

Chapter One

‘I almost forgot!’ Mr Aiken straightened his hunched shoulders. The bones cracked like gunshots. Dasha shuddered. ‘Be careful on your way home. The school has been informed there’s a wild animal loose in the city.’

‘Wild?’ A boy, new to their class, stopped packing his fluorescent yellow rucksack. ‘I saw that on the television this morning.’ He spoke clearly, precisely, as though the words weren’t in his home language. ‘It is very dangerous. The news said.’

He smiled at Dasha. She tried to look away, but his bright eyes were hypnotic. Papa said smart people were never fooled by smiles. Smiles could hide lies as cheerily as flowery wallpaper hides a crack in the wall.

‘Well,’ Blythe huffed. ‘I reckon *my* bite is worse than any beast’s.’ She shoved past Dasha, knocking her closer to the new boy. ‘Sorry, Dash, I’m in a dash!’

‘I get the joke,’ the new boy said with a snort.

Around them, other children snickered. Dasha bit her lip. With a hurried goodbye to a smiling Mr Aiken, she raced out of the crumbling middle-school building. Her heart hammered as she caught her breath, fingers pressing into the bullet holes in the school wall. Little dented reminders of what can happen to a city, a country – to people – whose ideas grow too wild.

More children emerged out of the school doors, forcing Dasha to keep moving. The wind cut across the steely street. She reached into her rucksack and snapped the earphones over her hairband. She pressed play. Anna had given her this album. Knowing Anna had listened to the same tunes was the only thing left to keep them tethered, like they were still friends in another, distant, possible place.

The guitar riff played as she neared the Barricade. Two Gripper guards stood on top of the lookout tower. Their rifles were slung over their right shoulders, their gaze fixed along the length of the Barricade headed westward. They were like hungry dogs awaiting their owners return.

‘Step away from the Barricade.’

One of the guards now faced her.

Dasha hurried past, even though she was far away from the wall.

The car was already coming to a stop alongside the kerb before she saw it. The red and blue lights on its roof weren’t flashing but there was urgency in the way the

car shuddered as it braked. Dasha ripped off the earphones, her fingers shaking as she pressed the pause button.

The sounds of the city returned. The Barricade grew a foot. The wind was ice. Dasha wrapped her denim jacket around her and crossed her arms.

The Gripper exited the car like a long-legged insect. His khaki woollen coat looked older than he was, but the brass buttons shone.

‘Name,’ he said.

‘Dasha. Dasha Smith.’

The young officer leaned against the car bonnet, his fair eyebrows pinched in concentration. ‘And you?’

Dasha gave a little start; the new boy with the hypnotic eyes stood idly behind her.

‘Vadim,’ he said. ‘Vadim Klimov.’

‘And where did you get that music-player, Dasha Smith?’

‘My father gave me it,’ she said, distancing herself from Vadim. ‘Markus Smith.’

The officer’s eyebrows dipped lower like they were holding hands across the bridge of his pointed nose. ‘Markus Smith,’ he repeated, narrowing his eyes as though the name was unlikely.

Dasha cleared her throat. A spool of white air clouded the space between them. ‘I like to listen to the music of the Fatherland as I walk.’ She tugged out the music case from her rucksack. ‘It makes me proud to belong.’

Her cold finger traced the national flag on the fake album cover. The officer clicked his boots. ‘To the Fatherland.’

Dasha’s gaze snagged with Vadim’s. Something hard and shiny glinted in his eye. ‘Yes. To the Fatherland.’

The officer turned to Vadim. ‘And where are you from?’

Vadim was tall for twelve, but his gaze rested only as far as the officer’s top brass buttons. ‘West.’

The officer’s moustache bristled at the edges. ‘West?’ He relaxed his thin square shoulders. Dasha wondered how far West you had to travel before the turn in the earth meant you were from the East. ‘Well. You are a credit to our fine nation, both of you. It’s getting colder. You better get yourselves home.’

Dasha nodded down at her feet. ‘We will. We will.’

The Gripper climbed back in the car. The engine started but he didn't leave. He called out of the window: 'Watch out for the beast, won't you! Word is, it's now attacking dogs.'