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Opening extract from
Between Shades of Gray

Written by
Ruta Sepetys

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RUTA SEPETYS



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THEY TOOK ME IN MY NIGHTGOWN.

Thinking back, the signs were there—family photos burned in the fireplace, Mother sewing her best silver and jewelry into the lining of her coat late at night, and Papa not returning from work. My younger brother, Jonas, was asking questions. I asked questions, too, but perhaps I refused to acknowledge the signs. Only later did I realize that Mother and Father intended we escape. We did not escape.

We were taken.

June 14, 1941. I had changed into my nightgown and settled in at my desk to write my cousin Joana a letter. I opened a new ivory writing tablet and a case of pens and pencils, a gift from my aunt for my fifteenth birthday.

The evening breeze floated through the open window over my desk, waltzing the curtain from side to side. I could

smell the lily of the valley that Mother and I had planted two years ago. *Dear Joana.*

It wasn't a knocking. It was an urgent booming that made me jump in my chair. Fists pounded on our front door. No one stirred inside the house. I left my desk and peered out into the hallway. My mother stood flat against the wall facing our framed map of Lithuania, her eyes closed and her face pulled with an anxiety I had never seen. She was praying.

"Mother," said Jonas, only one of his eyes visible through the crack in his door, "are you going to open it? It sounds as if they might break it down."

Mother's head turned to see both Jonas and me peering out of our rooms. She attempted a forced smile. "Yes, darling. I will open the door. I won't let anyone break down our door."

The heels of her shoes echoed down the wooden floor of the hallway and her long, thin skirt swayed about her ankles. Mother was elegant and beautiful, stunning in fact, with an unusually wide smile that lit up everything around her. I was fortunate to have Mother's honey-colored hair and her bright blue eyes. Jonas had her smile.

Loud voices thundered from the foyer.

"NKVD!" whispered Jonas, growing pale. "Tadas said they took his neighbors away in a truck. They're arresting people."

"No. Not here," I replied. The Soviet secret police had no business at our house. I walked down the hallway to listen and peeked around the corner. Jonas was right. Three NKVD officers had Mother encircled. They wore blue hats with a red border and a gold star above the brim. A tall officer had our passports in his hand.

“We need more time. We’ll be ready in the morning,” Mother said.

“Twenty minutes—or you won’t live to see morning,” said the officer.

“Please, lower your voice. I have children,” whispered Mother.

“Twenty minutes,” the officer barked. He threw his burning cigarette onto our clean living room floor and ground it into the wood with his boot.

We were about to become cigarettes.

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WERE WE BEING ARRESTED? Where was Papa? I ran to my room. A loaf of fresh bread had appeared on my windowsill, a large wad of rubles tucked under the edge. Mother arrived at the door with Jonas clinging close behind her.

“But Mother, where are we going? What have we done?” he asked.

“It’s a misunderstanding. Lina, are you listening? We must move quickly and pack all that is useful but not necessarily dear to us. Do you understand? Lina! Clothes and shoes must be our priority. Try to fit all that you can into one suitcase.” Mother looked toward the window. She quickly slid the bread and money onto the desk and snapped the curtains shut. “Promise me that if anyone tries to help you, you will ignore them. We will resolve this ourselves. We must not pull family or friends into this confusion, do you understand? Even if someone calls out to you, you must not respond.”

“Are we being arrested?” began Jonas.

“Promise me!”

“I promise,” said Jonas softly. “But where is Papa?”

Mother paused, her eyes blinking quickly. “He will be meeting us. We have twenty minutes. Gather your things. Now!”

My bedroom began to spin. Mother’s voice echoed inside my head. “Now. Now!” What was happening? The sound of my ten-year-old brother running about his room pulled a cord within my consciousness. I yanked my suitcase from the closet and opened it on my bed.

Exactly a year before, the Soviets had begun moving troops over the borders into the country. Then, in August, Lithuania was officially annexed into the Soviet Union. When I complained at the dinner table, Papa yelled at me and told me to never, ever say anything derogatory about the Soviets. He sent me to my room. I didn’t say anything out loud after that. But I thought about it a lot.

“Shoes, Jonas, extra socks, a coat!” I heard Mother yell down the hallway. I took our family photo from the shelf and placed the gold frame faceup in the bottom of the empty suitcase. The faces stared back at me, happy, unaware. It was Easter two years before. Grandma was still alive. If we really were going to jail, I wanted to take her with me. But we couldn’t be going to jail. We had done nothing wrong.

Slams and bangs popped throughout the house.

“Lina,” Mother said, rushing into the room, her arms loaded. “Hurry!” She threw open my closet and drawers, frantically throwing things, shoving things into my suitcase.

“Mother, I can’t find my sketchbook. Where is it?” I said, panicked.

“I don’t know. We’ll buy a new one. Pack your clothes. Hurry!”

Jonas ran into my room. He was dressed for school in his uniform and little tie, holding his book bag. His blond hair was combed neatly over to the side.

“I’m ready, Mother,” he said, his voice trembling.

“N-no!” Mother stammered, choking on the word when she saw Jonas dressed for academy. She pulled in an uneven breath and lowered her voice. “No, sweetheart, your suitcase. Come with me.” She grabbed him by the arm and ran down to his room. “Lina, put on shoes and socks. Hurry!” She threw my summer raincoat at me. I pulled it on.

I put on my sandals and grabbed two books, hair ribbons and my hairbrush. Where was my sketchbook? I took the writing tablet, the case of pens and pencils and the bundle of rubles off my desk and placed them amongst the heap of items we had thrown into my case. I snapped the latches closed and rushed out of the room, the curtains blowing, flapping over the loaf of fresh bread still sitting on my desk.

I saw my reflection in the glass door of the bakery and paused a moment. I had a dab of green paint on my chin. I scraped it off and pushed on the door. A bell tinkled overhead. The shop was warm and smelled of yeast.

“Lina, so good to see you.” The woman rushed to the counter to assist me. “What may I help you with?”

Did I know her? "I'm sorry, I don't—"

"My husband is a professor at the university. He works for your father," she said. "I've seen you in town with your parents."

I nodded. "My mother asked me to pick up a loaf of bread," I said.

"Of course," said the woman, scurrying behind the counter. She wrapped a plump loaf in brown paper and handed it over to me. When I held out the money, she shook her head.

"Please," whispered the woman. "We could never repay you as it is."

"I don't understand." I reached toward her with the coins. She ignored me.

The bell jingled. Someone entered the shop. "Give your parents our very best regards," said the woman, moving to assist the other customer.

Later that night I asked Papa about the bread.

"That was very kind of her, but unnecessary," he said.

"But what did you do?" I asked him.

"Nothing, Lina. Have you finished your homework?"

"But you must have done something to deserve free bread," I pressed.

"I don't deserve anything. You stand for what is right, Lina, without the expectation of gratitude or reward. Now, off to your homework."