

# Tina

(by Devyn Lowe)

The sun discreetly peeks over the hilltops surrounding the city as though it is afraid to show its face. Another morning has arrived, awakening a distraught Sarajevo from a not so pleasant slumber. The piercing sounds of the shellings and the screams of the sirens keep residents on edge for most of the night.

Tina Blahovic lies awake on the filthy floor of her family's abandoned gift shop. She hasn't slept well in months and stays up most nights wondering if she will see another morning. The slightest of noises startle her. Tina does not want to be awake. She wishes she were asleep, lost in dreams with her mother and father and the happy life her family used to share. In those dreams, she's not the mother of four; she's a normal teenage girl living a normal teenage life.

Tina tiredly shifts from the blanketed floor to her feet and makes her way across the room through a maze of random household items. She gets to the kitchen sink and reaches for the plastic jug containing her family's remaining water. Disappointedly, she realizes how quickly the water disappears as she takes a small sip and splashes the last bit onto her face. Grabbing a cloth from a pile of old laundry on the floor, Tina quickly pats her face dry. With the water being emptied from the last jug, Tina understands that today will be a busy day. She will have to go for more water. As she turns to walk away from the sink, she catches a glimpse of a young girl with dark circles under her eyes and long, messy hair pulled back behind her shoulders, dressed in tattered clothes. It's hard to recognize herself in the mirror anymore. Tina isn't proud of her appearance these days. She isn't proud of anything.

It's a bright day in Sarajevo, and the sun is attempting to squeeze into the room from between the boards nailed to the windows. Tina shuffles into the center of the dimly lit room and pauses for a moment to take it all in. What used to be a thriving family gift shop is now a hide-out in shambles and disrepair. The once pristine floral wallpaper is peeling and discolored from the damaged water pipes and their multiple leaks. The room reminds Tina of an old abandoned house like the kind she used to see in the horror films that she watched with her friends. She remembers staying up all night with the lights on after watching those movies, scared to death. She wouldn't dare tell her parents that she watched a movie of that type without asking permission. Shivering from the memory, Tina shakes her head to free herself of those thoughts. She would give anything to have those days back, those days when a scary movie was the only reason to lie awake at night and feel frightened. But things are different now.

Tina still cannot believe how much her life has changed as she stands quietly watching her four siblings lying sound asleep on the floor. They are so peaceful and angelic, and Tina feels her eyes filling with tears. How could she ever tell these innocent souls that their mother would never come home? Tina's stomach rumbles, interrupting her thoughts. She quickly realizes that the children will soon be awake, so she tiptoes over to where her brother is sleeping.

"Stefan!" she whispers softly. "Stefan, it's time to wake up." Stefan rolls over still half asleep and squints up at his sister.

"It can't be morning already," he murmurs, rolling his eyes back into his head. Tina smiles and leans over to help him get up off the floor. Merely twelve years old, Stefan is mature for his age, although he doesn't have a choice. His skinny legs struggle out of the blanket as he yawns, stretches and then stands up.

"I have to leave now," Tina says sternly. "You know what you have to do." Stefan nods his head as he pulls on a pair of trousers.

"Lock the door behind me," she orders. Although she hates leaving the safety of her home, she knows as well as Stefan what she has to do. Going to bed on an empty stomach is not something that small children can tolerate for more than one night. And their water supply is an issue too.

Tina steps out onto the street and scans the surrounding area. What was once a nice part of town filled with shoppers and tourists is now a lifeless wasteland of debris. She hurries across the road before stopping to take another look at her family's hideout. An abandoned car sits outside their shop, and the sign reading, "Blahovic Za Odeću," just barely manages to hang on to the side of the building. It has been more than two months since their apartment was bombed, and ever since, they have been living as best they can in their family shop.

Tina still remembers the warmth and liveliness of her home. It always smelled of freshly made bread and delicious soups. It seems like only yesterday that the most challenging part of Tina's day was to wake up early in the morning for school. To help get her out of bed, her father would walk into her bedroom most mornings and set a plate of steaming hotcakes beside her. Her mother, up bright and early for work most mornings, was always in a good mood, no matter what day it was. Tina would give anything to have those days back. She roughly wipes away the tears that stream down her cheeks as she walks down the sorrow-filled streets.

It has been nearly two weeks since she lost her mother. These days in Sarajevo, doing something as simple as buying bread for your family can get you killed. It doesn't make sense to Tina how a selfless deed such as that could take away her mother forever. She will never forget the day that she waited hours and hours for her mother to come home. That was the day that turned Tina's whole world upside down, taking it from horrible to disastrous. She remembers waiting up through the night, listening for the knock on the door, which would signal her mother's return. That knock never came, and it never will. It was not until the next afternoon that Tina visited the place where her mother had gone to buy bread the morning before. There she came upon a cellist sitting in the middle of an open square, where the bread stand used to be, playing a beautiful song with mourners and flowers surrounding him. She remembers breaking down in the middle of the sidewalk and crying for hours on end before forcing herself to return home. That was the first day that the cellist would play his adajios, and Tina learned he would continue on for twenty-one more days, playing one day for every person who died at the hands of the snipers in the hills that day. She would return to listen to the cellist whenever she could and would imagine her family living a life without war or killing or fear.

After that, the days seemed to blur together. Between mothering her siblings and maintaining their survival supplies, Tina has an extremely busy life. She wonders how her mother would manage all of this misery and misfortune. Tina has begun to lose faith in everything.

Thinking about the cellist and hoping she has time to see him today, Tina runs most of the way to the relief center. At least these menial tasks help her stay focused on the present and ignore her fear and despair. She imagines herself running away from the city, from everything. She stops at a busy intersection, recognizing the crowd of people hiding behind the building as a sign that it is not safe to cross the street. There must have been a recent sniper attack. She must be careful. Stopping and waiting until someone signals it's safe again, Tina feels a slight tug on her sleeve. She whips around to find a wrinkled old woman peering at her with longing eyes.

"Dear, do you have anything for me to eat? Please dear?" the woman's hoarse voice is sharp, but gentle. Terrified, Tina pulls back, shakes her head and moves away. Before the war, Tina would have given that old woman all of the contents of her pockets and more, but money does no one any good now. She has nothing to offer.

The crowd starts to move across the street, and Tina hurries to catch up. Once safely through, she spots the relief center and plunges forward to get into the long line.

The vast number of people waiting there frightens Tina, so she tries her best to remain invisible. She doesn't want anyone to notice her and avoids all eye contact and conversation. Tina longs to be back at home with the boarded up windows and locked doors although, even there, it's not safe.

Finally, Tina makes her way to the front of the line and spots a relief worker waving her down from a corner of the room.

"How many servings for you?" a middle-aged man asks her. Tina puts five fingers into the air. The worker looks confused, so Tina decides she must say something.

"My mother is sick today," she says. "I have to get the rations for our family because she isn't well enough to come." Believing her story, the worker reaches into a large bin and scoops dry rice into a small bag and hands it to her.

"Have a good day!" he calls out, but Tina has already rushed away, anxious to get back home.

Clutching the bag of rice tightly in her hands, Tina runs most of the way home, happy to have gotten something accomplished. With sweat dripping down her face, a tired and weak Tina arrives back at the shop and bangs three times on the bolted wood door.

"It's me, Stefan!" she exclaims. After waiting a minute or so, she hears the lock being released, and the door slowly opens, revealing her younger sister, Jasmina, in the doorway. Tina hurries inside while ushering her sister further in and slamming the door behind them.

After spending an hour cooking up a small meal for the children, Tina is already dreading going back out into the war zone.

"I am going to have to go out again, to go and get more water," she explains to the sullen faces around her. There is no reply. The four children are too busy wolfing down their miniscule bowls of rice. Shoveling the last bite into his mouth, Stefan pipes up,

"Can I come with you today, Tina? Please?" Tina knows this question is coming and shakes her head as she has done so many times before. Stefan knows her reasoning and has heard it a thousand times: it's too dangerous.

"Please, Tina, I promise I will do what you ask! And I will help you carry the water jugs...I will carry all of the water jugs! Please, please, please?" His begging over the past few weeks has been wearing her down. Maybe she should give in. She sure could use the extra pair of hands carrying more jugs.

Never having left the younger children alone before, Tina sits them all down and sets ground rules about being home alone. Rules that the girls have heard her tell Stefan millions of times before, rules that their parents used to tell Tina when the war first began. Stefan eagerly shoves on a pair of hiking boots much too small for his growing feet, and the two exit the shop. Tina waits to hear the lock being bolted behind her before leaving the doorstep. She grabs her brother's hand as they cross the empty street, but he pulls away and impatiently strides forward. Tina is starting to feel like letting him come along is a bad idea.

Stefan almost gallops with excitement to be outside. He's like a little puppy being taken on his first walk. The child in him is finally permitted to come out for the first time in many months. Tina almost smiles at his antics. She enjoys his company and doesn't take her eyes off him as he skips merrily down the street. Stefan and the other children are tired of being cooped up in the shop, but she must keep them safely hidden away, away from any possible shellings and away from the men in the hills.

After several minutes of walking down the lifeless streets, Stefan already looks as though he has lost interest.

"I told you that it's nothing exciting Stefan," Tina reminds him. Stefan looks back at her with a curious smile, and then keeps walking. Suddenly, Tina realizes where his curiosity is headed. In the distance, she hears the familiar melody of a cello. The music fills her ears, and she slowly succumbs to its haunting embrace. Whenever she hears the cellist's tune, it's almost as though the music takes her to another place. This place is much like Sarajevo used to be, without guns or violence. A Sarajevo without war. For a moment, her fear leaves her.

Walking at a much quicker pace now, Stefan has a look of excited anticipation in his eyes.

"Tina, there's music! Where is it coming from? Who is playing that?" Tina decides she will let him enjoy the music as she has for the past little while, for a few minutes anyway. With their new destination only two blocks away, Tina reminds Stefan that he must stay close to her. Approaching the street corner, she grabs his shoulder and pulls him back, not allowing him to go any further. The street is a dangerous one, in full view of the snipers in the hills. She leans back

against the brick wall and motions him to do the same. Stefan frowns but decides to play along with whatever his sister is doing.

"I come here to my special little spot everyday to listen to the music," she tells him, "everyday since mama...left." Tina catches herself and holds back the waterfall of tears she knows is coming. When Stefan doesn't respond, she opens her eyes in time to see him marching out from behind the street corner towards the cellist and out into the open intersection. Tina screams for him to return, but Stefan is too lost in the music.

"Stefan, you come back here right now!" she shouts, edging out from around the corner towards the street. She tries to run after him, but cannot bring herself to move her feet and screams again for him to come back. It's as if Stefan doesn't hear her. He only hears the cellist. Paralyzed with fear, she cannot find it within herself to chase after him, but continues calling out and begins to cry helplessly. Stefan comes to a dead stop and stands motionless in the middle of the street, staring at the cellist and the bunches of flowers that lay at his feet. Sobbing, Tina watches as he turns around towards her, his face red with anger and streaming with tears. He knows.

"Oh, Stefan! Come back!" The shots ring out. Tina watches with horror as she sees her little brother is carrying clatter to the ground, and his lifeless body crumples beside them. Perhaps the cellist might play for one more day.