

Chapter 1: Bruno the Bear

January 2000

Mama was frightened, Max could sense that. "Hurry children, hide in the back cupboard, quickly."

"Where's Papa?" asked Max, his little voice trembling.

"Just hurry, please children," urged Mama again.

Obediently the two children, Max and his older sister, squeezed into the small cupboard tucked under the descending eaves in Max's bedroom, pulling the door almost closed. There was just room for them to sit between some boxes and the low roof. They heard Mama go away. Max could just see Bruno the Bear on his bed. Mama and Papa had given him Bruno. He wanted Bruno the Bear. But he knew that he should not leave the cupboard now.

"What's going to happen, Dasha?" Max whispered.

"Shh, Max. Be quiet," she ordered.

Abruptly from inside the house there was shouting, harsh men's voices, Papa and Mama, in the strange language of this place. Suddenly there was a gunshot, Mama screamed and another burst of gunfire. The two terrified children froze listening and trying to understand what was happening. They could hear men's voices again now, not shouting but talking to each other. It seemed things were being moved around, and there was an occasional loud thump as though something had fallen or dropped.

The children froze as a man entered the room. They saw the gun he carried, the army style uniform, his long black beard with a streak of silver hair in it. They held their breath as the man looked around the room, and then turned to leave. But he turned back, paused and then quickly grabbed Bruno the Bear by one ear and hurried out of the room.

After a time it seemed to go quiet. Dasha put her arm around her little brother and gently squeezed.

"Stay here and keep quiet, Max," she said. "I'm going to see what's going on."

"I'll come as well. I want Bruno back."

"No, stay here and stay still until I come back. I'll find Bruno."

With that she carefully opened the cupboard door and crept out. The house was quiet. Dasha put her finger to her lips in a sign for Max to keep quiet and closing the cupboard door again, tiptoed away. He waited in the almost total dark with just a sliver of light coming in through the almost closed door.

"Mama!" It was Dasha's voice, loud and screaming, laced with fear. A man's voice in a tone of authority, but Max could not make out what he was saying. Then another man's voice mixed with Dasha. She seemed frightened and there were noises of movement. Frozen still in his little hiding place, Max waited and wondered. Dasha was upset and where were Mama and Papa? Why weren't they helping her? The noises went on for some time, Max thought he could hear Dasha crying and the men talking. Then Max startled at the sound of another gunshot. He was used to the sound of gunfire but this was in his own house. Delay and fear, and slowly Max wet himself in the cupboard, too scared to move, and still with Dasha's instruction in his head to wait until she came back. So he sat and waited.

...

He woke up with a gasp as the cupboard door was opened. It wasn't Dasha, it was a man, in the camouflage he had grown used to since moving here. But the man had a gun and it was pointing straight at Max. He cried. "Mama."

This soldier had no beard; he had fair hair and blue eyes like Papa, and like Max. "There's a kid here," he called. There were other men in the house again. "Come on kid, out of there." He held out his hand and Max took it, emerging from his hiding place. Another soldier came into the room.

"Who is he?" asked the second soldier.

"What's your name, son?" asked the first.

"Max."

"What's all of your name?"

"Maxym Ivanov."

"Patronymic?"

Max didn't understand that so he just stood, trembling with fear.

The first soldier crouched down to Max's level. "What's your father's name?"

"Papa," said Max.

The second soldier spoke. "How old are you, son?"

Max could answer this. "I'm six," he replied.

The two soldiers looked at each other, one shaking his head.

"Have you got Bruno?" asked Max.

"Who's Bruno?" asked the first soldier.

"My bear, Bruno the Bear," said Max. "The other soldier took him away."

"What other soldier?"

"The one with the beard that came in here."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know, I could not understand him. He didn't see me in the cupboard."

As the two men gave each other knowing looks, Max started to panic. "Where's Mama and Papa? Where's Dasha?"

"Who's Dasha?"

"My sister. She's called Daria, but we call her Dasha."

"How old was Dasha?" asked the first soldier.

Max missed the significance of the past tense. "She's ten." And then added, "I think."

"Have you got any family here?"

"Mama, Papa and Dasha," answered Max, puzzled. They already knew this.

"Baba? Deda?"

"Yes, but they are back home. But Mama says they are in heaven now."

"But this is your home, isn't it?"

"We came here in the summer."

"So where is home?"

"Boltino. It's near the lake."

The first soldier looked puzzled and turned to the other.

"Just north of Moscow," said the second.

"We'll have to take him with us," said the first. The second nodded.

"Come on, son. Maxym?" said the first, confirming the young boy's name.

Max shook his head. "No, I want to stay with Mama, Papa and Dasha."

"You can't. It's not safe here for a Russian boy." The second soldier took Max's hand and led him out of the bedroom. Max's eyes widened as they walked through the house. Everything was smashed up and lots of things were not there.

"Close your eyes, Maxym," ordered the first soldier. But Max only pretended to as they walked through the main room towards the door; what he saw made Max stop. Then he screamed.

"Mama! Papa!" They were lying on the carpet, there was blood everywhere. Even Max could understand they were dead, shot many times. Then he saw Dasha. She was naked from the waist down lying on the sofa and there was more blood on her legs and she too had been shot and blood was still oozing from her head. Max screamed again.

"He wasn't supposed to see all this," said one of the soldiers. "Get him outside, quickly"

But Max couldn't move. He was shaking and crying. He felt strong arms pick him up and carry him. Outside was an army truck, and some more soldiers.

"Found this kid inside, sole survivor. Russian family from near Moscow," explained one of the soldiers to these others.

"Come on son, we'll look after you," someone said kindly. Max was put in the truck. The first soldier sat with him, arm round him for comfort.

"You're safe now, Max," he said. "My name is Leonid, I'll look after you."

Max felt comfort in this man's arms, it reminded him of Papa. He thought of Papa lying dead on the floor and he cried. Leonid squeezed a little tighter.

"Here, put these on," said the second soldier who had been back into the house and found a change of clothes for Max as well as a warm coat, boots, hat and gloves. Max recognised them as his own. In the back of the truck he changed his wet clothes with Leonid's help and put on the coat, hat, boots and gloves. He had started to shiver, whether from shock or the bitter cold wasn't certain.

Soon the truck started to move, slowly navigating round the rubble as they got closer to the city centre. He could hear the sound of explosions getting closer. As he passed the ruins of what had been a health centre, Max saw more soldiers sitting on the ground with their hands on their heads, guarded by others standing with guns. Max had seen this before but then he shouted, "Stop!" One of the sitting men had Bruno the Bear on his lap. "Stop!" shouted Max again, "There's Bruno the Bear!" The truck stopped.

"Are you sure that's your bear?" asked Leonid.

"Yes," said Max, looking back at the sitting man. He saw the beard with the streak of silver hair in it. "That's one of the men that was in our house. That's his beard and he took Bruno the Bear." The truck backed up the few metres to where the men were sitting being guarded.

They got out of the truck. Holding Leonid's hand Max went up to the sitting man. "Are you sure this is the man who was in your house?"

"Yes," shouted Max, and grabbed Bruno the Bear. The man then spat at Max. One of the soldiers from the truck hit the man with his gun.

"You animal!" shouted Leonid. "You killed this kid's parents and raped and killed his ten year old sister, for fucks sake!" He drew a pistol from his belt and pointed it at the bearded man's head. Then he paused, and turned to Max. "This man killed your Mama and Papa and your big sister. So now you can kill him." He carefully gave the gun to Max. It felt heavy. "Good lad, now hold it there close, and pull the trigger back. It's quite hard at first so pull hard."

The bearded man looked at Max, their eyes met, a look Max would never forget. He called, "Allahu Akbar!"

Max pulled on the trigger, it didn't move at first so he pulled harder. The loud bang startled him and he felt the shock go up his arms. The bearded man lay dead, his blood oozing out.

"Well done, Max!" Max looked at the dead man. The soldiers cheered him and Max felt good about that.

"There wasn't just him in the house," said Max.

"Hey, shoot the others, kid," called one of the soldiers. Max stepped to the next bearded man - they all seemed to have long beards - and pulled the trigger again, the man fell, the spent cartridge shooting out to Max's right. Then the next, and the next, his anger increasing all the time while the soldiers cheered him on. The prisoners were saying, "Allahu Akbar!" There was one left and Max pulled the trigger but there was no bang. The man laughed at Max. Another soldier stepped up with his own gun and killed the prisoner.

The soldiers lifted Max on their shoulders while they cheered him. Max laughed. He saw Leonid looking at him intently.

"We have ourselves a soldier," he said.

The first kills of many to come.