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Historical Fiction

THE END OF SORROW

A Novel of the Siege of Leningrad in WWII

by

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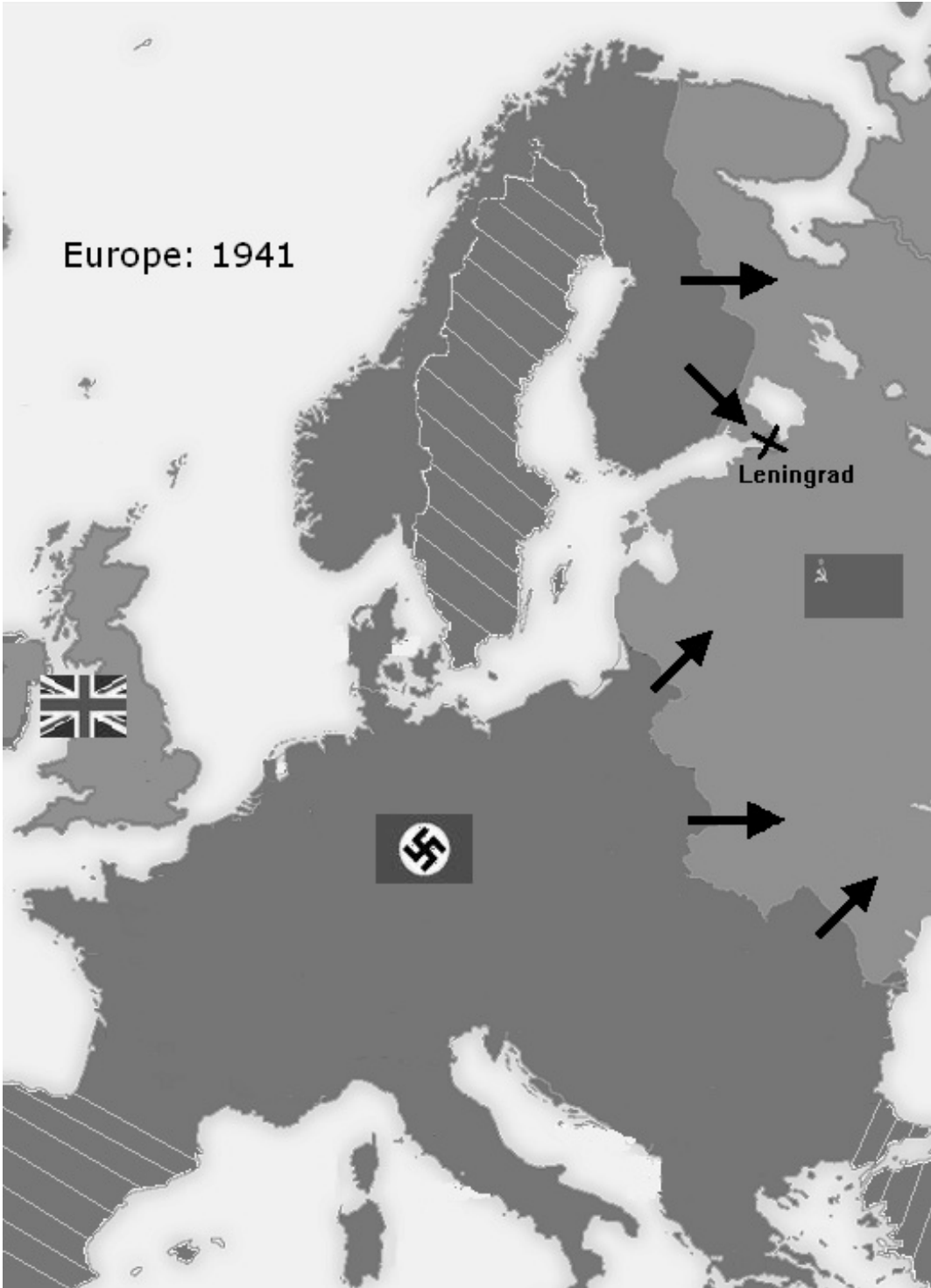
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Preface:

This historical fiction novel attempts in every way to remain true to the events and circumstances that history has recorded for the siege of Leningrad. The stories within – though fictional – could very well have happened. The novel contains several real-life characters who interact with the fictitious characters created by the author. Some real-life characters may be obvious. Others not so. For the real-life characters, the novel stays as close as possible to the historic events they were involved in, whether it be deserting to the enemy lines, or buying tickets to a soccer game before the war started.



Prologue

The two German soldiers huddled together, trying to deny their shivering by discussing the bitter cold and the strange blue tint of the moon. They spoke in soft, sad voices that the stillness of the night carried far and wide over the freshly fallen snow. They wondered how much longer it would be before the sun once again emerged from the horizon. Of all the unusual things in this country, they agreed, that was the one that took the most getting used to – the shortest days and longest nights they'd ever known.

The moon was suddenly gone again – swallowed whole by another of the enormous dark clouds that floated through the black winter sky. One of the soldiers took out a flask, cursed the city of Leningrad, and then took a long sip. A small hole in the cloud allowed the moon to shine through, and for a few seconds, the entire area glowed pale blue. Tall, somber evergreens cast black shadows a hundred feet long, and a solitary tree stump in the middle of a white field stood out like a tiger on an iceberg.

When the stump appeared to move, the strangeness of the night threatened to become surreal.

“Dietrich, did you see that?”

“See what?”

“That dark spot out there,” he said, motioning toward the open field in front of them. “I think it moved.”

No sooner had they begun to examine the spot when the light was again lost, and everything settled uncomfortably back into the dark.

“There’s nothing there. I knew you couldn’t handle your liquor.”

“To hell with you! I’m telling you I saw something move.”

“All right, let’s go to the nest. The moon should be back out in a minute. You’d better be right this time. I’m getting tired of your false alarms.”

What had been vague, borderless figures only an hour before could now be seen clearly by the Russian soldier. Felix Varilensky had excellent nighttime vision and even without the help of the moon could make out the two Germans as they trudged through the snow over to the machine gun nest and then disappeared inside. Under his breath, he cursed whoever it was that had been spotted. For most of the men, there had been no training in how to crawl in thick snow across an open field in the middle of the night. For most of the men, there had been no training at all.

He studied the night sky and calculated how much time he had in between the clouds – in between the dark and the light. In the dark, he was invisible, immeasurable. In the light, he was just another man.

It wasn’t long before the moon began showing its ashen face again. It crept along the edge

of the monstrous black cloud – its frail light spilling over the rim and down to the frozen ground below. The light moved faintly from the top of the field where the Germans were, toward the middle of the field where he was. He dug a few more inches into the snow and stopped all movement as the light treaded up to, then around, and finally over him.

The machine gun nest was off to his right on a slight hill, no more than 90 feet away. As he lay motionless in the moonlight, he tried to wiggle his toes, but they were too numb from the cold for him to tell if he'd moved them or not. He needed the dark to return. That was where he lived now – where he walked, where he ate, where he prayed, and most of all, where he unleashed his anger.

And when the darkness did return, he slowly positioned his rifle at the machine gun nest. The ghostly light returned a few seconds later, just as he had calculated it would, and he found his target – a dim figure with binoculars looking out from behind the sandbags. Felix gripped his rifle tighter and slowly clenched his jaw until the gums around his loose upper tooth once again flooded his mouth with that thick, salty sensation he craved. He closed his eyes for a short second to concentrate on the sourness of his own blood. Then he opened his eyes and pulled the trigger. The bullet went straight through the German's hand to his cheek, and one after the other, the binoculars, and then the man, fell from sight.

The other German soldier quickly engaged the machine gun and bullets flew frantically in every direction. They struck all around Felix, but he remained still. Even when one of the bullets burned a hole straight through his left arm, he did not move.

After several minutes, the tat-tat-tat of the machine gun ceased and additional German soldiers could be heard arriving – barking out orders and demanding answers.

The snow underneath him turning red and the cold so intense that it was difficult to breathe, Felix waited. In his mind, he disappeared from the cold, and reappeared in that warm, familiar place where the sun refused to set, where the lazy afternoons went on forever, and where the shade of a tree was proof of God's unconditional love. In that peaceful place, he lay on the soft grass, Katya beside him – her seductive hips next to his, her outstretched forearm resting lightly on his bare chest. When he kissed the small of her wrist, the tender scent of lilacs and honey stayed on his lips. An insatiable zest for life and for Katya pumped through his veins, and the passionate love they'd made that morning seemed an eternity ago. He listened as she recited in his ear a poem she had written for him, the final words of it repeating themselves in his mind: *Love is the beginning, and Love is the end, and here in the middle is where we must mend.*

It was all so real – that bright yellow sun, that clear blue sky, that cool green grass. But that warm day was long past. That warm day was before it all began . . .

ОДИН — **Part I**

A man's character is his destiny. – Heraclitus

Глава Первая — Chapter One

“Two Days in June”

Eyes that pierce,
Beauty so rare.

Thoughts that intrigue me,
love to share.

I with my body, a mind, and a soul,
I am but parts, you make me whole.

Will so strong,
with good intention.

The road is long,
our journey in question.

Excerpt from Chapter 1 . . .

The Day Before the Invasion: June 21, 1941

In the center of Leningrad, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan sits quietly on the main thoroughfare of the city. The proud, Romanesque structure, more commonly called the Kazansky Cathedral, has held a quiet authority over the city ever since the first stone of its foundation was laid by Tsar Alexander I on August 27, 1801. Stretching its massive wings out to the east and west, it always seems to be ready to fly away to the more perfect place it surely must have come from. But it never leaves, and perhaps that's why it holds such a special place in the heart of so many Leningraders. It's always there, in repose, patiently watching the cars, buses and pedestrians as they move in steady streams up and down the stately Nevsky Prospekt.

In 1931, the cathedral was shut down and transformed into the "Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism." But for Felix, it would always be known as Kazansky Cathedral. He'd fallen in love with it the first time he saw it and promptly learned every detail of its storied history.

It was now after 11:00 p.m. and the setting sun colored the sky beyond the cathedral with soft pastel hues of violet, gold, and crimson. Felix and Katya walked slowly by the rose bushes in front of the cathedral. It had been a long, but fun day, and Felix hated to see it come to an end. He was walking Katya back to her apartment building, trying to squeeze every minute he could from the day. He reached his arm out and pulled her close as they walked. He loved to run his hand slowly up and down her side, feeling how her waist seductively curved into her hips. Leaning over to give her a quick kiss on the cheek, he suddenly changed his mind, dropped the picnic basket and took her in his arms. He kissed her on the lips and squeezed her body tightly to his – delighting in the firmness of her breasts as they pressed against him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

After a few seconds, Felix heard a mother with small children approaching and he reluctantly pulled away. As he and Katya prepared to cross the street, he switched the picnic basket to his left arm so he could hold her hand as they crossed.

He smiled at Katya, then looked back one last time at the cathedral and the dozens of giant Podoust stone columns that marked the front facade, wondering what it must have been like to be part of the Romanov royal family and been married within Kazansky's majestic confines.

"Did you talk to your father?" he asked Katya.

"About what?"

"You know perfectly well what," he said, annoyed that the pleasure of a minute ago was gone so quickly. "Don't make this into an argument again," he added.

"Don't talk to me like that," she said testily.

"Like what?"

"In that tone. You talk to me sometimes as if I'm a child and you're the parent, and I hate it."

Felix reflected for a second. "You're right," he concluded. "I'm sorry. It's just that I get tense even thinking about this subject. Have you talked to him yet?"

"What's there to talk about? I know what his answer will be – the same as last time."

"So you're not even going to try anymore?" Felix stopped and turned to face her.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“But Katya, why do you need his approval? We’re both eighteen now.”

“Why do you ask questions like that? It’s annoying.”

“Come on, so what if he sits on the City Soviet. He’s only one man.”

“Felix,” she said, the volume of her voice climbing a notch. “He’s *friends* with Party Secretaries. He doesn’t just *know* powerful people – he plays chess with Kuznetsov; he has *tea* with Zhukov.”

“But you can’t tell me he’s going to ruin the life of his only child out of mere spite. He may not act like it, but I know he loves you. He wouldn’t hurt you.”

“You don’t understand, Felix. You don’t know him. He thinks he knows what’s best for me and it doesn’t matter what I think. He’ll never change his mind.”

“But he can’t do this. It’s *your* life.”

“He *can* do it. And he is.”

“*No*, he can’t. I’m going to have a talk with him.”

“Felix, no. Please, don’t do that. He could have you arrested if he wanted to.”

“Arrested for what? For talking to him?”

“I’m serious. Don’t do it. I know him, and I know you. You’re both pigheaded, and if the two of you go into a room, probably only one of you will come out.”

“Oh come now, Katya. You underestimate me. I’m not violent.”

“Just promise me you won’t try to talk to him.”

“Promise you? First, promise me you’ll marry me one day – with, or without, your father’s approval.”

Katya stared at the ground for several minutes, wringing her hands from time-to-time, before finally answering. “Can’t we talk about this some other time?” she asked with an air of resignation.

Felix nodded yes and they walked the remaining three blocks to Katya’s third floor apartment in silence. Her neighbor Petya was smoking a cigarette and leaning over the railing looking down on them as they walked up the stairs. “You certainly picked a beautiful day for your picnic, Katya. Any leftovers?”

Felix and Katya looked above at Petya’s portly figure – pot belly hanging over his belt, shoulders slouching forward over his chest, cigarette held limply in his right hand. He stood with his weight disproportionately on his left leg. “Hi Petya,” Katya said, “I thought you usually took a nap about now, so you could write all night.”

“Who could sleep on a day like this?” He said it sarcastically, and Felix glared at him in response.

After they reached the third floor, Felix set the picnic basket down and Katya started looking through it. She had some strange connection to Petya that Felix didn’t understand. She said she considered him a friend, though Felix wondered if it was out of pity. Felix didn’t much care for Petya. He thought him fat, lazy, and conceited, and hated it when he used big or unusual words. In particular, he didn’t like the way the twenty-seven year old writer constantly stared at Katya. But Petya’s disfigured right leg (it was shorter than his left and he walked with a limp) and Katya’s assurances convinced Felix that he was harmless.

“Sorry, Petya,” Katya said as she closed the picnic basket, “there’s nothing left over except a couple of boiled potatoes and a pickle.”

“That’s fine. I’ll take them.”

Katya dug them out and handed them over to him. “So did you go outside and enjoy this

beauteous day, Petya?” Felix asked.

“I went to the store and bought some paper this morning,” he said, but instead of looking at Felix, he looked at Katya as if she had asked the question.

The entrance to the building creaked open and then closed and footsteps echoed in the stairwell. Felix and Katya glanced over the railing, but you couldn’t see who it was until the person reached the second floor.

“It’s Dmitry,” Petya said.

“How do you know?” Felix asked.

“I know,” he said confidently.

As the person rounded the corner onto the second floor, Felix and Katya saw a familiar small head with short, dark hair and a cowlick and knew that Petya was right. It was Dmitry Shostakovich.

“How do you do that?” Katya asked, her face full of amazement.

Petya smiled for the first time and said in a mock humble voice, “It’s but one of my innumerable talents.”

Shostakovich had likely come to visit his friend, the old painter, Alexander Guzman. Guzman lived next door to Petya and Katya and had a beautiful piano, but couldn’t play a note. He admitted to keeping the piano only because Shostakovich loved it and frequently came over to practice or compose.

“Good evening, Dmitry,” Katya said.

“Ahh, Katya. How’s my favorite poet?”

“Fine. I heard you playing something new yesterday. Have you started on your Seventh Symphony?”

“Oh, those were just some random ideas,” he said, wiping his round black-rimmed glasses on his shirt. He laughed nervously.

“Did you know that it’s Felix’s birthday? He’s eighteen today,” Katya said.

“Is that so? Happy Birthday, Felix. And to think, only last year I was *twice* your age. Say, why don’t you go to the soccer game at Dynamo Stadium with me tomorrow. My treat. I got two tickets today, but I saw my friend just a minute ago and he said he can’t make it.”

“I’d love to, except I promised my friend I’d help him move tomorrow.”

“Ok. How about you, Petya? You want to go?” Shostakovich asked.

“No, that would make me too happy. I can’t write when I’m happy.”

“Did you write today?” Shostakovich asked.

“No.”

“Are you happy today?”

“No.”

“I think you need a new hypothesis. If either of you change your mind, you know where to find me.” Shostakovich walked down the hall to Guzman’s apartment, knocked, then slipped inside. Katya kissed Felix on the cheek and wished him happy birthday once more, before she too disappeared into her apartment.

On his way home, Felix enjoyed the cool night air and the sweet, salty fragrance from lilacs and the Neva river. Just as he reached his apartment, a bell chimed twelve times, signifying the end of June 21st and the beginning of June 22nd. For a reason he couldn’t explain, he suddenly felt out of breath, and a strange shiver went up his spine.

Глава Пятая — Chapter Five

“All that Matters”

Dragged,
by well-fed ignorance

Down,
into subtle lies

That can't disguise
this ruse,
this fuse,
that goes

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick . . .

Meet me down by the railroad
where the tracks curve west.

Meet me before the realists
steal the youth from my chest.

Meet me while this righteousness
still burns on my breath.

Excerpt from Chapter 5 . . .

High in the sky there was a dogfight between a Soviet and German fighter plane. Felix watched them for a minute while he took a drink of water from his canteen. The Soviet plane was being chased and made a sharp turn to the left and dove toward the ground in an attempt to escape. At the last second, it pulled up and barely avoided crashing into the earth. It was a desperate attempt, Felix thought, but that was what it would take to defeat the Germans.

He'd found the 2nd Regiment of the Volunteers and a young, fresh-faced officer assigned him to the 1st Platoon. Felix asked who commanded the platoon, but the officer didn't seem to know and had neither the time nor inclination to find out. After spending the rest of the morning looking for the 1st Platoon, Felix finally found it. His next task was to find its commanding officer and report for duty. He'd checked several trenches already with no luck and was now making his way to the next one.

The fighting was heavy in this area. There was a constant din of machine gun fire and exploding mortars, and occasional screams of agony. Houses stood in ruin, trees burned, the stench of rotting flesh filled the air. Despite all the sounds of fighting, Felix couldn't see the enemy. They were somewhere up ahead – behind houses, or camouflage, or in trenches of their own. Every now and then, he would see a man in green run from one spot to another, crouching all the while and taking a few shots at the Russian lines as he did so.

Felix jumped into the trench he'd been directed to. He thought it would be empty since he hadn't seen anyone firing back at the Germans. But there were twelve men in there, all sitting with their backs to the incoming fire. Each man had a rifle, but it was either lying harmlessly at their feet or resting against the wall. On Felix's right, at the far end of the trench, was a dead Soviet soldier. Dark red blood covered his right side from the neck down, and his face was sunk into the orange-colored earth. A dozen tiny black ants congregated near the dried blood on the side of his neck.

Only a couple of the men turned their heads to look at the stranger who'd just dropped into their trench. The rest of them continued staring at the dirt wall in front of them. Having just arrived at the front, Felix was alert and on edge and found their detachment incomprehensible.

None of the men had showered or shaved in at least a week and a half – the strong body odor that hung in the trench and the thick stubble on their cheeks testified to that. As Felix watched their behavior, he wondered if any of them had even *slept* in a week and a half.

A mortar round exploded in front of the trench and dirt fell like rain on top of them. Felix was startled by the deafening sound of the blast and pulled his helmet down as low as it would go. The other men hadn't even flinched. Their reactions were identical to the man who was already dead.

Felix reached into his pocket and pulled out the pack of cigarettes he'd brought. He didn't smoke himself, but figured they would make a nice gift for his new comrades. He'd heard that cigarettes were sometimes hard to come by on the front. After he opened the pack, he offered one to the man nearest him, then told him to pass it down the line. Every man took at least one, looked down the trench at Felix, and nodded appreciatively. When the nearly empty pack made it back toward Felix, he waved it off.

The sun was hot. Felix wiped some sweat from his forehead, then opened his canteen and took a drink. When he finished, he noticed several of the men staring at him, an unspoken request in their eyes. Guessing they had all run out of water, Felix then passed his canteen down the line. Again, all the men took some and nodded to him appreciatively. One of the men even summoned

up the strength to speak. "Thank you, comrade," he said.

Someone suddenly jumped into the trench, startling Felix. He turned his head to the new person next to him and was flabbergasted to see Dima looking back at him. "Ahh, Varilensky," Dima said, "so nice of you to finally join us."

Felix was taken aback by Dima's formality. He couldn't recall Dima ever calling him by his last name before.

"We expected you yesterday," Dima said.

Felix noticed how different Dima's demeanor was from the other men. He had the same short beard as the others, but his movements were quick and sharp. His forehead was wrinkled into a scowl as he awaited a response from Felix.

"My orders were to report today," Felix said.

Dima laughed. A sharp, derisive taunt. "That's not what I was told," he said. "I don't want to waste time arguing though. Where's the ammo? We need to get it distributed."

"Where's the what?"

"The bullets," Dima said irritably. "They said you'd be bringing a crate of ammunition with you. We're nearly out."

Another mortar exploded nearby, and again none of the men reacted. What a pitiful bunch, Felix thought. How can you fight a war like this? "I had no such orders," he said to Dima. "And I have no ammunition to give you."

"Devil take it!" Dima muttered. "Do you even have a rifle?"

Felix shook his head. "I was told I'd be assigned one when I reported," he said.

Dima opened his mouth but said nothing. He turned to the rest of the men in the trench. "Comrades!" he said. "We're going on the offensive again. We're going to retake the area south of the school."

None of the men moved nor showed any sign they'd even heard him.

"Dima, I realize that I just got here," Felix said, "but it doesn't seem to me like these men are in any shape to mount an offensive."

"First of all," Dima said, scowling once again. "You will address me as Comrade Lieutenant. Secondly, if I want your opinion, I'll ask for it." Dima quickly checked his rifle to see how many rounds he had left. "My orders are to attack," he added, "and I will carry out that order. The enemy must not have a moment's rest."

"Have we any artillery?" Felix asked.

Dima didn't respond. He was peeking his head over the shallow clay ditch at the German lines.

"Have we any machine guns?" Felix asked.

Again, Dima didn't respond. He hollered to the other men in the trench, asking how many grenades they had left.

"Comrade Lieutenant," Felix yelled. "Do you have a weapon for me? Or will I be sent out with a shovel again?"

"Enough of your provocations!" Dima yelled back. "You'll get your weapon from the enemy or when one of us has fallen." He turned to the others. "Men! Be ready to move out when I give the signal. Kazinsky and I will take out the machine gun on the left flank first, and then we'll move up that side."

Felix studied the blank expressions on the men's faces, the complete lack of emotion, and wondered how far their "offensive" would make it.

"Where's Kazinsky?" Dima shouted over a series of thundering explosions.

One of the men pointed at the end of the trench. Dima turned and looked at the corpse with its face pressing against the dirt, then addressed Felix. "Grab his gun. You and I will take out the machine gun."

"He just got here," the man who'd thanked Felix earlier said. "You're trying to kill him already, lieutenant?" He said the last word contemptuously.

"Perhaps *you* would like to go in his place?" Dima retorted.

"It's all right," Felix said. The man looked away, and Felix made his way down the trench and slid the gun out of the dead man's hands. It was a strange rifle and had a scope on it, and Felix understood that Kazinsky must have been a sharpshooter. Dima took the rifle from Felix, quickly inspected it, then gave it back to him. Felix realized why the rifle seemed strange to him – it was German.

Felix peeked over the red dirt of the trench to get a glimpse of the target. He could barely see the machine gun off to his left. The Germans had chosen a good spot next to the corner of a building. They had an excellent angle to fire on a wide expanse of the Russian lines, but it wasn't easy for the Russians to return fire. Felix only saw a narrow gap where the nest was vulnerable.

Dima waved his arm at Felix. "Let's go," he shouted.

They jumped out of the trench amid the angry spitting of the machine gun and the sound of bullets slicing through the air all around them. They ran to the safety of an old brick schoolhouse. There were bomb craters and unexploded shells in the playground. Two swings moved slightly from side to side in the light breeze. Through a window, Felix could see into one of the classrooms. Tiny desks were scattered about the room, most of them tipped on their sides. On the chalkboard was a crude map of the area, a swastika, and, in Latin, the words, "Veni. Vidi. Vici." In the far corner of the room, a German soldier lay sprawled on a group of desks. His head and neck were wrapped in bloody gauze, his right arm hung limply over the edge.

Felix tugged on the back of Dima's shirt and pointed to the classroom. Dima looked and nodded. "They took it last night, but we drove them back again this morning."

Dima pointed to his right. "You see that bomb crater on the side of that slope in between those small bushes?"

"Yes, I see it."

"When I run from here to that next building, you run to that crater."

Felix looked at the building Dima was referring to. "Dima, that's wide open. That machine gun will cut you down before you get three steps."

"That's the idea. I'll draw their fire so you can make it to that spot. You should be able to get off a good shot from there and take the machine gunner out. They've only got one guy manning it for some reason, so that'll make things a little easier."

Felix couldn't tell if he'd be able to get off a shot from the bomb crater Dima had pointed to. If he couldn't, he'd be a sitting duck once they saw him. There was little cover there and nothing to run to. The plan seemed so desperate to Felix. Either one of them, or maybe even both, might be killed before they even got close.

Dima crept to the edge of the wall and prepared to run. "Varilensky!" he shouted. Felix turned. "Make them count. There's only two bullets left in that gun." Then Dima dashed into the open and the machine gun followed him. Little clouds of dust rose from the ground all around him.

Felix took off running for the crater, and though it seemed like an eternity, made it there in just a few seconds. He looked through the scope and saw immediately that he didn't have the angle to get a shot off. He'd have to move further to his right, but there was absolutely no cover there. When he got up and started running, another German soldier arrived at the machine

gunner's side. He was carrying more ammunition for the machine gun. When he saw Felix, he alerted the machine gunner, and Felix knew he had only a second or two before the machine gun swung around and started spitting its poison at him. He found the machine gunner's head in the center of the scope, aimed for the man's nose, and fired. The bullet went high and hit the man's helmet just above the eyes. The man was stunned for a second, but then quickly finished swinging the gun around and started spraying the ground around Felix with bullets. Felix took aim again. He knew he had to hit the man with this shot. His life depended on it.

He blocked everything out, carefully aimed two inches lower than last time, then squeezed the trigger. The bullet smashed through the man's right cheek and he slumped forward.

The other soldier immediately started pulling the dead man away from the gun so he could fire it. Felix was out of bullets and had no choice but to try running back to the schoolhouse. He doubted he could make it in time. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone running straight at the machine gun. It was Dima. He had a grenade in his hand and when he was close enough, he lofted it high in the air and then dove to the ground. The grenade landed just behind the machine gun's nest and exploded. The German soldier crumpled into the sandbags just as he fired his first round.

Dima jumped to his feet and ran up to the machine gun. He fired an additional bullet into each of the fallen Germans, then picked up a rifle and some ammo, and ran over to Felix. "Here," he said, handing the rifle to Felix, "those German guns seem to suit you."

At first, Felix thought Dima's remark a provocation, but then he saw him wink.

"Let's get the others and move out," Dima said.

They ran toward the trench and when they were within shouting distance, Dima yelled, "Comrades! Let's go!"

Nobody responded.

"Fedushkin! Ivanovich! Let's go!" Dima repeated.

Still no response.

They ran to the trench and jumped in. Felix expected them all to be gone or dead, but they were still there. They sat in the same position as when he'd left, staring blankly ahead.

"Come on, men! For the Motherland! For Leningrad!" Dima shouted.

Two of the men started to move, but the others remained motionless. Dima withdrew his pistol and pointed it at them. "Cowardice is no different than treason," he said. "Those of you wishing to remain here will be joining Kazinsky in *permanent slumber*."

The men still hesitated, and Felix thought Dima had erred by threatening them with eternal sleep. That probably sounded quite appealing to most of them.

"Listen!" Felix said to the men. "You're exhausted. You want some rest and water and food." A mortar whistled over their heads and exploded 50 yards behind them, sending mounds of dirt flying into the air. "You didn't ask for any of this. You don't want to be here. But we are *not* going to die in this miserable trench from a German shell launched a mile away." Felix had to shout to be heard above the din of battle. "If we are to die today," he continued, "then let our deaths have meaning! Let us die defending our wives, our children, our parents." Every man had now turned their head to look at Felix. He went down the line, looking them each in the eye as he said, "We don't fight for the generals. Or for the Party. We fight for ourselves and our family, for our right to exist!"

There was a pause while his words sunk in, then one by one, the men slowly picked up their rifles and tumbled out of the trench. Dima was out in front, leading the charge, but the men stayed close to Felix. There were no shouts of "hurrah."

* * *

Глава Девятая — **Chapter Nine**

“The Coldest Winter”

My love is like a shadow

forever following you.

There, behind you

around you,

I always surround you.

Look for me when winter dances with your heart,

And steals your warmth

Because it's what you most need

To visit that place where the ice stops you.

Do not fear the fall.

You'll find me there, but do not call

My name

Is written everywhere.

I'm always there,

a baby's breath away,

the sun of May . . .

There, behind you.

You're welcome to keep reading, but . . .

The excerpts chosen are ones that give you a taste of the novel without giving away too much of the plot. This is not an easy thing to do. If you're still not convinced you should buy the novel, you can keep reading. Otherwise, stop reading and go [buy](#) the book now! :-)

Excerpt from Chapter 9 . . .

They were packed in tight in the cab of the truck and Felix struggled to get his arm out from behind Misha's so he could have a drink of water from his canteen. He had no idea how Misha had managed to get the truck driver to take them over Lake Ladoga, but he'd learned that Misha was quite good at that sort of thing. If a situation came up that involved bartering or bribery, Felix knew to let Misha handle it.

Their truck was only one of a twelve-truck convoy, and their convoy was only one of a never-ending stream of convoys going to Leningrad and back again. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the trucks rolled on.

The driver was jittery, didn't say much, and kept his left hand on the door as if he might jump out at any second and let the truck go on without him. He used his teeth to pull the mitten off his right hand, then took a cigarette out from his coat pocket. Both Felix and Misha noticed that his last two fingers had been severed below the knuckle.

"What happened?" Misha asked.

"The first truck I drove didn't have any heat," he said matter-of-factly.

Felix didn't understand at first, then it dawned on him. Frostbite. Sitting motionless in an unheated truck for hours on end with the nighttime temperature dipping to forty-five degrees below zero . . . he had to have two of his fingers amputated.

"Lucky they gave you this truck," Misha said. "It's got a good heater. What did they do with your old truck?"

The driver pointed below them.

"What do you mean?" Misha asked. "It's in the lake?"

"A few weeks after I started, there was a thaw," he said. "I jumped out just in time."

Felix understood now why the man kept his left hand on the door at all times.

"I take it you didn't fall in the water," Misha said.

The driver shook his head. "You fall in the water, you're dead in less than ten minutes."

After a short time, they came upon a small hand-painted sign that read, "Дорога Жизни" – Road of Life. Next to the sign was a snow-covered car sticking halfway out of a large bomb crater in the ice.

Every hundred feet along the road there was a small, colorful flag sticking out of the snow. The driver said they were markers to help them follow the road. If you saw a red flag, that was a warning to take a detour around a thin spot in the ice. In addition to the flags, there were traffic controllers every few hundred yards directing the convoys. The men wore white camouflage robes that stretched all the way to the snow, covering their dark boots. They had snub-nosed automatic guns slung around their necks and wore extra cartridge belts slung across their chest in a X formation.

Felix saw a board lying on the ice and a little flag fluttering in the wind above it. "What's

that?” he asked the driver.

“That means there’s open water there – a bomb crater. It’ll be frozen over again in a day or two and they’ll remove the board.”

The driver had to hit the brakes suddenly to avoid hitting the truck in front of him. There wasn’t much space between the trucks in the convoy and neither were the drivers to allow much.

“What are you hauling?” Misha asked.

“Food,” came the response.

“Well, that’s what they need, I’ve heard,” Misha said. “How are things going in Leningrad?”

The driver turned his head to Misha and stared, expressionless. “You want to know how things are going in Leningrad?” he repeated. “Here comes your answer.” He nodded his head toward a caravan of cars and trucks up ahead. They were stopped because the front truck was apparently experiencing some mechanical difficulties. One man stood leaning over the top of the engine, and another man was lying on the snow underneath the engine.

Felix and Misha leaned forward so they could get a better look. The vehicles in the caravan, like all vehicles on the lake, had been painted white for camouflage. The large army truck at the front was loaded with Leningraders fleeing the city. Felix saw them crammed into the back, peering out with ungodly big eyes and thin faces. He saw the red and white frost marks on their cheeks and knew they were already half-dead. They were little more than skeletons with skin, and Felix felt terrified. Was the entire city like this? Full of these subhuman creatures on the verge of dying at any moment? He shuddered to think that Katya might look like the people in the back of that truck.

Behind the truck was a bus that had obviously been outfitted with heat – puffs of smoke came out of a tin chimney in its roof. Behind the bus was a carload of people. The car could comfortably fit seven, maybe eight. Felix counted eleven people packed into it. Those seated in the back had a large tank of some sort on their laps. It was so crowded that Felix doubted they could move an arm or a leg more than an inch or two.

“What’s that big tank on their laps?” Felix asked.

“Probably gasoline,” the driver replied.

Felix imagined how miserable they must be – packed in there so tightly, gasoline fumes filling the air, stuck in an unmoving vehicle on a road of ice where the outside temperature was well below zero. And the Germans might attack with their long-range artillery or planes at any moment. He started to wonder how bad the situation in the city could be that people would submit themselves to that. Then he glanced back at the skeletons in the front truck and understood why they’d left.

In a truck behind the car, four men were dragging a body out and toward a round crater filled with blue water. The men had to stop and rest every few yards as they dragged the corpse over the ice. Felix could hardly comprehend it. He alone could pick up that thin corpse, toss it over his shoulder, and carry it to the crater in a matter of seconds. What had happened to these people? Were these just the extremely ill who were being evacuated? Felix could not – would not – believe that the whole city was filled with people like this. But certainly every person in the caravan before him was. All five trucks, two buses and three cars were packed full with half-dead men, women, and even children.

“I’ve heard dystrophy is rampant in the city,” Felix said to the driver. “Are all these people sick with it?”

“Some, I imagine,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders.

“Where are they going?” Misha asked.

“To their graves, most likely,” the driver answered. “Most of them are too far gone to be saved.”

“But I heard they increased the rations,” Misha said.

“Too little, too late,” the driver said.

Felid had to close his eyes. He couldn't take it all in. He had the thought that he was too late – that Katya was already dead. She was thin to begin with. She had no fat reserves to call upon.

When they passed the caravan, Felix looked in the mirror and watched the cars and trucks slowly disappear into the endless whiteness that surrounded them. He was impressed with how well the white camouflage worked but then looked out the window and saw the dark shadow the truck created. The sun never got very high in the sky this time of year, and there was no way German planes could miss the hundred-foot long shadow the truck made.

After another twenty minutes, the traffic slowed to a crawl again. There were abandoned and wrecked cars and trucks alongside the road, victims of either the cold weather, the perilous road, or the German Luftwaffe. After a few more minutes of slow going, their convoy came to a complete stop and Felix and Misha got out to stretch their legs and smoke a cigarette. A pair of nurses with sheepskin coats skied up close to them. They had red crosses on their left arms, submachine guns around their shoulders, and pulled small sleds packed full with medical supplies.

Misha nudged Felix with his arm. “Girls,” he said, pointing at them.

The nurses heard and stopped when they reached him. “That's *Lieutenant*,” the second one said, “and you'll salute before addressing me.”

Misha came to attention and promptly saluted. “My apologies, Comrade Lieutenant,” he said.

“Do you know what the hold up is about, Comrade Lieutenant?” Felix asked.

“There's only one lane open ahead,” she said. “There's a large bomb crater in the road that hasn't frozen over yet.”

“Those certainly look warm,” Misha said, referring to their sheepskin coats.

“They are,” the first one responded, “but they don't smell so good.”

A long caravan of peasant sledges approached and began to pass by. The sledges were filled with straw and pulled by tired horses rhythmically nodding their head with each step. The horses had hoar-frost on their fur and their ribs stuck out.

The driver suddenly grabbed his automatic submachine gun and jumped out of the truck. “Down!” he yelled and started running away from the truck.

Felix couldn't understand why. Were the sledges part of a German trap?

The nurses started to ski away, then Felix saw the peasants halt their sledges and throw dirty white sheets over the horses. Two people emerged from the straw in the back of each sledge and started running away.

Then Felix heard it. Planes.

He and Misha ran about fifteen yards, then dove to the ground just as the bombs started whistling through the air. They exploded on the ice and sent geysers of water streaming into the sky.

An anti-aircraft battery that he hadn't seen before began pounding at the planes. The big guns were hidden behind walls of ice blocks and a heavy snow-laden net that sunk low over the top. Everything was camouflaged in white. Even the guns had been painted white.

The low-flying planes with the black crosses on their wings roared over Felix and Misha and then started to make a giant loop around for another pass. While they did that, a second wave of planes dropped their bombs on the column of trucks and sledges. Felix watched as one of the

sledges, horse and all, suffered a direct hit and disappeared into the lake.

The deafening sounds of explosions and rushing water filled the air. When the second wave reached them, Felix rolled onto his back, aimed his rifle, and squeezed off several shots. The bullets clanged off the underbelly of the planes.

After the second wave came a third wave of planes. The bombs squealed as they dropped down to the ice. Felix could see several of the trucks burning, but so far the one he and Misha had been riding in had been spared.

The first wave of planes had circled around and was strafing the convoy with their machine guns now. The bullets hissed as they hit the ice. Felix heard one of the horses neigh wildly and watched its rear legs slump to the ice. The sledge's driver got up from the ice, shook his fist at the German planes, cursing them at the top of his voice. A second later, bullets cut him down and a pool of blood formed around his lifeless body.

It wasn't until the third wave of planes was flying over for the second time that the anti-aircraft guns finally hit one. The plane's left wing was split in two and the plane spun out of control, hitting the frozen lake with a tremendous thud that shook the ice and made long, lightening-like cracks in the ice that extended in all directions.

"Yeah!! Take that you bastards!" Felix heard someone shout.

Once the anti-aircraft guns stopped firing, Felix heard lots of shouting, but quickly realized they were not shouts of victory or vengeance, but of agony. Several people had been wounded in the attack.

Half of the dozen trucks in their convoy were on fire. The ice was dotted with craters where the dark blue water of the lake stood in stark contrast to the whiteness all around. The truck Felix and Misha had been riding in wasn't on fire, but it had been struck repeatedly by the planes' machine guns. Felix doubted it would be going anywhere for a while – if at all.

"Looks like you're going to have to dig into your bag of tricks and get us another ride over that lake," Felix said to Misha.

Misha didn't reply, and Felix turned around and saw he was still lying in the thick snow on top of the ice. "Misha," he shouted. "It's over. They're gone. You can get up now."

Still no response.

Felix felt his stomach tighten. "Misha!" he called out even louder and walked toward him.

As he got nearer, he saw the awful red snow under Misha's head. He knelt down and gently rolled Misha over. His right eye was drenched with blood and he was unconscious. One of the nurses skied over and knelt down next to Felix. She worked without her mittens, placing her fingers in her mouth from time-to-time to keep them warm.

"He's still alive," she said after a minute, "but he needs to see a doctor. We have to get him to a medical station right away."

"We passed one not too long ago," Felix said.

"Yes, that's the closest one. It's about a mile and a half from here," she said.

Felix hesitated, looking to the other side of the lake where Leningrad was. If he went back with Misha, he'd be delayed for several hours – perhaps even a day. He started to mull over his options, but then stopped himself. He knew what he had to do.

He started looking for a means of transportation to take them to the medical station. The trucks were out, so that left the sledges. Carefully, Felix circled around the wide cracks in the ice that led to the numerous bomb craters. He saw four men gathered around the horse that had been wounded. They had cut open its belly and were emptying the still-warm carcass of its internal organs. They did it all with their bare hands, then dumped the inedible parts down one of the bomb craters. The horse's carcass was tied to one of the sledges to be dragged along behind. Its

meat would not be wasted.

Felix came up to one of the sledge drivers as he shoveled fresh snow over the blood stains the horse had left on the ice. "Help me bury those two men," the man said to Felix, nodding with his head toward two bodies a little ways away from them.

Together they dragged the two bloody corpses to the nearest crater and dropped them in.

"Did you know them?" Felix asked.

"I was transporting them in my sledge," the man said.

"So you have some free space now?" Felix asked hopefully. "Can you take me and my comrade who's been wounded to the nearest medical station?"

The man shook his head. "My orders are to return immediately once I've finished. There's others waiting."

Felix tried to think of what Misha would do or say to convince the man. "We have some cigarettes we could give you," he said.

"I don't smoke," the man replied and started to walk away.

"Wait," Felix said, taking him by the arm. "My friend is badly injured. He needs to get to a medical station right away."

"There'll be a sledge along shortly to pick up the wounded," the man said.

"No, he can't wait."

"He'll have to. I'm not going that direction." The man tried to free his arm, but Felix wouldn't let go.

"I'll make you a deal," Felix said.

"What kind of deal?"

"You agree to take us to the medical station . . ."

"And?"

"And I promise I won't shoot you."

The man was taken aback. He opened his mouth but didn't say anything.

"Yes?" Felix said.

The man nodded his head slowly.

They loaded Misha into the back of the sledge, then Felix jumped in and covered them both with some straw to keep warm. The driver cracked his whip and the horse started forward.

It was a painfully slow trip. The horse moved just slightly faster than Felix could have walked. When they finally arrived at the medical station, it was dark and Misha was still unconscious. A pair of nurses came out of an ice hut and they helped roll Misha onto a stretcher and get him inside.

A young female doctor inspected his eye and promptly decided they needed to operate. They took him behind some curtains and told Felix to go to the hut next door and see if they had any room for him to sleep that night.

* * *

To learn more or buy the book, see:

www.EndOfSorrow.com

Resources

The following excellent books have been referenced in the writing of this novel:

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