

CHAPTER ONE

Anna Belko woke to the sound of a distant explosion. She rolled over in bed, pushed aside the quilt, and picked up her phone. It was 6:45 a.m. *Time to start the day*, she thought, and got up to look out the window.

Rain rattled against the glass and sprayed from the tires of passing cars in the street below. She searched the gray sky above the buildings opposite for traces of smoke. Hopefully, she wouldn't have a problem getting to work.

Anna went to her chest of drawers. The water stain that spread in a fan shape down her candy-pink wall had grown, so it must have been raining most of the night. She scowled at the stain as she tried to clear the morning fuzziness from her thoughts. After dressing, she brushed and braided her dark hair. She tied a scarf over it and put on earrings.

As Anna stepped into the hallway, her favorite brother, Radoslav, walked out of the bathroom, his blue uniform bundled in his arms. "Would you have time to fix this after work?" He tossed her the shirt.

She winced when she saw Radoslav's face. He had a bruise on one cheekbone, but thanks to God, nothing worse.

"What were you up to last night?" She tried to sound casual.

Radoslav shrugged. "Somebody was in a hurry to leave, and I just happened to be blocking the doorway." His joking tone didn't match the sadness in his eyes.

"He didn't get away?"

"No, of course not."

Anna held up Radoslav's shirt. All but one of the buttons had been ripped off, and that last one was hanging by a thread.

"Can I use black buttons if we don't have enough navy blue ones?"

"Sure."

"You won't be breaking some Riverside Prison Uniform Code or something?"

"No," he said. "Thanks. I owe you."

"Then don't forget my birthday this year. May 20th."

Radoslav chuckled.

I made him laugh, she thought with a smile. *That's getting harder to do.*

"I'm turning in. Have a good day." He stretched, rolling his shoulders, and went back into his bedroom.

Anna walked to the kitchen where Dad was sitting at the table, his Bible open. He leaned over it, his nose inches from the well-thumbed pages.

Half a dozen eggs clicked together in a rolling boil on the stove.

"You're going to turn them into rubber if you boil them like that," said Anna, pulling the pan off the gas.

"I like them hard." Dad smiled at her and bookmarked his place. "Off already, love? I'm sorry, I forgot to put the kettle on. It's in the sitting room."

Anna raised her eyebrows. She glanced toward the open sitting room door. The tea kettle, a stack of plates, and most of the contents of the kitchen cabinets were piled on the floor beside the sofa.

"Mama had a bad night?"

"Yes. Restless. She thought she needed to pack."

"I think Rado had a bad night too," Anna said. She ladled two eggs out of the water, cooled them under the tap, and wrapped them in a dish towel. The eggs, a loaf of flat bread, and a little jar of pickles were her lunch for the day." What do you think got hit this

morning?"

"I don't know," Dad said. "We'll see it on the news later, if it was anything important."

"I suppose so. Anyway, I love you Dad. You have a good day. Say hi to Mama for me when she gets up."

Anna hugged Dad and kissed his cheek. His beard smelled like shampoo; the morning goodbye wouldn't be the same without a sweet whiff of it. She laced her boots and put on the leather jacket that had been Radoslav's until he couldn't zip it over his stomach.

The rain was a fine drizzle as she walked down to catch the bus that would take her to the Muscovy Place Garment Factory.

At the factory gate, she smiled and waved at old Pasha, the security guard, only to realize a moment too late that the man in Pasha's chair wasn't Pasha. It was a man she'd never seen before, a young Sevian with a hat like the black knitted one Pasha always wore. Embarrassed, Anna hurried across the factory yard and inside through the double doors.

From eight o'clock to five, Anna sat at her sewing machine, third in a long line of women and machines. Fluorescent bulbs filled the vast room with cold, white light. The noise of the machines hummed in the air and vibrated through the floor, her boots, her chair and her whole body.

Anna could have a raw-edged tee shirt hemmed in two minutes and seventeen seconds; at least that was her speed record. When she finished the hemming, she would push it to her left, and the next woman would sew in the collar and tag. Then the shirt was done.

Some days they sewed tee shirts, other days jeans, leggings or summer dresses. Anna preferred those days, because nine hours of tee shirts was boring, even with Seeli and Magda to talk to.

Seeli sat to Anna's left, sewing in the tags. She had fine, straight hair dyed blonde and a big laugh for her size.

She wasn't Sevian, like Anna. She was Tur. When Seeli started working at the machine next to Anna's, they hadn't spoken for the first few days. That was because Anna wasn't sure Seeli would be able to speak Sev. Many Tur people only knew Tur. But Seeli did speak some Sev, and she wasn't hard to understand. Now Seeli usually had a funny video to show Anna during their lunch break.

When Anna arrived at the factory that day, Seeli was gone. The woman who had taken her place was Sevian. She had a pointed nose and two sets of gold hoops in each ear.

When Anna came up to the table and saw her sitting at Seeli's machine, an uneasy feeling began in her stomach.

"Do you know what happened to Seeli? This was her work station. I hope she's all right."

The woman shrugged without looking up. "Don't ask me. I just got hired. This is where they told me to come."

"Why did Seeli quit?" Anna wondered aloud.

Magda, who sat on Anna's right, spoke up. "Maybe she got fired. If Seeli's from one of the Tur provinces, the factory bosses had to let her go. Don't you watch the news? There's no way you could have missed all the hullabaloo when the Job Protection Act became law."

"Of course I watch the news," said Anna sadly. "I just hadn't put two and two together yet." She looked around the bright, noisy room. *Why didn't I notice all the empty work stations when I first came in?*

The missing women were all the small ones, the ones with round, olive-tinted faces, all gone because of the new law. That must also be why old Pasha, with his wispy goatee and gap-toothed smile, had not been there to greet her at the gates. He'd been there every day since Anna first started work at the Muscovy Place Garment Factory.

"Only people with Dor Province ID cards can legally work here now," said Magda as she ran a zigzag stitch down the raw edges of a tee shirt. "It's supposed to keep the provincial Tur from taking all the cheap jobs and getting rich off of us. Doesn't really make sense to me," she continued, "But I never did spend much time thinking about politics. Now my sister, Sufya..."

Anna had stopped listening. She was thinking of the bomb blast that had startled her awake that morning.

The pile of shirts waiting at Anna's work station had grown so tall it tipped over onto her machine. Today was going to be a Men's White Undershirts day.

Magda tossed another shirt on. "What's up with you today, Anna? You'd better get busy or you're not going to make your quota."

Anna settled herself into her chair, flicked her machine's 'ON' switch, and turned up her first hem. "I suppose Seeli wasn't from Dor. She never talked about living in the provinces, though." She clicked her tongue in frustration as the chattering machine dropped a stitch.

"Didn't she have an accent?" Magda asked after a minute or two.

"What? Who?"

"Seeli. I remember her speaking Sev with an accent."

"Of course. Why wouldn't she?"

"Then she was definitely provincial. I've heard some of the schools up there don't even teach Sev." She snapped a loose thread with her teeth.

Well, don't you know a lot about it, Anna wanted to say, but she kept her mouth shut and sewed faster.

By five o'clock, Anna's wrists ached, and her fingers felt like fine sandpaper. Her shirt and jeans, even the scarf tied turban-style over her hair, were dusted with white lint. On the way home, she stopped at Oxsana's, the little cafe on Bladik Street. She often went there after work to wash the fuzz out of her throat with a glass of tea.

On beautiful spring evenings like this one, she liked to sit outside. The rain had stopped earlier, and now the sky showed between ragged clouds. The street glistened, and a flock of pigeons spilled from the roof of a nearby building and swooped circles in the sky.

Anna chose one of the tables on the cafe's cement patio. The waiter who came to take her order was a young man with short dark hair and heavy shoulders. When she asked for a pot of tea, he nodded. "It will be just a few minutes."

She smiled at him, but he didn't smile back. His face was blotchy red, and his eyes were swollen. Maybe he was allergic to the pollen from the beech tree that overhung the patio, dusting the glass tabletops with yellow. Maybe he'd been chopping onions in the kitchen.

In a minute the waiter returned with a silver tray on which sat a fat white teapot, a tea glass, and a bowl of cube sugar. Just as he reached Anna, he stumbled. The tray

tipped, sending everything crashing onto the table in front of her.

Anna yelped and jumped to her feet as tea dribbled onto her jeans, leaving a brown, steaming stain above her knee.

The waiter grabbed the little table, tilting it away from her. The teapot, the sugar bowl and the glass slid off and shattered on the concrete. "Damn! I'm so sorry," he gasped. "Did I burn you?"

"Only a little." Anna tugged at her jeans as she sat down again.

"I'm sorry..." he said again, backing away from the table. His face crumpled. Tears filled his eyes and began to run down his cheeks.

Anna stared at him. "Are you all right?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'm fine." He scrubbed his face with the sleeve of his red sweater.

He can't be that upset because of the tea, she thought. "What's wrong?"

The waiter took a long breath through his nose. "I'm sorry. Today hasn't been my best day."

"Oh, don't worry about it."

He looked at the mess on the ground. "My cousin died last night. My cousin, Alexander."

He didn't move or say anything else, just stood there, arms hanging limp at his sides.

"I'm sorry," Anna said. "It's terrible to lose someone you love..."

"It's not just that. He was murdered."

Anna put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, no," she whispered.

The waiter knelt and began gathering the larger pieces of broken glass. He cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry about the tea. I can have a fresh pot ready for you in five minutes."

"I'll come back for it another day." Anna wiped drops of tea off her purse. "Can you take the evening off? You should be home with your family."

"No, I have to be here. I'm the manager. It's my Aunt Oxsana's place." He pointed to the name 'OXSANA'S' in white letters on the faded green awning. "Besides, I've got these two young Tur guys in the kitchen, and they're...well...they're new. I'm Boris Merkovich, by the way."

"I'm Anna. Is...was Alexander your Aunt Oxsana's son?"

"Yes."

Anna leaned across the tea-streaked table and touched Boris's arm again. "I want to pray."

"If you want, you can light a candle and pray that God will remember Sasha. But you don't need to. God never took His eyes off him for a second."

"No, I want to pray for you."

She didn't know what she should say, but she didn't try to stop the words as they came. "Dear God, I pray for...Boris...that You would guard him from hatred and keep his heart soft, even if that means it needs to stay broken. Give him strength to bear this pain for himself and for his family. And don't let him ever forget that everything he is suffering is nothing compared to what You took on for all of us. In Jesus' name." *I can't believe I said that,* Anna thought. *I wouldn't blame him if he's angry.* She looked up, afraid to meet his eyes.

"Thank you," Boris said. "It's going to be hard." He paused. "Even though Sasha was the one who got killed, I have no doubt God loved him. But I do wonder if God has stopped loving me." Without another word, he stood and walked back inside.

Anna dabbed the tea stain on her knee with a tissue from her purse and got up to go. *I wish I could take some of his pain,* she thought.

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