

CHRISTINE NYKOLUK

HEART STONES

A NOVEL

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Dedication

For refugees everywhere, past and present.



Foreword

I completed the manuscript for *Heart Stones* just three months before Russia shocked the world and invaded Ukraine. The news of millions of refugees pouring across the borders reminded me that the more things change, the more they stay the same. In his book *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need To Know About Global Politics* (2015), Tim Marshall explains why Ukraine's flat steppes have always made it vulnerable to attack from the east, all the way west to the Carpathian Mountains, and south to the Black Sea. His book is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in learning more about why the nation of Ukraine has been embattled for so long.

Although the stories and scenes within *Heart Stones* were derived from real events, each character is fictional, a composite drawn from several individuals and my own imagination.



Chapter One

Lilia – March 2, 1914 – Melnytsya Podilska, Galicia, Ukraine

The church was a warm oasis on an otherwise cold and cloudy day. Myk and I arrived early for the funeral so we could get a good place to stand with the children. We knew the church would be full because Volk and Tatia were a very well-liked couple in our village. By the time we found our place, the choir was already singing hymns. Myk left us to go to the back of the Church to join the other three pallbearers.

Holding my baby, I said a prayer to the angels, asking them to take care of the small soul whose short life we were celebrating. Stepan copied my actions, saying his own three-year-old prayers.

A new embroidered cloth was placed on the altar, and a beautiful braided bread was placed upon it. A candle, symbolizing Christ, illuminated the center of the bread.

The Liturgy began with the funeral procession entering the church from the back. Every one sang the hymn loudly. The pallbearers carried the small casket to the foot of the sanctuary and one of them opened the casket; the priest released incense and holy water over the deceased child's body. Myk, a sombre look on his face, returned to my side for the rest of the Liturgy.

“We are gathered here today to celebrate the short life of Ruslana, the child of our dear friends Volk and Tatia.” The priest spread his arms wide, raising them towards the heavens.

“Death is not an ending; it's simply a time of well-deserved rest. May we all be reminded that our prayers bring the departed much joy.” For the next hour and a half, the priest continued with the ceremony, one I knew only too well.

I'd worried about attending the funeral for Volk and Tatia's child so soon after having my own baby, born only a few days earlier, but I felt the need to be with our friends in their time of great sorrow. Anyone could lose a child. You never knew if your turn would be next. My heart bled for them.

I sang the Eternal Memory hymn with my whole heart. I prayed again that our own two children would live out their lives in good health and prosperity. I've always found funerals difficult. Maybe because there were so many.

All of the congregants walked up to the casket and said their final farewell to Ruslana.

Myk stepped forward and he and the other men carried the now-closed casket out of the church. He held his head low, keeping time with the other pallbearers.

It felt good to breathe fresh air again. Soft wind blew the branches of the old-soldier willow trees as we all followed the procession to the child's final resting place. Stepan held my hand tightly the whole way.

The pallbearers approached the freshly dug grave and set it down on the earth. The priest prayed and made the sign of the cross at the head, feet, and both sides of the casket, symbolically sealing the grave until the Second Coming. The priest then cast earth and ashes upon the small casket. Using straps, the pallbearers carefully lowered Ruslana into the freshly dug hole. The child's mother and her sisters wailed.

The priest said more prayers, and after he finished, the family and friends chanted sad final-goodbye songs. I let myself weep, while Stepan watched everyone wide-eyed. He kept a close eye on his *tato*. Women and some men wailed in the background.

So young. So little. Just four years old. Thank you, Lord, that our children have been spared the death visitor this winter.

As Myk and I paid tribute to family graves after the funeral, a voice called our names.

"Lilia and Myk? Are you coming to Volk and Tatia's cottage? Everyone's going."

I heard some coughing. "Thank you for asking, but I'm tired. I'll take the children home and rest." The woman nodded and walked on.

"I'll go and give our condolences; after that, I'm going to the peasant's tavern to meet some friends," Myk said. "The one near the Jewish tavern. I'll take you home first. And don't worry, I'll be home soon." He touched the

bump of Oksana, tucked close against my body under my shawl. He tousled Stepan's hair as we walked back to our cottage. Once I got the children in the door, Myk left for the funeral lunch, and then later, to join his friends.

The men always liked to go and have a brew, and perhaps a small cake. *I can't complain*, I thought. *It's not like he's drunk all the time, like many men here.* Myk liked to spend time with his friends. Especially since he'd decided we'd be going to Canada. *I wonder if he'll tell them today . . .*

Mykyta (Myk)

Our hearts were as gloomy as the sky. The fruit trees were not yet blooming, and even the birds were silent. Would it rain again? This was the fourth child to die in our village this winter, the other three slightly older than this wee one. Seemed that we went through this every year: the deaths of children.

Could this poor child's life have been saved?

After the funeral, I took Lilia and the children to visit my family's graves on the other side of the cemetery for a few minutes.

I pushed some grass aside from a small stone. "Here's Maria's grave, Lilia."

Lilia pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. "Your sister died of pneumonia, didn't she?"

I stepped a few feet over to the next grave. "Yes. Oh . . . Here's my brother Jose's grave; he died from flu."

"How did your older brother Dano die again?"

"He died in an accident working on the estate farm when he was ten years old." That story always made me angry.

"Oh—"

"Stepan, here's Grandma's grave," I said.

"I don't remember her, Tato."

"You were very small when she passed away. Here's my father's grave over here," I whispered, caressing my own Tato's stone with my hand.

Lilia moved closer to look at the stone. "I never got to know him. He died before we were married."

"Yes." It still made me sad that my father hadn't been alive for our wedding.

As soon as I took Lilia home, I went to Tatia and Volk's home to give them our condolences and share a few memories. Of course, they were both heartbroken and very tired.

After a respectable amount of time, I departed to meet Metro and Janko at the tavern. Joining my friends was one small treat I allowed myself. They were already seated at our favourite table when I got there. We bought our beers and cakes and sat down in our chairs. Half a dozen men already dozed, heads down on the tables around the room.

"Metro! This round's on you." Janko punched Metro's shoulder hard enough that Metro knocked the table, splashing beer everywhere.

"Hey, settle down. Have some respect," I said. I took a long chug of my beer. For as long as it took to swallow, I didn't think about how many villagers we'd lost over the winter.

Rain spattered against the small window. I hoped Lilia had gotten the children comfortable after I'd left her at the cottage. Small mercy the storm had held off during the funeral.

"You're no fun now you have children." Janko broke off a piece of cake and popped it in his mouth.

Metro took advantage of Janko's full mouth and jumped in. "Did you hear what happened in the village down the road?"

I shrugged and took another sip of beer.

"Do you remember Josep?"

"The guy who lost the old goat in a bet?" Janko laughed and slapped the table. "Who could forget? Good thing he didn't bet his sister!"

"He was in the tavern when two soldiers came in, and he signed up." Metro took a long pull on his beer and wiped the foam from his top lip with the back of his hand.

"He was never too smart," Janko said. "Why the hell would he do that?"

I had to agree. "Christ. I wouldn't go back in the army. Not for all the free meals I could stuff in my face. The food was shit anyway."

"Do you think there's going to be a war?" Janko asked, the next piece of cake halfway to his mouth.

Metro shrugged. "Makes you think, doesn't it? Officers in village taverns, looking for young men. I heard they're making lists."

Janko straightened his cap. "The *kobzars* say war is coming."

I reached over and pulled Metro's cap over his eyes. "Those crazy old men? You can't believe them."

"Well, they should know. They're always going from village to village, picking up news along the way."

My empty mug slammed on the table harder than intended. "What have I been saying? We should all get the hell out of here and head for Canada."

My two so-called friends had nothing to say to that. *Cowards*. "Hey, Fedoro! More beer for me and the boys."

Fedoro laughed from behind the bar. "Myk, what do you think I'm doing right now?" He already had three more on a tray.

"To Demeter!" I said, grabbing a fresh mug from the tray and raising it high.

"Poor bugger, he couldn't take it any longer," Metro said. He raised his glass, which was nearly knocked out of his hand when Janko thrust his mug towards ours.

"To hell with the army!"

"I'll drink to that," I said. We knocked our mugs together and drank. I closed my eyes, but there was no way to shut out the memory of Demeter's boots suspended just above the rough planks of our barracks floor. "He didn't deserve to be treated like shit for two years."

"I'll drink to that," Janko said.

The anger welled up in my chest. "The whole goddam Austrian army can go to hell!"

Metro belched. "Easy, easy, Myk. Don't get mad about it again."

The next beer slipped down quicker than the first. "What really bothers me is that Lilia and I don't have enough land to feed ourselves. And what if the harvest is poor? And what if we have more children on top of the two we already have?" I pushed my glass away.

"Yes, it's cruel not to be able to feed the children," Janko said.

"What about the villagers that emigrate all together?" Metro said. "Imagine doing that?"

Janko shifted in his chair. "Nah . . . that would never happen in Melnytsya."

"Well, if you emigrate with your whole village, at least you'll know someone in Canada," Metro said, as he swigged back his brew.

“There’s just too many people here,” I sighed. “My dream is to have my own farm. With wood and water, and a place to grow some wheat and a big garden. That’s my dream,” I said, wagging my finger at my friends.

“You have more land than I do, and you think you need more?” asked Metro.

“It’s not only that. To live as free people with an opportunity to educate my children. That’s my dream.”

“Ukrainians being eligible for 160 acres of farmland in Canada?” Metro said disbelievingly. “It seems like a miracle.” The effects of the beer were starting to wear on us all.

“I read and write a lot of letters for the villagers,” I said. “I tell you, it’s true.”

“My wife says I’m too afraid to take risks,” said Metro, swaying a bit from side to side. “I don’t want to ever leave here.” His eyes enlarged and then shrunk small.

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. “We’ll always be slaves to the Poles and Jews. You know that, don’t you?”

“So, Myk,” Janko said. “Why did Antin come back then? If life’s so good over there?”

“He said he came back to sell his land. After, he’ll take the whole family to Canada. He told me the country is beautiful, and there’s lots of good land to grow wheat.”

Metro let out another loud belch. “What’s he doing, working for the railway? *That’s* how to save up for a farm!” He made a fist and swung it in the air.

“Do you remember in 1912,” I said, “when the Austrian army forbade us to leave the country? That was because they didn’t want to lose all of us young guys.”

“The kobzars said it was because we’re too close to the Russian border. The Austrians need us to fight them if war breaks out,” Janko said. “The estate owners are pushing the government to keep us here too, so we can defend their estates for them.”

By the end of the afternoon, the tavern owner was pushing the three of us out the door; I’d had enough to drink.

When I wobbled closer to home, I heard Lilia singing in the garden. *Oh, so lovely.* She brought joy to everyone who heard her. I loved listening to her singing in the fields. She would sing anywhere and anytime. I snuck up behind her and startled her.

“Hey!” She laughed.

“It’s just me. Are you practising the two-hundredth wedding song?”

“Yeah, the parents of wedding couples expect me to sing *all* the songs.”

I went into the cottage and played with the children until Lilia finished her work in the garden. Stepan was with Oksana in the bedroom and pretending to be asleep on our bed. Our baby was fast asleep in her cradle.

“Stepan, where are your animals? Let’s play with them until Mama comes in. Let’s go into the kitchen so that we don’t wake the baby up.”

“Yes, Tato, the horse is over here—”

“Bring the other ones too.” I gathered a few animals up in my hands while Stepan searched around for more.

After a few minutes, Lilia came in from the garden. I heard her banging pots in the kitchen.

“Supper’s ready.”

I carried Stepan into the kitchen, and we sat down at the table. Lilia nursed Oksana while we ate in silence. I noticed all that had taken place in our two-room cottage; Lilia had organized everything while I was at the tavern. After we were done eating, I took all the dishes to the sideboard and put some water on the stove for dish washing.

It was still quiet.

“So, what did you and your friends talk about that made you so late?” Lilia asked me as she dried the dishes and put them up on the shelf above the sideboard.

“Oh, the usual things. Whether to go to Canada or not.” It was a mistake bringing that up again. Dead silence.

I busied myself by going out to the woodpile and bringing in an armload of wood for tomorrow’s fire. Then I went to the barn to make sure the cow and chickens had enough feed and bedding. When I couldn’t find anything else that needed my attention, I went back into the cottage. Lilia already had the children asleep.

“Lilia, don’t you think the funeral today was sad? All the sickness we’ve endured here?”

“Shhh, don’t wake the children.”

“If they were in Canada, maybe Volk and Tatia could have sent for a doctor.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, I really think so. Everyone who comes back says that life in Canada is better.”

“But I don’t want to leave my family and my home.”

“We can actually own our own farm in Canada.”

“But it is so far—”

“But our children will have a chance to go to school. We can earn enough there to send them.”

“I’m pure Ukrainian. I would have to learn how to speak another language. If we go to Canada, what language will our children end up speaking?”

Our fight ended with us both climbing into bed without even a kiss good-night, trying not to wake the children. I was determined that, as soon as I could make it happen, I would make a home for us in Canada, and then send for Lilia and the children to join me. It would be difficult parting from them, and I knew Lilia was unhappy with the decision, afraid of what could happen, but I hoped she would come around. Fights like this were not how I wanted her to remember our time together once we inevitably parted.

Lilia – April 4, 1914 – Melnytsya Podilska

I fondled the blankets and cooking items that Panko and Ylena had given us before leaving for Canada a month ago. They hadn’t been able to take everything, only what they could wear and a few precious small possessions.

I picked up my mending basket and got to work, pushing the needle in and out, stitching another patch onto Myk’s best shirt. I mended his shirt, his pants, his brown wool jacket, and even his sweater. Finally, I’d mended everything for my husband’s trip. I’d gotten over the idea that I might have any say in whether we went to Canada or not. I didn’t want him to leave with bad feelings between us.

Today, Myk and I were spending the afternoon discussing what essentials he'd need to take with him. Stepan was playing on the floor with a kitten he'd brought into the cottage from the barn. The cottage was warm, and I'd just taken a loaf of fresh bread out of the oven.

"I wish you had better boots," I told Myk. "Those are quite worn."

"They'll do for now. We can't afford—" He stopped suddenly. "What time is it?"

Why is he asking me? He has the watch.

Without waiting for an answer, he checked for himself. I sighed. He was determined to leave at midnight and still had much to do. *Only fools and black cats leave the house at midnight.*

"I don't like the idea of you leaving on such a big trip during the full moon."

He gave me a look I knew all too well. "Don't be so superstitious."

"It's such a big trip. I want everything to go right. I don't want us to have any bad luck. What loving wife wouldn't want the same?"

"Things will be better for us in Canada; you'll see."

I looked at my husband for a long moment and sighed again.

Later in the evening, when Myk was in the barn, I retrieved two small heart-shaped stones to put into his satchel, knowing he would smile when he found them. I caressed them, squeezing them between my palms as though I could press my warmth into them forever. Stepan and I'd found these amulets along the Dniester River earlier in spring.

On that day, Stepan and I'd been walking a path beside the river, hand in hand. It seemed like yesterday. For a little boy, Stepan saw things clearly. I explained to him how amulets were to be worn around the neck for good luck, or carried around in your pocket.

"Where are amulets found, Mama?"

"Anywhere, and they can be anything that looks interesting to you, an unusually shaped twig, a stone, a feather. Whatever you like."

So, he'd started looking for interesting stones along the river.

In no time, we'd both found heart-shaped amulets! I think it was a bit of luck. When we'd arrived back at the cottage, we'd both put our amulets on the kitchen window ledge, and it wasn't until this afternoon that he'd had an

idea: “Mama, why don’t we give those two amulets to Tato for when he goes on the trip?”

“That’s a great idea, Stepan.” I marvelled at his thoughtfulness. Stepan was determined to give his father a parting gift. Then he crept into his small bed for a nap and drifted off to sleep with a small smile on his lips.

As I nursed Oksana in the rocking chair before supper, I played with the wedding ring on my finger. Myk’s Mama had given us these matching heirloom rings when we’d married; we could never have bought them ourselves. I reminded myself that every woman who saw his wedding ring would know he was already taken.

I thought about what Baba Simchuk had said at the village market: “Men who go overseas often forget they are married to someone at home.” I tried hard not to listen to the things she said.

I made a special meal with everything Myk liked, including cabbage rolls and a freshly butchered chicken.

Myk inhaled deeply. “Oh, I will miss these smells so much, Lilia.”

“I also made your favourite apple cake.” I wondered if I should’ve used the dried apples. *We had so few left. Should I have saved them for the children?*

“This is such a nice meal. You even took out your best tablecloth.”

“Well, it *is* a special occasion, our last supper together until we see each other again.” *In Canada.* I couldn’t imagine when we might have our next meal together. I fumbled with my knife and fork as I felt myself choking up with feelings of anxiety and fear.

After supper, we played with the children until it was time for Myk to leave. Together, we put the children to bed, Oksana in her cradle and Stepan in his small bed beside ours.

I went back into the kitchen to get a glass of water. Stepan and Myk were saying goodbye. “When will I see you again, Tato?”

“In a while, Stepan. Promise me you’ll take good care of Mama and your baby sister, eh?”

“I . . . I will, Tato.”

“That’s my boy!”

When Myk came out of the bedroom with his meagre satchel, his face looked sad. My tears started to come.

“How long until you send for me?”

“As soon as I find a job and save some money. I spoke with Frosina last week; she’ll read my letters to you, and she’ll write letters for you to send.”

“Please write!”

“I will, my love.”

The warmth of the cottage was too much. “Come outside. Let’s have a sit together before you go.” I grabbed Myk’s hand and pulled him outside. We sat close, side by side, on the bench near the rhubarb patch. After a few minutes, he took a heart-shaped gold locket out of his pocket that I’d never seen before.

“But how—”

He shook his head and gently pressed his fingertip against my lips. I pulled up my long hair so he could place it around my neck. Holding each other on the bench, we sat together for a time.

“I have to go now.”

I saw the tear on Myk’s cheek. I couldn’t speak. And I couldn’t move as I watched him go.

Mykyta – April 5, 1914

I walked forty kilometres to the nearest train station in Chernivtsi under the protection of darkness. It took me all night to get there, and by the time I arrived, I could barely keep my eyes open and was limping a bit. Was a blister starting on my right foot? I found a bench in an unlit corner and laid down with my satchel clutched to my chest. I wrapped my coat around it and tried to sleep for a few hours.

I woke up after drifting in and out of sleep and searched in my satchel for a piece of bread and cheese. It tasted good, but it was hardly enough. I ran my hands over my face and realized that it might be a good idea to try to shave. I found a few other men shaving in the restroom too. After cleaning myself up, I felt more presentable.

My train didn't depart for Lviv until noon, and I had to ask someone to help me buy the right ticket.

"Excuse me, could I please buy a ticket to Lviv?"

The man in the ticket booth stared at me. He wrote the amount on a slip of paper and passed it under the wicket.

I took the money out of my pocket and passed it back to him. The man told me when my train would arrive and pointed towards the exact spot where the train would pick up passengers. I nodded my thanks and moved towards the platform.

A noisy crowd waited to board the train. An older woman with two children pushed me aside so they would get on the train first. When I got on board behind them, I found a seat by myself on one of the hard benches. Before I knew it, a baba and three children plopped themselves down beside me. Then a younger man squeezed in. He was dressed in wool pants, a jacket, and a white shirt.

The train steward ambled towards us, swaying from side to side. "Hey there! Where are you young men going? We have strict orders to keep you fellows in your district. You aren't thinking of leaving the country, are you? The Austrian army will have a thing or two to say about that. Are you on leave?"

The young man beside me gave him an explanation that seemed to satisfy him, but I wasn't paying attention, too busy trying to come up with an adequate response of my own. When the steward turned to me, I told him the truth in a voice that I hoped was steadier than I felt.

"I've already done my army service, thank you."

"I think the army wants you back for more time."

"No, thank you." When the man frowned, I reached into my pocket and leaned in. "Here are a few *kopiyka*, brother. Buy yourself something nice, eh?" I looked him straight in the eye and smiled.

The steward held my gaze, not even glancing at the coins I was holding out to him. *Christ. Am I going to be arrested?*

The steam engine whistle blew, and the smell of coal was everywhere. Perspiration dripped down my forehead. At long last, the steward extended his hand for the money, then tipped his cap at me and said, "Enjoy your

trip!” He turned his attention to the passengers on the other side of the aisle. The kopiukas disappeared into his trouser pocket. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good day, mister,” said the man sitting next to me as he reached to shake my hand. “Kyrylo Pawluck.” His handshake was firm.

“Good day. My name’s Myk.”

“Where are you going?”

Kyrylo seemed like a nice guy. I leaned forward. “Lviv and then Rotterdam.”

Kyrylo lowered his voice. “Ah, so . . . you’re leaving your village?”

Could I trust Kyrylo with the truth? “Yes. I’m going to Canada.” Hearing these words come out of my mouth surprised me.

“Lucky you. So many people have already left my village. But I don’t have enough money to leave.” Our shoulders bumped each other as the train jostled from side to side as it made its way down the tracks, screeching sounds barking from the rails.

“Keep saving,” I said. “There’s lots of work there. Hopefully, it won’t take long before I can send for my family.” The sun blasted in through the grimy window. Lilia would be in the fields already. Maybe she would be stopping for bread and tea at the side of the field by now. “My wife and children are still in the village; I hope to work for the railways when I get to Winnipeg.”

“Was it hard for you to leave them behind?” Kyrylo asked, shifting in his seat, raising his eyebrows at me.

“Of course. Do you have children?”

“No, I’m still single. My mother is too bossy. I don’t think I’ll get married until after she has passed.” Kyrylo let out a short laugh. “How about you? How many children do you have?”

“Lilia and I have two children. My youngest was born just over a month ago, a daughter. My older son is three years old. Of course, it was hard to say goodbye to them.”

“What does your wife think of you leaving her behind?”

I sighed. “Lilia was not happy to see me go. When I first made up my mind to emigrate, she made me promise not to leave until after our baby was born; after that, she still tried to convince me to stay. She finally came to accept it.”

“Hmm.”

My throat tightened, remembering her tears, and I coughed into my sleeve. “So, do you think there’ll be a war?”

Kyrylo shrugged. “I try not to think about it. Here, take this.” He took out a piece of bread from his jacket pocket and held it towards me. I nodded thanks and savoured it slowly.

“Myk, I heard you say that you’ve done your army service already?”

“Sure. Of course. But they say I’d have to go back in again if it comes to war.”

The train stopped at all of the small villages on the way to Lviv. It seemed that it was always either speeding up or slowing down. All of the train stations were crammed with people—people getting on and people getting off. Finally, by supper time, the train slowed to a crawl, and we arrived in Lviv. Before we knew it, everyone was trying to get off the train at the same time.

I held my hand out to my new friend. “Goodbye, Kyrylo, it was nice to visit with you.”

“You too; maybe I’ll see you in Canada someday.”

I smiled, and we both waved goodbye.

The Lviv train station was unlike any I’d seen on the way here. It had three big sections: a big dome in the centre with smaller cupolas on each side. In the station, both shod and barefooted peasants searched for their trains, bundles in their arms and on their backs. The Ukrainian women were easily identified by their bright red, green, and blue babushkas and their embroidered blouses. Most of them wore an apron or sash over dark, ankle-length skirts. Their men wore traditional sheepskin coats and hats.

Uniformed men milled around both inside and outside the station. I began to wonder if one of them was following me. *Is he watching me?* My heartbeat quickened, and I lost myself in the crowd for as long as possible. When I was sure he’d lost interest, I marched up to the ticket window and bought my train ticket.

“Which platform will the train to Rotterdam be leaving from?” I asked the ticket seller.

“Number seven, sir.” The man waved me on so he could look after his next customer.

“Thank you, sir.”

I located platform number seven and waited for the train to arrive. I had to stand until some peasants vacated a bench. *Maybe I should hide behind the families instead of sitting down?* The platform was full of all kinds of people; I spent time trying to identify the different nationalities by looking for differences in their clothing. I heard Polish, German, Ukrainian, Hebrew, and even some Russian spoken. People of all ages walked up and down the platform, some laden down with heavy baggage, and others with just small meagre belongings like mine.

I pulled my last piece of apple cake out of my bag and realized that this would be the last bite of Lilia's cooking I would eat for a long time. Something fell out of my bag and onto the platform. I leaned over and found two heart-shaped stones near my feet. Had Lilia hidden these for me to find later? I smiled. This is just the type of thing she would do. I put both stones in my trouser pocket, vowing to keep them forever.

I felt a pang of sadness as I went in search of a drink from a platform vendor. There were so many interesting foods on offer: sausages, breads, fruit, and some vegetables that I couldn't recognize. In the end, I decided to save my precious money.

Time dragged on. The train crept down the tracks towards my platform. The big steel monster screeched to a stop, steam erupting with a hiss.

A conductor stepped out of the first car and leaned out over the platform, his right hand holding onto the handrail, and yelled, "Train to Rotterdam!"

Passengers milled towards the train conductor, and then one by one, we boarded the train. I sat down next to an older man and sighed after all of the mayhem. I pushed my satchel underneath my seat. I wondered if my new neighbour would be talkative or not? I looked forward to the idea of visiting with another passenger since I'd have lots of time on my hands for the next three or four days. What might I learn from this man?

I extended my hand in greeting. "Hello, sir, my name is Mykyta."

"Hello, nice to meet you. My name is Olek. Where are you travelling to?"

"I'm going all the way to Rotterdam. You?"

Olek shook his head. "I'm only going as far as Berlin. It's about halfway to Rotterdam."

"I'm assuming you're from here? Do you know if this is a new train station? I've never seen a building quite like this."

“It was built about ten years ago; they call it the ‘new artistic style.’” Olek raised an eyebrow and grinned.

“The main entrance is beautiful.”

“You like it? It took five years to build. I think it looks like a child designed it.”

It was hard to tell if he was offended or amused. “These houses,” I said, gesturing to a row of homes. “They are so large and grand.”

“Where are you from?”

“A village called Melnytsya, just north of Chernivtsi.”

“I bet your whole house is smaller than where the Poles keep their horses and carriages.”

I laughed, nodding at his joke.

“Over the bridge there?” he said. “That’s the Jewish neighbourhood.” Soon we saw men wearing long black coats and black hats walking along the street. “About half of the population of Lviv is Polish. The other half is equally Ukrainian and Jewish.”

“Hmm.”

The poorer parts of town and the industrial areas came into view through my window. Blacksmiths, coal bunkers, lumberyards, quarries, and such. Amidst these small businesses were small houses and thatched one-room cottages; most were whitewashed with small gardens surrounding them and laundry fluttering on clotheslines. I recognized a Ukrainian embroidered tablecloth on one of the clotheslines and fingered the two heart-shaped amulets in my pocket. I thought of Lilia and my children at home. *Are they missing me right now?* A shudder of loneliness passed through my heart.

Someone on the train said something in Polish, and Olek immediately turned around and answered the man. When he turned back, I told him I was impressed.

“Your Polish is very good.”

“Yes, my father was a professor at the university here in Lviv,” he said. “I was educated in Polish, but we always spoke Ukrainian at home. How about you?”

“My mother taught me. Even though my village had mostly Ukrainians, we lived with many Jews and Poles. Like most other villages, we didn’t have a Ukrainian school. All the teachers were Polish. You know how the politics works. I was lucky Mama taught me in both languages.”

“Makes life easier, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.” I nodded and smiled. “Would you mind if I borrowed your newspaper?”

“Sure, of course.” Olek reached under his elbow and handed me his paper.

As I unfolded the Polish newspaper, I couldn’t help but reflect on Olek’s statement and my own luck. Most children would not have the opportunity to learn that I’d had with a mother who could teach me. Luckily, Mama’s Jewish ancestors valued education. Still, Mama made me swear never to tell anyone about our Jewish roots. She said history proved that Jewish people would always be persecuted. I’d never spoken of my family secret to anyone, even Lilia.

I read Olek’s paper for a few hours. The Cunard Line shipping company was advertising passenger travel to Canada and the United States. There were also articles about the nightlife in Lviv. There was an article about the 1912-13 Balkan Wars and the growing fear of a Russian invasion into Galicia. This article disturbed me. There were also articles about different political parties, some of them radical.

I looked up from the paper towards Olek. “Do you think we’ll have a war, Olek?”

Olek looked out the train window and thought for a few moments. “Well, unfortunately, Russian invasion has been a concern for the last thousand years.” He scratched his temple thoughtfully. “It’s always a possibility, I guess.”

“What about the Balkan Wars?”

“The Balkan Wars made things more precarious, for sure.”

After a few minutes of silence, he looked at me. “So, why are you going to Canada?”

I blew my nose in my hankie. “The Ukrainians I know who’ve emigrated to Canada have done well; I read and write letters for them. I’ve learned that most of what the Canadian agents tell us at the village inns is true.”

“Is that the reason for this trip? You’re going to Canada for good?”

“Yes. I would like to get a farm there.”

Olek put both hands on his knees and squeezed them. “If I was your age, I would do the same thing. I’m not sure what Galicia is coming to . . .”

The train swayed and belched its way through the countryside towards Poland. At one point, we stopped at a small village to fill up with water and coal. The smell of coal wafted through the windows as the train was fired up again.

The Polish countryside moved past my window until darkness fell. It had been a long day, spent watching out the window and chatting with Olek, and I was tired. I stared out the window into blackness, wondering what it was about meeting people on trains that made you feel like you could tell them your whole life's story.

Lilia – April 7, 1914 – Melnytsya Podilska

I got out of my bed earlier than usual, picking Oksana up from her crib when she started making baby noises. I nursed her in the rocking chair. I loved the rocking motion as much as babies do. I loved the feel of Oksana's small body in my arms, swaddled in her blanket. Her skin was so smooth and sweet smelling. My second baby was such a cheerful little creature. Like those babas all say, every baby is different. She was such an easy baby, without the colic that Stepan endured as an infant. I'd thought that all of that crying would drive me mad! Nothing I did could make him stop, except the poppy tincture. But I didn't like to use too much of that. Still, in time, he'd grown into such a fine boy. *My son is having a deep sleep this morning. He must be growing again. I must—*

The realization hit me like a brick again: *My husband is gone*. I missed having him here to help me. He'd only been gone a couple of days, but there was so much to do with all of the farm work, plus having a new baby.

I heard the door open. "Hello, Lilia? Are you in the bedroom?"

It was Sofiy. My sister never knocked. Her feet crossed the kitchen floor, and then I heard her put something onto the kitchen sideboard by the table.

"Yes, I'm here in the bedroom with Oksana. What did you bring me?"

"I brought you some freshly baked bread. What? No tea made yet?"

"Ssshhh! Stepan's still asleep. Don't wake him." I pressed my finger to my lips for emphasis.

"Oops. I'm just so excited to see wee Oksana again!" Sofiy came over and stroked Oksana's cheek with her little finger. Her eyes were full of wonder. I saw my opportunity.

"Can you look after the children this morning while I weed the garden?" I gave her my sweetest smile. My children adored her.

“Of course.”

“I also need to feed—”

“Don’t worry so much. I’m sure the cow and chickens will wait for you.”

I sighed. “With Myk gone, I never seem to have enough time.”

“I bet you miss Myk’s mother too, eh? She looked after Stepan, didn’t she?”

I nodded.

“I’ll tell Nicholas and Petro to come over and help you with the estate seeding; don’t worry.”

“I don’t know,” I said. Our two brothers might be grown, or mostly so, but they were always on the run. “They always seem too busy—”

“Those lazy boys aren’t even married yet. They *will* help you. Now, enough!”

I shifted Oksana around to make myself more comfortable. Sofiy, never being one to sit still, left the bedroom and started to tidy up the kitchen. She put everything back in its place, putting away the pots and pans and the dishes, and placed the four chairs neatly back under the table. Then she grabbed the broom and started to sweep the hallway and both rooms.

“Well, with no man around the house, your *domovyk* will need to take better care of you.”

I giggled. Sofiy knew I had a close relationship with my house demon. “Hey! Mine has always taken very good care of me. Don’t make her mad, or you’ll wreck everything.”

Sofiy tapped my foot with her broom, and I raised my feet up on the chair’s rockers. She swept underneath it and right around me.

“Who, me?” Sofiy laughed. “Hey, I see you’ve used up all of the stove wood already.” She waved her hand around in feigned disgust.

“Because I knew *you* were coming over, Sofiy. I can always depend on you to help me out.” I gave her a mischievous look.

“I’ll bring an armful of wood in, and then I’ll go out to the barn to find some fresh cow manure and water. I’ll polish these floors of yours while you rest in that chair all day.”

I ignored Sofiy’s wisecracks about my house-cleaning abilities. Before I knew it, she’d returned to the kitchen with everything she needed. I smiled as Oksana’s little nose crinkled for a moment at the smell, though she didn’t open her eyes. I remembered being a child and learning about how cleaning the floors with a mixture of cow dung, water, and mud would keep away

bugs and promote good health. The smell always dissipated once everything was all mixed together.

“So,” Sofiy said, interrupting my thoughts, “do you think Myk’s plan going to Canada will work?” She stopped working and raised both eyebrows at me.

“I think so. I told him to get back here if things don’t look so good. If those agents have been telling him stories.”

“Oh?” Sofiy said as she added some water to the cow manure solution in the wash pail. “You think—”

“Some days, I don’t know *what* to think,” I said, interrupting her. “I’d rather be poor here in my own cottage than poor in some strange place. Better to be with family and friends.”

“Do you ever think,” she got down on her knees and started scrubbing the floor, “that Myk might not send for you?”

“Yes. Sometimes I think about it.”

“Aren’t you worried about what he might get up to while he’s away? You know what men are like.” She moved closer and scrubbed the floor around me.

“But most men aren’t Myk, Sofiy. Most women are just too suspicious anyway.”

“Still, to have two little kids to feed and then get abandoned by your husband—”

“At least I *have* a husband. Not like you.”

Sofiy scrubbed the floor faster and faster. “Hey! Think about it. Who would marry you if your husband left you? You’d need to cover your braid for the rest of your life.” My floor started to gleam again.

“One thing’s for sure. My life would be difficult without him. I pray that all his plans work out.” The baby started to whine, sensing the unrest percolating between me and my sister.

“You’ll always have your family here, Lilia. And even if Myk doesn’t send for you, you’ll still have his wonderful little cottage.” She gestured around my cozy home.

“Yes—”

“*And* you gained these two *morgs* of land when you married him. Even if he never comes back, you’ve already done quite well for yourself, Lilia.”

“I know I have. Myk even knows how to read and write.”

“Yes, that’s a real comeuppance for sure.” We both laughed at this. Not being able to read or write was something that had bothered both Sofiy and me ever since we were little girls.

Sofiy took the pail of dirty water out of the cottage and threw it on the lower leaves of the hollyhocks. When she came back inside, she ran her fingertip across the tops of my four windows and made a face at me when she saw how much grime was on them. Then she went to the hallway, found a rag, and started to wipe everything down. Despite her prodding, I was glad she’d come over. *What a great sister I have!*

Stepan and I were getting ready for bed when he reminded me that we needed to play with the animals his tato had given him.

“Mama, can you get the animals down?” Stepan pointed towards the windowsill.

I took the carvings down one by one and handed them to my son. “Here’s the chicken. Here’s the sheep. And here is the donkey!”

“Where’s the new ones, Mama? The ones Tato made for me?”

“Oh, that’s right. Here they are: the bear, the cow, and the horse.” Stepan took them into his small hand, one by one, and then set each animal on my bed. “Wasn’t that sweet of Tato to carve these for you before he left?”

Stepan nodded. “Yeah.”

“Which one is your favourite?”

“I don’t know, the bear?”

“I’ll sing you a song about it,” I said, then sang an old folk song about a bear who breaks into a cottage and steals the honey jar.

“When will Tato be coming back home, Mama?”

“As soon as he possibly can.” I wasn’t yet ready to tell my son that we’d be moving to Canada, and that his tato wouldn’t ever be coming back to our village.

After he was finished playing, Stepan and I knelt down beside his small bed and said our prayers together. The sun sank into the horizon, the last rays shining through the windows. The scents of evening entered my nose as Stepan crawled into his bed and closed his eyes.

After he’d fallen asleep, I sat in the rocking chair with Oksana, recalling my day and all of the newness in my life. I found myself missing my mother,

and asking myself, *Was raising the four of us this difficult?* I wondered what she would say about all of this?

Mykyta – April 8, 1914 – Train to Rotterdam

Olek prepared to get off the train in Berlin. “Good luck to you, Myk.” He put on his wool fedora and tucked his newspaper under his arm.

“To you, too.” I felt a pang of sadness; he’d been a good traveling companion.

Olek and I shook hands and then he reached for his bag and stepped off the train.

The past two days had given me lots of time to think about what I’d left behind, and what might lie ahead. I felt grubby, I hadn’t shaved in a few days, and I’d slept in my clothes. More passengers boarded the train, and in no time, I was squeezed between two men.

Mid-morning, my mind wandered back to a conversation I’d had the previous fall with Jurko, my childhood friend. We’d been at the Jewish tavern, just having a beer and sharing a loaf of bread on a nice sleepy afternoon with not much going on. It was always a good place to go and talk, and where else did I get the chance to walk on squeaky hardwood floors and look through windows with real glass?

Jurko’s mind never wandered too far from food. “Hey, Myk! Did you see that CPR agent at the inn? There was lots of free food.”

“Of course, I know about the food. I’ve been going to those promotions for a couple of years. Didn’t you know?” I ripped off another piece of bread, putting it into my mouth. “I like the food they give away. I always ask the agents a lot of questions, and then I get to eat more food.”

Jurko slapped me on the shoulder. “It bothers me to talk through the Ukrainian interpreter, though. I wish I could talk to that CPR man myself.”

“Why’s that?” Jurko always noticed things I didn’t.

“I’m wondering if the interpreter is telling us the truth or not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, maybe he gets paid more money if more Ukrainians go to Canada. You never know.”

“*Ja.*” I couldn’t argue the possibility. “I don’t mind, though. It’s all good. Especially after the Austrian government forbade us to leave our villages two years ago. Don’t you worry, the CPR is building new rail lines and recruiting more men to work for them. Even older men. They need us.”

“Interesting problems. The Austrian army wants to keep us locked in *their* Austria, and the CPR wants to get us out of here.” Jurko tipped back his beer.

“Don’t you find it rather odd that the Austrian government lets them have offices here?” I asked, my eyebrows raised. “And they have for years now. Do you think the CPR is paying the government for the privilege of recruiting young men like us?”

That conversation with Jurko seemed like a long time ago, but I couldn’t help but think that there was a lot going on under our noses that we didn’t know anything about.

I’d been relieved to learn that, once our ship got to Canada, the CPR would have a man come with us on the train all the way from Port Halifax to Winnipeg. I’d only left my village a few times in my life, so this was all very new to me. My understanding was that Winnipeg was in the centre of Canada, where the big CPR operation head office was. They’d assured me there were already many Ukrainians living in Winnipeg. Knock on wood.

Other Ukrainians on the train mentioned that they were headed for Rotterdam and then Canada, too. *The Galician train police must be making a lot of money under the table.* Most of the men were planning to begin their lives anew in Canada, but some were only planning to work on Canadian farms until the harvest was over. Then they planned to explore the country before returning home. It all seemed quite extravagant to me. There were even some entire families on the train. I stopped to talk to a peasant family with three children.

“Hello, where are you off to?” Their small boy smiled back at me. He reminded me of my son.

“We’re going to the United States. We’re starting over.” The man’s wife was shy and dropped her gaze to the floor as she clutched her baby.

“Are you hoping to farm?”

“Yes. I’ll hire out to work on a farm, and then when we save enough money, I’ll buy my own farm. We’re sick of working for rich landowners.” The man let out a cynical laugh. “Do you have family back home?”

I nodded. “Yes, I’ll send for my wife and children after I start working for the railroad in Canada; my wife wanted me to get settled there first.”

“Ah.”

I wished I could have convinced Lilia that we should all emigrate together. It would have been nice to have my family with me. But Lilia had said our baby was too young for such a dangerous journey. I liked that Lilia was so concerned about our family. *She’s a good wife and mother. It’s too bad Mama couldn’t see all of her good qualities, too focused on wanting me to marry someone with at least a few years of schooling.* I remembered how upset she’d been when she’d realized I was marrying someone who’d never been to school.

“But, Mama, what woman has any education in our village?”

“Myk, there are too many poor Ukrainians here. They don’t even have enough money to send their children to school with boots in the winter.”

“Mama—”

“Why can’t you find a nice Polish or Jewish girl?”

“Because I want to marry Lilia.”

“Yes, well, intermarriage is frowned upon. But my family did it and so can you. You could at least marry someone your equal—”

“Mama—”

“All of the effort I made to raise you well . . .”

I sighed, looking out the window as the train continued on its way. All those years ago, I’d vowed to make my mama proud of me. I wondered if I’d ever feel I’d done enough.

In 1914, a young Ukrainian family faces an uncertain future. With growing political unrest in the region, they are forced to make a difficult decision between remaining in their beloved homeland or reaching for a better life across the cold Atlantic. In the end, Myk makes the hardest choice of his life and leaves his wife and two young children, with hopes of quickly saving enough money to send for them.

Things don't go as planned: WWI breaks out shortly after his departure, leaving his family at the mercy of enemy forces, whose violence and cruelty drive his wife, Lilia, and their children out of their home village. Meanwhile, in Canada, Myk finds himself at the mercy of the authorities, who no longer look upon him as a welcomed immigrant worker but as a potential threat to national security. He is left without a means of contacting his loved ones, as he struggles to survive countless obstacles to achieving his family's dream of reuniting one day.

A story of love, enduring patience, and faith, *Heart Stones – A Ukrainian Immigration Story of Love and Hope* is based on the real experiences of the author's grandparents and paints a poignant and compelling picture that touches on the many historical events of the time with which many people today are sadly and blissfully unaware. This incredibly important story will change that . . . and its readers.

In *Heart Stones*, Christine Nykoluk weaves an intricate thread binding the two worlds of her grandparents during World War 1, Galicia, Ukraine and the New West of Canada. Her extensive research into her family's history and intricate details shine through in this timeless story of separation, suffering and survival. *Heart Stones* is a novel of endurance, reunification and hope told through two voices and will engage readers of historical fiction.

- Pam Clark, Author of *Kalyna* (2016 Stonehouse Publishing)

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