

THE  
**FREEDOM**  
DANCE

**ERIC FALKNER**

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*To my wife and children,  
Our adventure never ends.*



## **ENTRY DATE: UNKNOWN**

Have you ever noticed how time slows down in the wee hours of the morning? It almost gives you the false hope that you could freeze time. I gave in to the illusion and sought to absorb every detail of this moment, for I know that it will be one of my last.

Two warm bodies nestled up close to me; I closed my eyes and breathe them in . . . warm and salty, they smell of good clean earth. The smaller one smells of the berries that stained her hands. I opened my eyes and kissed each of her tiny fingers. When awake, she is in perpetual motion, but it is her quick mind that leads her whole self into mischief. Next to her, as always, is her brother. Even in his sleep he seems determined. He has always been wiser than his years. How often I used to tease him when he was a baby that he appeared to know exactly how to solve every problem, if only his body would catch up! His eyes had a way of seeing right through you; a quality that was comforting to the good and discomfoting to those with something to hide. Normally, I found strength in my son's gaze, but right now, I was glad that they were still closed in peaceful sleep.

A noise from across the room startled me out of my reverie. I silently slipped from the bed and made my way towards the sound. The small form on the couch shuddered. I laid my hand gently on her back and the pounding heartbeat settled back into a steady rhythm. I tucked the blanket a little tighter around her shoulders as I kissed her forehead. I wish I could stop the nightmares. We have all seen too much. What would happen to them all?

For a moment, I entertained the wild impulse to wake them and continue running. We could make it to the edge; we could make it . . . or we would die trying. I shook free from hope, and knew that the only possible choice had been made.

Dawn was drawing close. I eased myself back into bed and gathered the little ones to me, hungrily scanning their faces. They each smiled dreamily at me and snuggled closer. My life for a promise. That was the deal.

I know that my future is that of a bargaining token, my life is worth nothing more. But, I had a desperate hope that as the world grew darker, hope would rise and they would be alive to see it. It will be better this way. Safer for them . . . with any chance they won't even remember me. My heart aching from the despair of leaving all I held dear in this world, I did what I always did late at night when no one else could hear.

I sang.

# CHAPTER ONE

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## MAYA

IT IS SAID that long ago people were happy. Stories of children laughing in the street. Stories of families who live together. Stories of peace. In the world I live in, they are just that . . . stories.

Staring out the window, I wonder what life was like in our little village before the war. Did families walk through the Novi Sad square on Sundays? Were there street vendors selling hot dogs or street musicians filling the air with their melodies? For a moment, I imagine what it would have been like riding down the street on my dad's shoulders feeling the cold flakes of snow as they hit my face.

Did the boys and girls throw snowballs at each other in the town square? Would they bury their siblings in the snowbanks? Did people have smiles on their faces while they walked from here to there? I wonder if the shop keepers were friendlier and happy when customers came through their door. All these images dance in my mind . . .

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

“May - ah! You’re going to be late for class again if you don’t get your shoes on.”

Ugh. Leave it to my brother to pop my happy bubble. Since we were little, he has always been the voice of reason bringing me back down to Earth. When he enunciates my name in his drawn-out, “I’m your bigger brother way,” then I know he is already impatient with me, so I better get going. If I hear my full name “Amaya” from him, well then, I better hide.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

Our life has not been easy. Tolmaó has been my protector through a lot of pain and hardship. When I was little, I couldn’t pronounce his name right, so it became Toma. He’s my best friend and the biggest pain in the butt I know.

Momma called him her little lion cub when he was a baby. The nickname was pretty accurate as he was nine pounds at birth. Fast forward sixteen years and he is one of the smallest kids in his grade. Momma knew something, because he is the smartest in his class, has the heart of a lion, and everyone likes him. I miss her so much . . .

Our days are not very exciting. The orphanage is one of the larger buildings in town, and there are about 150 of us who live and learn here. Despite its large size, the classrooms seem like closets. Our desks are very small with attached chairs. In an effort to make the room feel even smaller, they attempt to cram as many desks in each room as they can, barely leaving room for the bookshelves and teachers’ desks.

The orphanage has been around for a very long time. The windows have the yellow, dingy look from years of age that



time and neglect bring. I'm not even really sure what color the building is because the entire exterior of the building is covered in ivy. The hallways are not as high as I first remember but, as hard as the taller kids may try, no one has ever been able to jump up and touch them.

In the morning we study English and math. Verbs, nouns, and participles melt into absolute values and squares until we finally are able to eat. Lunch time at the orphanage is a controlled chaos that only Miss Bradley could control. If you ask the older kids, they would say she is so old that she probably helped start the Great War. If you ask the younger kids, she is the daughter of the fabled Yeti.

Her stare chills you to the bone. You don't dare look her in the eyes for fear you may turn to stone. As you receive your portion, you just wait for her raspy voice to growl out, "Next." A polite "yes ma'am" and you have survived another day. The food always contains the same formula: a green, a white, a meat.

Since we were much smaller, we have played the "what is that?" game. The usual prize is the honor of knowing you guess correctly—though few people really know if we are ever right. It always tastes the same, and the only way we know it is different each day is the texture. A few kids who came to the orphanage later in their lives help us decipher the tastes from their experiences, but the game is fun, none the less.

In the afternoon, we study my favorite subject: history. Most of my classmates hate history. They get bored to death

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

by the endless dates, names, and locations, but not me. As our teacher explains each story, I am taken to the events.

The date is just an insignificant piece of the story for me. It is the people and places of history that get my mind energized. I imagine I am Julius Caesar standing on the steps speaking to thousands of Greeks, or Napoleon leading his armies into battle. The spears and bullets whizzing by my head from my enemies and the triumph of victory. To hear the stories, Napoleon had to be eight feet tall and the strongest man ever to live.

Today my imagination is not interested in the lesson. We are learning about the second dark ages. My mind doesn't like sad stories. All the pain, anguish, and sadness that they are filled with makes my heart heavy, and I don't like it.

The second dark ages were no different. The endless stories of how humanity grew so violent makes my blood grow cold and my heart ache. What was it about that time that the world grew so dark? How could humanity exchange all the happiness and joy for war?

For two decades, the world fought. Country against country, state against state, brother against brother; countless casualties and families torn apart. Fear and death were all humanity knew until . . . Sebastian Crystal. No one is really sure where he came from. All history knows is he made it all stop. Humanity was decimated. Less than one hundred million people were left on the planet when Crystal rose to power.

"Class dismissed," Ms. Wimbley says. Rats. Guess I'll have to wait until tomorrow to finish the lesson.

“I’ll see you after school,” Toma says. He has just had his sixteenth birthday, which means he is now able to participate in afternoon athletics. I, however, will have to wait two more years so I’m sentenced, once again, to an afternoon of homework at the library.

“Okay. See you at dinner.”

He is super-fast, only two weeks on the team and he is already the third fastest in his events. A lot of the boys on the team get very jealous. Most of them stand six to ten inches taller than him, but they cannot hold a candle to his speed.

I also think they are jealous of his beautiful blue eyes and bleached blonde hair. That is one of the many reasons why all the girls think he cute. If only all the girls knew what a pest he was, they might think differently.

According to the rules set by the Mir City Administrators, no citizens are to participate in any physical activities until they are old enough for their bodies to handle it. Through many studies of the human body, their scientists decided that age was sixteen. They say that if we exercise before that age, our body can become permanently damaged and our growth will be abnormal. How they got that number is beyond me, but who am I to argue . . . they are scientists.

Here at the orphanage in Novi Sad Village, I am just another number. Toma won’t admit it, but I think he has been secretly doing pushups and jumping jacks since he was little. We all have our secrets, and if that is the worst thing he ever hides from me, then I guess that is not so bad.

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

As long as I can remember, he has wanted to run and compete. More than once I have caught him in his room doing sit-ups. If I come into our room while he is exercising, he will just say he is resting on the floor. His usual pool of sweat lets us both know it is a lie, but as long as the adults don't find out, it's not a big deal.

When Toma was eight years old, he raced a ten-year-old classmate down the hall. He won, and they both got two days of detention for doing it. I could tell that day that Toma was built to run. Secretly, I think he wants to qualify for the Great Games in Mir City. I wouldn't mind because he would get to take an equipment manager. Just so happens I am an excellent equipment manager, even if Toma doesn't know it yet.

The walk from the classrooms to the library is a long one. The library is on the far side of the building—which makes little sense to me—but I don't mind the walk. I love the library. In my closed off little world, it is the one place that allows me to escape to new worlds. I can chase the giant whale or lead an army into battle. The stories give me hope that there is more to life than my tiny village, though I'm just a little girl and we do what we are told.

The library is so large (with so many books) that I could hide away for the rest of my life and actually be happy. Many afternoons and evenings I have been lost in books . . . but not today. I have math homework that has to be done. Oh well, once again the real world invades my fun.

“Hey Maya, whatcha up to?”

“Oh, hey Marcus. Just doing my homework.”

Marcus is my best friend. He came to the orphanage last year. Most of the kids rejected him because he was different. During the dark times, the various ethnic groups rose up against each other and self-segregated themselves into their own regions. Our town is in a region that was mostly Caucasian, so it is very rare to see anyone who has dark skin.

Unlike the other children, I didn't find him scary or strange. I found him witty and funny, and we became fast friends. He is kind of a dork, and I am pretty sure he likes me. Toma is always telling me to watch out for boys, but he never seems to have a good reason. It really doesn't matter because we are just friends.

"What are you doing here? The library isn't exactly your usual hangout."

"I was looking for you. I don't understand the algebra assignment," Marcus says as he winks at me.

*Yeah . . . that's why you were looking for me*, I think. He is ten times smarter than I am. "What part confuses you?"

"Uh . . . all of it."

"Ha!" As soon as I laugh, I realize I have committed the ultimate no-no . . . having fun in the library. The dirty looks all around us pretty much confirm my suspicion. A sharp, icy look from the head librarian screams loudly, *QUIET!*

"Hey, let's go to my room," I suggest. "I can help you better there."

"Sounds great!"

I figured that was Marcus's plan all along. He is not really a book person. He is more of a conversational, do-it-together

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

person, which makes me his perfect tutor. I learn it from the book and we discuss it. It is not a very efficient system because we spend more time talking about other stuff than our homework, but I value his friendship. After a few hours of tutoring and laughing with Marcus, we head back to survive another meal with Miss Bradley and meet up with Toma.

“How was practice?”

“Awesome, I have qualified to compete in the regional meet. It’s in Szeged township in three weeks. Imagine it, I will get to leave our little town for the first time in my life. Of course I will need an equipment manager. I wonder if Sammy would do it—”

“Tol - mah - o!” I yell in disgust. Two can play the name enunciation game. If Toma thinks his wannabe girlfriend is going instead of me, he has another thing coming.

Sammy came to the orphanage around the same time we did. Sammy and Toma have known each other since the first grade. She has loved him since the day they met. Every year she manages to get the desk right behind Toma to be close to him.

Toma, on the other hand, only likes her as a friend. Many times he has run into our room, begging me to tell her he was at the library. Even if he did like her, I frankly don’t think he has time for a girlfriend. He has one focus . . . running.

A devious grin comes over his face. “Just kidding sissy. I know you want a chance to explore the world. I’ve already told coach Bardy you are coming as my equipment manager.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want to have to fight your girlfriend for it.”

“She is not my girlfriend!” he complains. It is so much fun to pick on Toma about it.

Szeged. The thought creates an excitement that I can’t control. The idea of a new town and a new adventure creates a warmth in me. It is like the daydreams I have about riding on my Daddy’s shoulders.

Daddy. I really only know him through stories and a few pictures. He died when I was just a baby. Though I never knew him in person, I still miss him. How proud he would be of Toma and his dedication. If only he could be there to cheer him on.

“Hey Maya, I snuck you some strawberry ice cream.”

How does he do that?! How does Toma always know when the sadness of losing Daddy is on my mind?

Is it on my face?

Is he psychic?

“Thanks bro. The day Bradley catches you, you know you’re a dead man, right?”

“I don’t think she could catch me if she tried.”

As always, Toma can make me laugh and forget my pain.

“Let’s head to our rooms and get some sleep.”

# CHAPTER TWO

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## MAYA

THE AIR IS crisp as the snow falls on my face. I can feel the sun trying to break through a small beam of warmth on my nose. All the fresh snow crunches under me as I twirl. I have an amazing feeling of exhilaration as the world spins in circles.

Even though I usually get dizzy, today I feel totally clear in my head. I can feel the warmth grow as the crowd encircles me to watch. I hear gasps, laughing, and murmuring from the crowd, but I don't care. This freedom is so peaceful to me that I don't want to stop. That's when I hear her scream.

"Maya! What are you doing?! You have to stop before they see you!"

*POP!*

Silence.

"NOOOOO!!!!" I scream.

"Maya, wake up!" The fog of my nightmare is broken through by Toma's voice. "You're having that nightmare again."

I lay my head in his lap as he sits on the end of my bed. I can feel my pajamas cling to the sweat on my skin. A few small



drops slowly roll down my forehead and meet the tears. With everything in me, I cannot stop trembling.

“It’s ok, I’m here,” he says as I weep.

The pain of that day haunts me. It revisits me constantly in dreams and robs me of sleep. As Toma slowly strokes my hair, I’m able to drift back to sleep.

“I love you Sis.”

Morning comes and Toma is asleep. He is leaned up against the wall with me on his chest. The fog of the night begins to clear in the warmth of the new day’s sunlight.

“Toma, it’s time to wake up. Thank you for last night.”

“No problem. Love you, Sissy.”

Today is an exciting day. We get to finish learning about Sebastian Chrystal and how he saved humanity. Curiosity is my weakness. I hate surprises, and I especially hate a cliff-hanger. Not knowing the whole story is just not acceptable for me. If I don’t know the whole story, I get mad and make it my quest to learn all of it.

Toma and Marcus have both been the victims of this. Once, Toma was reading the Shakespeare play *King Lear* to me. Half way through he was getting tired and tried to stop. I told him he was not allowed to sleep until he had finished. I had to wake him up five times!

“Don’t forget to come to the gym after history class today,” Toma reminds me.

I forgot that today is my first official day as his equipment manager. My new adventure starts today. How could I forget? That is the hardest part of my nightmares. They constantly

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

make me lose track of what week or day it is. It can take days to refocus.

“What? Did you think I forgot? Of course I’ll be there.”

Just because I forgot doesn’t mean Toma needs to know about it.

“Cool. I’ll see you then.”

As I walk into History class, I notice Ms. Wimbley has a timeline written on the board. Dark ages. Chrystal elected. Peace. How exciting! Today my cliffhanger will be resolved. My brain can be at rest once more.

“Good morning class. Today we are going to learn about the savior of our world.”

Something about Ms. Wimbley’s statement seems weird to me. I cannot tell if it is a hint of sarcasm or reverence in her voice. Either way Chrystal did bring peace to the world . . .

Ms. Wimbley gives her lecture and, despite the heaviness of it all, I am enthralled. At the lowest point of the second dark ages, close to seven billion people had died from war and starvation.

*Seven billion people.*

Can we even count that many? Where did they all get buried? The thought of that much death is baffling to me. It is much more than my mind can really handle. The world had become so selfish and greedy that most countries fell apart under the weight of their governments. For some countries, it was greed. For some it was corruption or debt. For others, zealots incited revolution.

The people began rising up. Rather than a world war breaking out, something entirely different happened. The world fell into massive civil war. Countries began to fight internally. The Eurozone, African Zone, and Eastern Zone all fell into disarray. As many as a dozen major conflicts rose up. Thousands were dying daily as the fighting raged across the world. Then, something amazing happened.

Peace broke out in the eastern portion of the Eurozone. A young general named Sebastian Chrystal brokered the first tribal peace pact among three warring factions. News spread like fire and more peace pacts were signed. Within two years, the entire Eurozone had reached peace and Chrystal was named Chancellor. He unified all the military elements from each of the regions in the Eurozone and, in his greatest achievement, he brokered the Euro Disarmament Treaty.

The treaty called for the surrender of all deadly weapons to the government. They were all to be destroyed. From the armies to the peasants: guns, swords, axes—and anything else that could kill—were turned in to the new Agency of Peace that had been created under Chrystal's leadership. Very few people fought the collection, because there was such a desire for peace.

The treaty also stipulated the government would create a peace keeping force. The Administrators established a security force called the *Friedenswächter*. All of us in class laugh at this name because it sounds so mean and funny at the same time. Most people call them “Swatters” because the name sounds

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

like “friend swatter.” It is fitting. Seems like all the Swatters do is hurt our friends . . . and our loved ones.

The world celebrated this peaceful, forward thinking. Chrystal convinced the other zones to join the Eurozone in order to become one unified collective. He named this collective the Society of Peace. With much of the world decimated from war, the other zones quickly signed on and joined his Society of Peace. He mandated a universal language, which he decided would be English. Chrystal’s new Swatters spread like ants throughout the Society, and crushed the small remnants of the first rebellion that arose against the Society.

With the world at peace, Chrystal called for the construction of a capital for the new society. Engineers from around the world gathered in the Alps and began construction of Mir City. The city was built in just two years. Spanning over one hundred square miles, it was built to house the food stores, government buildings, and the Swatters’ headquarters.

The first government was made up of tribal leaders from around the world with over five hundred representatives living in Mir City. Their first order of business was drafting the Principles of Peaceful Living. It was a ten-thousand-page document containing regulations and rules designed to maintain the peace. Everything from tribal structures to personal hygiene were spelled out. With little opposition, the people adapted to the new rules and peace reigned supreme.

Early on, there was some resistance to the vast regulations and another rebellion rose up. It was swiftly met by an army of Swatters and most of them were killed. The remaining

rebels fled east. Occasionally rebels steal or damage government property, but the Swatters always take care of them.

“Class, are there any questions?” Ms. Wimbley asks. “None? Well, then . . . class dismissed. Don’t forget, we have a test tomorrow.”

As much as I hate tests, today I don’t care. It’s off to the gym! I’ve never been in the gym before.

As I walk into it, I am struck by how big it is. The library is the largest room I have ever seen, and the gym dwarfs it. The ceiling seems to be a mile up and, for some reason, there are ropes attached at the far end. In the middle is a surface that I assume is where Toma runs.

It is a bizarre looking surface. It is almost like someone took the skin from a turtle and painted it red with white lines. I kneel down and touch it. I giggle because it feels like our typical lunch meal: lumpy and rubbery.

In the middle of this reddish path is grass. Because grass is such a luxury, few people have ever seen this much of it, let alone have it. Usually, they will see it in a science class growing in a foam cup. This grass is different from those experiments. It feels like slippery paper and smells bad.

Along the far side of the pathway there are some benches for sitting. I notice Toma is sitting on one of them tying his new running shoes. One of the perks of being fast I guess. At the orphanage we rarely get new things. A pair of running shoes is a privilege usually reserved for the most important of Administrators.

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

I haven't noticed how strong Toma has gotten. Around our room, and at school, he just wears old torn jeans and loose fitting t-shirts. His running uniform contours his body like the rubber gloves Miss Bradley wears. The way it hugs his skin, my suspicions are confirmed. Toma's legs look like the chiseled statues in my history books. His arms and shoulders are rounded and ridged from his muscles.

All those years of pushups—and whatever else he said he wasn't doing—have paid off. He may be the shortest runner on the team, but he is by far the strongest. Apparently, the other boys have noticed too because their smug, arrogant attitudes toward him have changed. They are now have looks of fear and jealousy.

“Maya! Come here. I need help with my equipment bag.”

I walk over to him with as much stealth as I can in hopes of not being noticed. It has not occurred to me (until this moment) that people will be able to see me in public. In class, and around my friends, I am the bravest person you have ever met, but put me in front of total strangers and I freeze.

“Hurry up!” he insists.

“What do you need me to do?” I ask.

“Pretty simple. I need you to gather my personal clothes into this bag, and when I'm ready to race, I need you to grab my warm-up pants.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“Oh yeah, the last thing I need you to do is cheer me on,” he says with a wink.

“We can do that?” I am confused because the Swatters have a strict policy against any public cheering or outbursts. Punishment is two lashings for every infraction. Disturbing the peace is what I believe they call it.

“Coach told us yesterday it is allowed for any teammates and assistants. Since you are my assistant, I expect you to cheer the loudest!”

“I’ll do my best.”

How can he ask me to do such a thing? He knows I am afraid of embarrassing myself in front of strangers. It also doesn’t help that I appear to be the only girl helping with the team.

The sight of Toma running blows me away. He is the shortest person on his team, but as soon as the buzzer sounds, he looks like he is a foot taller than the other boys. He explodes out of the gates with so much power that overcoming the other boys is effortless, usually finishing far ahead of them. His days of being third are gone, and he is obviously the fastest kid. His best events are the 200 meter and 400 meter sprints.

On his final practice run, as he rounds the final turn toward the finish, an excitement wells up inside of me and the words burst from my mouth, “*Go Toma!*” I don’t care what the stopwatch says, I’m pretty sure he runs faster for a moment.

The next few weeks fly by. Practices last about an hour and a half. The excitement of going to Szeged grows until I can’t stand it anymore. I cheer Toma on as he gets faster and faster every day.

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

Today is really exciting because it is the last practice before our trip. Just like I do every afternoon, I help Toma pack up all of his running gear and give him his normal clothes to change back in to.

“I’ll see you at dinner?” he asks.

“Of course. Where does your bag go?”

“Just put it over in the pile with the other bags. See ya later.”

After surviving another meal consisting of mystery meat and something with the name casserole in it, Toma and I head back to our room to get ready for bed.

“So, coach told us today we are taking a Solar Motorcoach to Szeged for the meet next week. I’ve never seen a huge bus before. Coach said there is even a bathroom on the bus!”

Toma is excited, but there is something different. Beneath his excitement is a nervous energy. He’s never nervous about anything. School. Girls. Races. Nothing. Something about this trip has him very uneasy.

“That sounds like it could get messy if you boys aren’t sharp with your aim,” I quip.

“Ha, ha. Very funny. Anyway, we leave at 08:00 sharp.”

“Toma!” yells Marcus from down the hall. “Wait up.”

“What does he want?” I ask Toma.

“He probably wants me to tell him how to make you his girlfriend.”

“You are not funny.” A hard punch in the arm should reinforce it.

“Just kidding, Sis. Why don’t you head to bed? I will catch up.”

“Sounds good. Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.”



## CHAPTER THREE

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### TOMA

“TOMA, YOU GOT a minute?” Marcus asks.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I’m worried about Maya. She doesn’t look well. Has she been having more nightmares lately?”

“Just the same one. It is always the same one. You are right, though. It does seem like she is having it much more frequently lately. I really don’t know how to help her deal with it.”

“What is the nightmare about?” Marcus asks.

I pause for an eternal moment. It is the kind of question that has no good answer. If I tell him no, he will feel like he is not trusted. If I tell him the truth, I may break the trust of my sister. This nightmare is from our past and a very personal one at that. It happened long before most of the other children came to the orphanage.

“We’ve kept this story to ourselves for a very long time. Very few adults here even know what really happened.”

“So the nightmare is real?” Marcus asks with surprise.

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

“The story is real, yes. The nightmare is just her reliving it. To be honest, I really shouldn’t tell you the story unless she gives me permission. It is her story.”

“I need to know the story to help her. You know how much I care for her.”

I know it is a private pain for both of us, but it haunts my sister. Maybe another person who cares about her knowing would be a good thing.

“Come by our room in about an hour. I will make sure she is asleep.”

“I will see you then.”

\* \* \*

“Go to bed Sissy. You need your rest.” There is a stubbornness in my sister that is impossible to break sometimes.

“No, I can’t. I’m too excited for tomorrow.”

“Are you afraid of the nightmare?”

“I’m not afraid of anything!”

“Of course, I forgot. I can hold you until you fall asleep.”

I know it is a dirty trick, but Marcus will not leave me alone. I am so conflicted, but his stubbornness rivals Maya’s, and I know he wants to help. A part of me is relieved that someone else can help carry this burden. Maya needs someone other than me. She needs that support. In a few short years, I will get shipped off to some factory or other job the Administrators assign me, and someone needs to watch out for her.

If I had to pick anyone to take care of her, it would be Marcus.

Without saying a word, Maya lays down on my chest. I always feel a little strange being her protector. That should have been our father's job, but that was not meant to be. It doesn't take long before I hear the familiar rattling noise of her nose. She will never admit it, but snoring is a skill for her.

I notice Marcus's eyes peering into our bedroom, so I slide out from under Maya and lay her head down on her pillow. I signal to Marcus to quietly come into our room. The door squeaks like it always does. A quick finger to my mouth (and a dirty look) is enough for Marcus to get the idea.

"Do you think she's asleep?" Marcus whispers.

Just as he asks, another loud snore rumbles from her nose.

"I'll take that as a yes," he says.

"She has been asleep for a while."

Marcus pulls our desk chair over by me and sits down.

"I guess I will start at the beginning. Many years ago my sisters and I came to Novi Sad—"

"Sisterssss . . . plural?" Marcus interrupts.

"Yes, plural. Her name was Chrystal. She was about four years older than me and very quiet. Maya and I were never really sure why. I suspect she knew more about our parents than either of us remember. I was a little over two years old, and Maya was just a baby, when we were brought here. I assume that a six-year-old knew more about what happened to our parents than we did, but I will get to her story in a minute.

"Our days were pretty boring like they are now. School, food, sleep, and on and on. Then came the day we found the secret staircase."

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

“In the orphanage?”

“Yes, in the school portion.”

“Well, where is it?” Marcus asked with his usual curiosity. He loves a good adventure, which usually leads to him getting detention. He has been fortunate not to receive any marks for his curiosity.

“It’s a secret that no one can know about. You are safer not knowing. A lot of trouble has been caused by that staircase. Trust me, what we found at the end of those stairs is not worth it. You are better off not knowing.”

“You’re no fun.”

“No, I guess life has a way of removing the fun. Our lives changed when Maya and I snuck out of our rooms one night. We were eight and six. Maya was just starting her elementary education phase at the time, so she didn’t get out of our room much. She convinced me to sneak out with her.

“We ran around the halls and had a good time . . . until we got caught of course. Two weeks of detention was a lifetime for an eight-year-old. Maya was just happy to be somewhere other than in our room.

“Week after week, she begged me to go out. I usually relented and went with her. Week after week, we got caught and got more detention. Eventually, though, we got pretty good at sneaking around. We learned where all the squeaky parts of the flooring were, where we could hide in the shadows if a hall monitor was walking around, and we began to have a lot of fun. We pretended we were in the Great War as spies

sneaking behind enemy lines and saving the day. It became a lot of fun and we became masters of the night.

“One night, while we were sneaking around upstairs near the washroom, we heard someone coming so we looked around and ducked into a janitors’ closet. Once the coast was clear, we peeked our heads out to make sure we were safe. As we were slowly coming out, Maya noticed it. The discolored boards right next to the door to the closet. I knew we needed to get back to bed.

“The nightly adventures were leaving me somewhat sleep deprived, but Maya wouldn’t go back to bed. Curiosity had already gotten the best of her, so she began feeling around. That’s when she found it. There was a slight separation in the wood between the discolored part and the regular part. At this point, I knew I wasn’t getting any sleep so I began knocking on the discolored wood. To my surprise, it sounded very hollow. To both our surprise, the hall monitor had heard the knocking and caught us. This time, detention was not our punishment.”

“Is that when you got your mark?” Marcus asks.

“Yes, it was. Most children as young as we were do not break the big rules. Unfortunately, the rules don’t care about age.”

“What was it like?”

“Pain. They took us to the Administrators’ office and sat us in a small room. There was a table on an elevated platform where three Administrators were sitting, above us as usual. They read us some regulation that I can’t remember. Basically, we had violated the curfew enough times that we were

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

now disturbing the balance of peace or something like that. We both had to sit in the room together.

“They strapped us to these metal chairs which were bolted to the floor. They tied down our legs and arms with straps attached to the chair. Then another man came in—at least his voice sounded like a man. He was a Swatter in full uniform, and he had a cart with some tools on it.

“He started with me. He pushed my shirt sleeve up to expose my right shoulder. Then he picked up what looked a sharpened pencil made of metal. It had a chisel shaped tip about a half centimeter wide. He pressed it on my skin and began to cut my arm. The metal was so hot; I could smell my skin burning. I wish I could say I was strong, but I was crying like a baby. I have never felt a pain like that.

“After he was finished with me, I begged him not to hurt my sister. He didn’t listen. I watched as he did the same thing to my sister. She gave out a piercing scream and began to cry. Once he was done with both of us, he left.

“Maya and I were left alone in the room. My arm was almost numb from the pain. The heat of the chisel prevented any bleeding, but it did not prevent the pain. I am not sure how long we were left in there, but when someone finally came in, we had mostly quit crying.

“I looked up and it was Ms. Wimbley. She hugged us both and told us to never sneak out again. She explained to us that if we got too many marks, they would not allow us to live any more. I understand now what that meant, but at eight, you really don’t understand what an execution is.”

“Have you two ever gotten your second mark?” Marcus asks.

“No. Whether by luck or someone secretly watching out for us, we have not. We should have many times, but we have not.”

“Wow. Ok, so what was in the room? Did you ever find out?”

“You know us a little too well,” I say with a laugh. “We never should have found it, but we did. Over the next few weeks, I was so tired from our exploring I tried to nap in the afternoon. It was very hard for me because I couldn’t help wondering what was behind those boards. What secrets were being held right under our noses? Could our little orphanage be a secret base for the Swatters? Could it be a secret Rebel hideout?”

“The agony of not knowing what lay behind those boards began to really bug me. We started to devise a plan for getting behind those boards. At lunch, I would sneak a plastic fork here, a plastic knife there and hide them in my bedroom.”

“You weren’t afraid of what might happen?” Marcus asks, knowing the penalty for having anything resembling a weapon is punishable by death. “You didn’t fear the consequences?”

“Sure I did, but my curiosity was too strong, and kids are not known for making the smartest decisions. When we were little, adventure was all we dreamed about. Life was about having fun. I guess we have grown wiser since then. Besides, we didn’t know about the penalty for weapons. If we understood it was death, we probably would not have tried. By then, our shoulders were healed and curiosity was getting the best of us. On with the story.

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

“The knives were Maya’s idea. She thought we could use the plastic knives to pry loose some boards. Then we could use the forks to pull them out or hold open any doors we might find. For weeks, we quietly collected our tools until we knew the time was right.

“When the night finally came, we quietly snuck out of our rooms back to the place where the boards were located. We waited until much later so there wouldn’t be as many hall monitors around. Maya felt around again and found the place where the board was loose. We pushed a couple of knives in and the board came flying out at us. Disaster almost occurred when the board flew, but Maya’s quick reflexes were able to grab it before it crashed to the ground. At that moment, we realized the fault in our plan. We had pried the board loose but when we looked through the opening all we saw was black.”

“A flashlight,” Marcus says proudly, having solved the mystery.

“Yes, a flashlight. We knew it was getting late again, so we carefully put the board back the way we found it. We did not want to not arouse suspicion to what we had done. We quietly made our way back to our room and headed to bed.”

“Where did you find a flashlight? Kids aren’t allowed to have flashlights. Only the adults.”

“That’s where the incredible—albeit crazy—brilliance of my sister comes into play. She may be a pest, but sometimes she is too smart for her own good. I didn’t know, but she convinced her science teacher that she wanted to learn how mold



grows. They had been learning about how the sun feeds plants in her science class.

“As you know, she spends hours staring out the window at what was outside. She has done that since I can remember. Apparently, she had seen moss growing on a boulder and had asked Chrystal about it. Chrystal had explained that moss needed light and heat and that it could grow anywhere. She used this knowledge to trick her teacher.

“When her teacher explained the process, Maya played dumb and acted like she didn’t understand it. The teacher devised an experiment to help her understand. They went outside and found a small rock and brought it in to class. The teacher put a flashlight on a stand, got the rock wet, and pointed the light at it. She explained the heat and light would cause moss to grow.

“Maya jumped up and down in excitement—she’s quite the actress you know—and said, ‘Can I take it to my room and watch it grow?’ The teacher didn’t think there was any harm in letting a six-year-old girl take her science experiment home for a few weeks, so she agreed. The best part is Maya convinced the teacher to give her new batteries, just in case the flashlight ran out of power.

“So that night, flashlight and utensils in hand, we headed back to our secret spot. Once again we pried the board loose (preventing it from flight this time) and placed it on the floor. We fired up the flashlight and shined it through the opening in the boards. We really couldn’t see much. The space was very

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

shallow. The opening was only about a half meter wide and maybe as tall as my hand is now.

“At first, I didn’t see anything. It was a little discouraging because we had come this far. That is when I noticed it. As I shined the light at a downward angle, I saw something shiny reflecting the light back at me. A lever. I tried to reach in and grab it, but my forearm got stuck so I asked Maya to reach in.

“Reach for the lever,’ I told her, ‘and try to pull it down.’”

“It won’t pull down,’ Maya said as she reached in the space, ‘It’s stuck.’”

“Determined not to go back to bed, I looked into the crevice again. I noticed the lever was a solid piece connected to a small disc. I realized she had tried to push it down.”

“This time, grab the middle of the lever and try to pull it,’ I told Maya. Once again she reached her arms in through the opening, grabbed the lever and gave it a good tug. It moved slightly so she twisted and tugged as hard as she could.”

“It’s starting to move, but I’m not strong enough,’ Maya said. The lever was moving but it was very stiff—we guessed from lack of use. That is when I had my next idea. I took the board we had removed, slid it in the hole and placed it under the lever. Using the opening of the wall as leverage, I made a fulcrum and pulled on the board as hard as I could. *CLICK. CACHUNK.* The noise startled us, but we had definitely done something.”

“What was that noise?’ Maya asked.”

“We both realized it had come from inside the closet. We put the board back in place—as we had before—and then we

quietly opened the janitor closet. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. There were racks filled with cleaners, paint, and tools. On the other side was the sink and the mops that were used to clean the floors.

“We looked and felt around for quite a while when Maya half-whispered, ‘Over here!’ In the far corner of the closet was a few lockers where the janitors would keep their cleaning clothes. I shined the flashlight and noticed they had come out slightly from the wall. I looked for a place to try to pull them open. The lockers looked like the doors made of a metal mesh, sort of like the chain-link fences outside.

“I reached out, wrapped my fingers in the mesh of the door and pulled. The whole section of lockers came towards me, which was followed by the worst smell. It was like stale rain mixed with dust. I peered around the lockers and noticed a small door with a very old looking lock.

“It wasn’t the kind of lock we see with the zig-zag hole in it. It was a circle on top and a triangle on the bottom. It was an odd shape for a key hole that I had never seen before. We tried to open the door, but it was definitely locked. Realizing our efforts to explore further had been thwarted, we decided to put everything back where we found it in order to leave no evidence of what we had found.”

“You just gave up?” asked Marcus.

“At the time, we thought we had.”

“For weeks we tried to figure out what kind of key would open that door. I dug through library books, history books, and anything I could find that would give me a clue to open-

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

ing it. The closest I could find were pictures in history books, but they offered no help. Maya and I continued to sneak out at night, but it was not nearly as fun anymore. We both had the same problem . . . we had to know what was behind that door.

“One day, I was walking through the hall and something in Ms. Wimbley’s room caught my eye through the window. On her desk, I noticed an old pocket watch and sitting next to it was a rusty piece of metal that had the shape of a key. It was like no key I had ever seen. Instead of the jagged teeth and square handle, it had a handle that looked like a clover with a square block on the other end. The key had a circular shaft rather than the usual straight edge.

“I think I found the key,’ I told Maya. ‘It’s on Ms. Wimbley’s desk.’”

“We can’t just steal it, can we?”

“I’m not suggesting we steal it, just borrow it,’ I told her, making air quotes. ‘Ms. Wimbley won’t miss it for one night.’”

“What do you suggest?”

“We’ll sneak out tonight and come by her room to see if her door is unlocked,’ I told her. It seemed like a simple plan at the time, but when we went to her room that night, the door was locked tight. Once again, we headed back to our room discouraged.

“When we got to our room, Maya had an idea. Her idea was to jam a wadded piece of paper in the door lock, on our way to dinner, to stop the door from locking. The next day we tried it. We put the paper in the door, and when we returned that night, it worked! The paper had held the door open even

though it looked closed. We snuck in, grabbed the key off her desk, and headed for the closet. Once again we removed the board, used it as a fulcrum and opened the secret passage.

“We took the key we borrowed,” I say making quotation marks in the air, “and put it in the keyhole. To our excitement, it unlocked! The door creaked loudly as I opened it. It was obvious that it had not been opened in years.

“We placed a broom in between the lockers and the wall to make sure we didn’t get locked inside. I opened up the door enough to allow Maya and I to slip through. Just past the door, we found a long hallway. Looking around with our flashlight, the walls were made of concrete. We walked slowly down the long hallway until we came to a staircase.”

“Where do you think it goes?’ Maya asked.”

“Just then, we heard a noise in the hallway and realized we better get out quick. Whatever was up those stairs was important enough for someone to go to great lengths to hide it. We made our way down the hall as fast as our little legs would go and ran out the door. We closed the door but left it unlocked. I knew we wouldn’t get another chance to use Ms. Wimbley’s key, so it seemed like the best idea.

“As we closed the lockers, and put the broom back where it belonged, we could hear the night monitor in the next hallway. We threw the board back in place and got back to our rooms. We made it safely to our room, but there was one big problem. I still had they key in my pocket. If we didn’t get it put back, our discovery would be in jeopardy.”

“What did you do about the key?’ Marcus asks.

## THE FREEDOM DANCE

“The next morning, on my way to breakfast, I told Maya to go by Ms. Wimbley’s room and remove the paper from the door. Fortunately, it was still there which meant we hadn’t been discovered. After the usual gruel for breakfast, I made my way back to Ms. Wimbley’s room. No one was in there, so I slowly made my way to her desk. As I was getting ready to put the key back, I heard a voice behind me.”

“‘What do you think you are doing?’ Ms. Wimbley asked.”

“I had to think fast. I was busted. All our hard work would be for nothing if whatever I said next wasn’t believable. For a second I thought about it and it came to me. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it, what is it?’”

“‘It is a key from the old world.’”

“‘A key?’ I asked, doing my best to fake ignorance. ‘It doesn’t look like any key I’ve ever seen.’”

“‘A long time ago, this was how they made keys. They were not very sophisticated like our keys are today.’”

“‘Where did you get it?’”

“‘It was given to me by an old friend as a gift. He told me it would bring me luck.’”

“‘And has it?’ I was so proud of myself because I could tell she was buying my story. Ms. Wimbley had just been out-smarted by an eight-year-old.”

“‘No, it has not, but it is at least a reminder of a better time . . . anyway, please put it back where you found it. You are going to be late for your classes.’”

“‘Yes ma’am.’ And with that, success. Our secret was safe.”

“‘So what happened next?’ Marcus asks.

“‘Well, that’s where the story gets really interesting.’”