

“Powerful, beautifully written, and unforgettable.”

—Patricia Reilly Giff, Newbery Honor author of *Lily’s Crossing* and *Pictures of Hollis Woods*

On a spring morning, neighbors Valentina Kaplan and Oksana Savchenko wake up to an angry red sky. A reactor at the nuclear power plant where their fathers work—Chernobyl—has exploded. Before they know it, the two girls, who’ve always been enemies, find themselves on a train bound for Leningrad to stay with Valentina’s estranged grandmother, Rita Grigorievna. In their new lives in Leningrad, they begin to learn what it means to trust another person. Oksana must face the lies her parents told her all her life. Valentina must keep her grandmother’s secret, one that could put all their lives in danger. And both of them discover something they’ve wished for: a best friend.

But how far would you go to save your best friend’s life? Would you risk your own?

Told in alternating perspectives among three girls—Valentina and Oksana in 1986 and Rifka in 1941—this story shows that hatred, intolerance, and oppression are no match for the power of true friendship.

“Not to be missed.”

—Jane Yolen, author of *The Devil’s Arithmetic*,
Briar Rose, and *Mapping the Bones*

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The
**BLACKBIRD
GIRLS**



BY
Anne Blankman

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PRIPYAT, UKRAINE, SOVIET UNION

APRIL 1986

Valentina

VALENTINA WONDERED WHERE the birds had gone.

They weren't waiting on the sill when she went to the sitting room window that morning. All year she had put slices of salami out for them. Blue jays came every day, and blackbirds sometimes, and sparrows least of all. The birds would stand on the sill, their claws black as soot against the gray concrete, and fly away when she unlatched the window, only to flutter back when she set out the pieces of salami.

Today, though, they were nowhere in sight. Valentina leaned out to look. Overhead, no blue jays circled one another, vanishing into the clouds, then reappearing. There were no blackbirds or sparrows, either. All of Pripjat's birds seemed to have disappeared. The sky was empty.

Except for a crimson glow in the distance. Valentina squinted. Usually, at half past seven, the sky was the pale blue of a robin's egg.

Not now. The sky in the south was red. Smoke churned up toward the scarlet-colored clouds. The smoke wasn't black or gray, but a strange, unearthly blue. It was so thick that Valentina

couldn't see anything below or behind it: all she could see was the wall of smoke coiling up and up into the red sky. But she knew what stood under that billowing smoke.

The nuclear power station where her father worked.

She whirled away from the window. "The power station is on fire!"

Her mother hurried out of the bedroom, buttoning the cuff of her blouse. "What did you say?"

Valentina pointed at the window. Her mother joined her and gasped. "Oh my God!"

"Where's Papa?" Valentina glanced at the empty kitchen table. Her father worked the night shift at the power station. Usually, he was back in time to eat breakfast, tired and hungry after a long night. Then he would go to bed once Valentina had left for school. When he hadn't been at the kitchen table this morning, Valentina had assumed he was already in the bedroom, asleep.

"He hasn't come home yet." With shaking hands, Valentina's mother latched the window. "Do you remember he said he would have a busy night? The supervisors were planning to run a safety drill. So when he didn't show up an hour ago, I wasn't worried."

She pulled Valentina in close for a hug. "I'm sure he's fine, Valyushka. If he was hurt, someone at the power station would have telephoned us."

Valentina leaned into her mother, breathing in the comforting scent of her violet perfume. Mama had to be right. An accident at a nuclear power station was a statistical impossibility. A one-in-ten-million chance, her father had told her. And in school she and her classmates were taught that nuclear

power was the safest, cleanest source of energy in the world. It had brought heat and light for the first time to thousands of citizens in the Soviet Union. But . . .

“Why isn’t the smoke black?” she asked.

Her mother held her tighter. “I don’t know. Maybe I shouldn’t send you to school,” she murmured. “But I have to go to work. And if we don’t show up, people might talk . . .”

Valentina understood what her mother meant. They mustn’t do anything out of the ordinary, *ever*, or they risked attracting attention. And attention was bad. It meant someone was watching you, waiting for you to make a mistake. And mistakes—like saying the wrong thing, criticizing the government, making someone important angry—led the secret police to you. People who were taken away by the secret police, the KGB, often weren’t seen again. When Valentina’s mother was a university student, one of her classmates had been arrested by the KGB. The last time anyone had seen him was when he was shoved into the back of a car. Valentina’s mother had never forgotten it.

“I want to stay home and wait for Papa,” Valentina said.

“If Papa was injured, one of the other workers would have let us know,” her mother replied. “If we don’t carry on as usual, we look as though we don’t trust the people at the power station. And we mustn’t—”

“Risk attention,” Valentina interrupted. She pulled herself free from her mother’s embrace. “But what if everybody’s hurt and no one can telephone us?”

“Then the hospital workers would call.” Her mother gave her a gentle push toward the door. “Papa’s fine. Now you’d better hurry or you’ll be late.”

“Yes, Mama.” Valentina grabbed her satchel and rushed out the door. Her mother didn’t understand. She never did. She cared more about being safe than anything else. If Valentina did the best in her class on a mathematics exam, her mother said next time she ought to get one or two questions wrong on purpose. “We’re Jews,” she would say when Valentina complained. “Others are looking for a reason to hate us. Don’t give them any.”

“Come straight home after school!” her mother called after her. “I have to work this morning, but I’ll be home by lunch. I’m sure Papa will be back by then.”

“Okay,” Valentina called back. Saturdays were half days at school. On Saturday mornings, her mother played the piano during ballet lessons at the culture palace. Many children who were too little for school went there for ballet or swimming instruction. Usually, after her mother finished the lessons and Valentina was done with school, they had lunch together while Valentina’s father slept.

Then Valentina would play in the park with her best friend, Larisa, while her mother shopped for groceries. When Valentina would get home, her father would usually be awake, and they’d tinker with different experiments. Last month they had rewired the electrical outlets in their apartment. Currently, they were working on a design for a water heater. Ordinarily, Saturdays were golden, glorious days, but now as Valentina walked down the corridor, she couldn’t stop worrying about her father.

The stairwell of their building was full of small children. On the landing, kids played with dolls and jacks. Valentina

stepped over them, nearly bumping into her neighbor, Dyadya Sergei. When she was little, she had thought all of her family friends and neighbors were her uncles and aunts, because that was how she had been taught to address them. It wasn't until she was older that she had realized calling grown-ups *dyadya* or *tetya* was a custom, and all these "uncles" and "aunts" weren't blood relations. She still liked calling them the traditional names, though, because she hadn't any uncles and aunts of her own, for both of her parents had been only children.

"Good morning, Valentina," Dyadya Sergei said. He was dressed only in trousers and had a book tucked under his arm. "I'm going up to the roof to sunbathe and watch the fire. Did your father tell you how it started?"

"No, Dyadya Sergei." Her voice trembled. "He isn't home yet."

Dyadya Sergei patted her head. "I suppose he stayed to watch the firemen work. You ought to go down to the station, have a look about. It's the sort of thing one sees only once in a generation."

He sounded as though he thought the fire was some sort of entertainment! "I have to go to school," she said, skirting around him.

His laugh followed her down the stairwell. "Poor Valentina! Having to go to school on such an exciting day is a true misery."

Valentina paused at the landing to look out the window. The sky still flickered red. Below it, the city of Prip'yat lay burrowed like a bird in a nest. People walked the streets; under

the scarlet dome of the sky, they looked as flimsy as paper dolls. Blocks of pink-and-white plaster-faced apartment towers stretched into the distance. The enormous Communist hammer-and-sickle insignia crowned several buildings, their neon lights dark in the daytime. Beyond them rose the gunmetal-gray domes of the four reactors of the power station where her father worked. The station's proper name was the V.I. Lenin Power Station, but it was usually called Chernobyl, after an ancient nearby village.

Valentina's father said Pripyat was a model city because the station powered electricity for millions of people in the western Soviet Union. Its citizens got the best of everything, like shaving cream from East Germany and toothpaste from Bulgaria, sweaters from Poland and dresses from Finland, and cheeses and chocolates and caviar. They were lucky to live in such a paradise, he often told her. Valentina knew he was right: she remembered the years they had lived in Siberia, where the winters were so cold you could actually hear your breath turn to ice.

Outside the air tasted of metal, not the wild roses and cut grass that Valentina was used to. *No fire should smell like this*, she thought. The scent of soot should carry on the air, but not this hot metal that tickled the back of her throat.

Everywhere she looked, she saw police officers leaning against walls or standing on corners. The city was a sea of blue-and-red uniforms.

She'd never seen so many policemen in her life. What were they doing here? They couldn't all be from Pripyat's police force; there were too many of them. Some must have been

summoned from nearby cities. Were they patrolling because of the fire?

Some of the grown-ups walking past sent nervous looks at the policemen. But they kept walking, their eyes going from the police officers to the red sky overhead. Nobody asked the policemen what was going on. Questions were dangerous, Valentina knew.

Children streamed along the avenue, staring at the police officers. Ladies carrying string shopping bags went in and out of stores; young mothers pushed babies in carriages or held toddlers by the hand, guiding them toward parks or nurseries where they would be cared for while their mothers worked. Everybody looked at the blue smoke coiling up into the red sky, and nobody said a word to the policemen.

Valentina's steps slowed. Her father was somewhere behind that wall of smoke. Maybe hurt.

She *had* to know what was happening. Before she could think herself out of the decision, she dashed over to the nearest policeman. "Are you here because of the fire?" she asked.

The man flicked his cigarette into the gutter. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I'm on my way." Valentina hesitated. Her parents often said her chattering mouth would get her into trouble. Maybe she ought to keep walking to school. But then she thought of the strange blue smoke enveloping the power station and of her father who was in there somewhere. "Why isn't the smoke black?"

The man narrowed his eyes at her. "There isn't any smoke. That's steam, and you ought to be accustomed to it from living

near such a large power station. Now you'd better get on."

"Thank you," she muttered, and walked on, frowning. The policeman was wrong. Steam was thin and gray, not thick and blue, and it didn't turn the sky red: she knew that much from living close to the nuclear station. Was the policeman lying or mistaken?

As she went through the school gates, she saw she had another problem to deal with. And it was waiting for her in the schoolyard.

Oksana Savchenko.

She was leaning against the fence, toying with the white ribbons at the end of her braids. She looked like the perfect Ukrainian girl—blond hair, blue eyes, pink-and-white skin, a porcelain doll come to life.

But Valentina knew there was nothing sweet or doll-like about Oksana.

The other girl caught sight of her. She pushed off the fence and called, "Valentina, come here!"

Valentina's heart sank to her shoes.

She wished she could run home. But she'd get in trouble for playing truant.

Better to get it over with.

Squaring her shoulders, she walked into the schoolyard, where Oksana stood waiting for her.