

Between Shades of Gray

By Ruta Sepetys

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 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.