woman walked out of her shack. She held up a withered hand and nodded. Her daughters clung to her legs. I remembered her, hiding the bathroom hole on the train with her girth. She had lost so much weight. My eyes scanned for Andrius. I had *Dombey and Son* tucked safely in my suitcase, next to our family picture.

A large truck sat near the kolkhoz office. Kretzsky smoked with two NKVD nearby. The commander stood on the porch with an officer I didn't recognize. They began calling names alphabetically. People climbed into the back of the truck.

"Take care, Jonas," said Andrius's voice behind us. "Good-bye, Mrs. Vilkas."

"Good-bye, Andrius," said Mother, grasping his hands and kissing his cheeks. "Take care of your mother, dear."

"She wanted to come but . . ."

"I understand. Give her my love," said Mother.

The NKVD continued reading names off the list.

"Write to me, okay, Jonas?" said Andrius.

"I will," said Jonas. He extended his small hand for a handshake.

"Take care of these two, okay? Your father and I are counting on you," said Andrius.

Jonas nodded.

Andrius turned. His eyes found mine. "I'll see you," he said.

My face didn't wrinkle. I didn't utter a sound. But for the first time in months, I cried. Tears popped from their dry sockets and sailed down my cheeks in one quick stream. I looked away.

The NKVD called the bald man's name.

"Look at me," whispered Andrius, moving close. "I'll see you," he said. "Just think about that. Just think about me bringing you your drawings. Picture it, because I'll be there."

I nodded.

"Vilkas," the NKVD called.

We walked toward the truck and climbed inside. I looked down at Andrius. He raked through his hair with his fingers. The engine turned and roared. I raised my hand in a wave good-bye.

His lips formed the words "I'll see you." He nodded in confirmation.

I nodded back. The back gate slammed and I sat down. The truck lurched forward. Wind began to blow against my face. I pulled my coat closed and put my hands in my pockets. That's when I felt it. The stone. Andrius had slipped it into my pocket. I stood up to let him know I had found it. He was gone.

ice and ashes