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HUNGER WINTER



A WWII NOVEL

ROB CURRIE



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Hunger Winter: A World War II Novel

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CHAPTER ONE



OOSTERBEEK, NETHERLANDS

NOVEMBER 11, 1944

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Dirk Ingelse's eyes flew open, and he raised his head off the pillow. Who could be knocking on the front door? *Gestapo*? His insides turned to ice.

The pounding resumed, the sound carrying easily up the stairs into Dirk's bedroom. It didn't sound like the rap of knuckles—it was more like the thumping of an angry fist. *Or the butt of a rifle.*

It had to be the Gestapo. They had been doing more raids lately, and they often came at night. Who else would pummel the front door of the Ingelses' farmhouse in the middle of the night and risk getting arrested?

Dirk rolled out of bed and crept to his bedroom window. Easing the curtain open just a bit, he kept his face away from the window, like Papa had taught him. He couldn't

see a vehicle. *But what if they hid their car?* Dirk's right hand shook.

He couldn't hide. They would tear the place apart to find him. And he couldn't run—they would have the place surrounded. He'd heard stories. His right hand shook harder. It had been doing that a lot ever since—

The assault on the door resumed, even louder this time. "Open up!" growled a deep voice.

Dirk turned from the window and crept down the stairs. "I'll peek outside," he said under his breath. "If it's the Gestapo, I'll say I have to grab the key to let them in." He ran his fingers through his short blond hair. "Then I'll dash through the house and burst out the back." They would catch him for sure, but maybe they would leave his little sister alone.

The banging got faster. "Open up, Dirk!" the voice demanded above the battering being inflicted on the door.

Have the Gestapo come because of Papa? Have they arrested him?

How long would they wait before they broke into the house? Dirk scurried into the kitchen and grabbed a sharp knife. Weighing about forty-eight kilograms and standing a little over one and a half meters tall, he was average weight and a bit tall for his age, but if the Germans thought they would capture him easily, they were dealing with the wrong thirteen-year-old boy. Waving the knife would keep them back so he could sprint out the rear of the house. *And lead them away from Anna.* He edged toward the window closest to the front door.

Dirk swallowed hard and squeezed the knife handle harder. He pushed the curtain aside a few centimeters, gasped, fumbled with the lock, and swung the door open.

“Mr. van Nort!”

Why would his neighbor leave his farm at this hour of the night to come here?

Mr. van Nort hurried in, looked back at the street, and closed the door behind him. His chest heaved.

Dirk stared at the barrel-chested man, who took off his hat and fingered it nervously. “How did you—?”

“I ran.”

That has to be two kilometers!

“I had to come right away to warn you.”

Dirk gulped. Mr. van Nort stared at the knife.

“Oh.” Dirk relaxed his hand, and the knife clattered to the floor. “I thought—”

“The Gestapo took Els,” Mr. van Nort said.

“No!” Dirk slammed his hand on the table. “Why?” But he knew why.

Mr. van Nort looked at him sadly. “The Nazis will do anything to find your father.”

Even torture my eighteen-year-old sister. “But Els would rather spit in their faces than tell them anything. Especially about Papa.”

Mr. van Nort shook his head. “They are animals, and they can force anyone to talk. One man held out for fifteen days before spilling secrets.” He stared at the floor. “The next day he died from his injuries.”

Dirk grabbed the back of a chair and forced himself to

swallow a sudden sour taste in his mouth. “How did they capture Els?”

“I came as soon as it happened. Els left our house, and I heard a scream a few moments later,” Mr. van Nort said.

Dirk squeezed his eyes shut, his stomach twisting.

“I ran to the window.” The neighbor grimaced. “She did her best to fight them off, but there were too many of them.”

Dirk put his head in his hands. “Why was she at your house in the middle of the night?”

“You’ve got to leave,” Mr. van Nort said.

“She helps the Resistance, doesn’t she? And that means you do too.”

Mr. van Nort held up a finger. “If Els doesn’t talk right away, they’ll come here for you and your little sister. That’s how they work.”

The room swam before Dirk’s eyes. “We’ll go to Tante Cora’s house in Doorwerth.”

“But there’s no food in the cities,” Mr. van Nort said. “Ever since the Germans—”

“I know. But that’s where Els told me to go if anything ever happened to her.”

“Take as much food as you can carry.” Mr. van Nort looked through the window at the street, then back at Dirk. “You need to leave right away. They’ll be coming for you, son. Take Anna and go. Now!”

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER MR. VAN NORT LEFT, Dirk's mind raced. *What are the Nazis doing to Els?* But he couldn't do anything for Els right now, and he had to get moving right away to save Anna. If he and Anna found Papa, then Papa would rescue Els. Dirk snatched two coats from the front closet, dropped them on a nearby chair, and flew up the stairs. In his bedroom, he threw on clothes over his pajamas for extra warmth.

How soon would the Gestapo come? In an hour? Fifteen minutes? A car with its lights on approached the house. He peered outside. *No!*

Dirk's muscles tensed, and his eyes flitted between the approaching car and the long driveway which led to the farmhouse. *Should have kept the knife with me.* His breathing became more rapid. If he ran down the stairs right now, he might dash out the back door before they surrounded the house and draw them away from Anna.

But the car passed the farmhouse.

The next one could be coming for me. With fresh urgency,

Dirk rushed to his dresser, jerked open a drawer, grabbed a gray stone shaped like an extra-large coin, and jammed it into his pocket. He rushed into Anna's room, grabbed the first clothes he saw, and shoved them into a bag next to her dresser, pushing them in so hard he ripped a seam.

Anna's doll lay on the bed next to her. But he couldn't carry Anna, food, and the doll. He reached over his six-year-old sister, untied the orange ribbon in the doll's hair, and crammed the colorful strand in his pocket.

"Anna." He shook her shoulder. "We have to go to Tante Cora's."

Her eyelids fluttered. "Huh?"

"It's time to go."

"Why?"

How could he tell his little sister that the Gestapo had hunted down Els and wanted them next? "It'll be all right. Tante Cora will take care of us." Anna's limp body resisted his effort to sit her up. "And we'll play a game on the way. We won't let anyone see or hear us. It'll be like hide-and-go-seek at Oma and Opa's."

"I love Oma and Opa," she said, still half asleep.

"Yes. And they love their grandchildren, too."

Anna's long blonde hair swung forward when Dirk sat her up on the bed to slide clothes on over her pajamas. He scooped her up and hurried down to the kitchen. While she dozed on a chair, he yanked open a cupboard. He stuffed a half dozen potatoes into his pockets, shoved a loaf of bread under his shirt, and tossed a dozen apples into a bag. *Wish I could carry more.* Dirk threw on his coat and helped Anna

with hers but only took time to fasten a few buttons on each jacket. He grabbed the bag of clothes, slung the bag of apples over his shoulder, and lifted Anna in his arms, but she was heavier than he expected. *Uh-oh*. He shifted her onto his back, and she leaned into him.

“We’re going to play the quiet game now. You can go back to sleep.”

“Uh-huh,” she murmured.

Dirk scurried away from the house, his muscles taut, looking left and right like radar scanning for enemy aircraft. The moon provided enough light for him to see. Papa would know how to keep from being spotted. *But Papa isn’t here. It’s up to me.*

At the edge of their farm, they passed a white birch tree, Mama’s favorite, but Dirk couldn’t bear to look at it. It brought back too many memories. His voice cracked as he said softly, “I’ll protect Anna, Mama. I promise.”

He glanced back and suddenly regretted his strategy. He’d chosen the most direct route to Doorwerth. But the road threaded through farm country, with few places to hide if someone approached. What if a dog barked or if one sleepless person looked out the window? Car headlights would be obvious from a distance, but what if the Gestapo rode swift and silent on bicycles? Though the Dutch rode bikes more than the Germans, if anyone was out on a bike after curfew, it would be the Nazis. Dirk’s chest tightened. And what if they raided his home and then searched the roads for him? It’d be easy for them to catch him when he was carrying Anna. He frowned.

Also, this road was parallel to the train tracks. The Germans moved troops at night by train to be less visible to Allied planes. What if just one soldier on a passing train saw two children out this late after curfew?

Three more kilometers to Tante Cora's. That would be a lot of time out in the open. A patrol would arrest him for being out at night even if they didn't know his papa was Hans Ingelse.

That wasn't all. His arms and legs were rapidly tiring from carrying Anna on his back. He wouldn't be able to carry her all the way to Tante Cora's. He needed a place for them to hide and rest overnight. But where? They'd already scurried past several farms of people he didn't know if he could trust and one who *definitely* couldn't be trusted.

Dirk bit his lower lip, and his right hand started trembling again.

"Don't go out after dark." Dirk could hear Papa's words as if he had said them yesterday, though it had been a few years earlier, when the Germans started cracking down after the Dutch went on strike. "If the Germans see you out at night, they'll bring you in for questioning, and maybe more than that." He had put both hands on Dirk's shoulders. "Go out during the day—act like you're running an errand—and no one will notice you. You're under the cover of daylight." *I miss you, Papa.*

The Germans would *not* catch them. He would outsmart the Nazis by finding a hiding place. But he saw nothing along the sides of the road that would conceal two fugitive children.

A few minutes later the road turned west and away from

the railroad tracks, now following the Nederrijn River. But that brought a new risk. If Anna woke and cried, the sound would carry over flat ground to any German barges passing in the night. Dirk took a long, slow breath and tried to calm himself a bit.

Where could they hide? The route was familiar from previous trips to visit Tante Cora, but he'd never been looking in desperation for a place to take cover. He searched his memory for a place of concealment along the road. *Wait. I think there might be*— His strides lengthened, and his pace increased until his eyes confirmed what his memory had told him.

Up ahead a fifteen-meter evergreen grew on the side of the road. Dirk slowed his pace and studied the lower branches, which hung low to the ground. He nodded. When they reached the tree, he gently set Anna down.

“Crawl under there,” he said, lifting the lowest branch. He eased her to her hands and knees. She was groggy and barely awake, but with Dirk's help, she made her way under the cover of the branches. His right hand quieted. When they lay down, their coats and body heat counteracted the cool November night air.

Lying on his back, Dirk looked up in the dark at the canopy of branches and needles. What was the Gestapo doing right now to torment Els? She was one of the strongest-willed people he knew, but how would she do in the hands of the Nazis? His tears flowed. *Focus, Dirk.* He *had* to lead Anna to safety and find Papa. Papa would figure out how to rescue Els.

So much had happened in such a short time. When Mama died two months before, Els withdrew from university to

come home and work to pay the bills for the family. But she was gone a lot, so Anna's care fell to Dirk, as if the suddenness of Papa's departure and the shock of Mama's death weren't enough. Dirk had assumed Papa would come back when Mama died, but Els had told him Papa couldn't because home would be the first place the Nazis would look for him. Dirk put his hands to his eyes, but that didn't stop the tears. And then there was the hardest thing of all—the secret he didn't dare tell anyone.

Dirk tossed and turned. "Good night, Papa, wherever you are," he whispered. Tired as he was, he lay awake for a long time waiting for slumber and for the cover of daylight.