

the
WARSAW
SISTERS

a novel of WORLD WAR II POLAND

AMANDA BARRATT

“Heart-wrenching and powerful. *The Warsaw Sisters* left me reeling but in a good and necessary way. Amanda Barratt shines an uncompromising light on the devastation and cruelty of life in occupied Poland—a light that needs to be shined, because through Antonina and Helena, we see. We understand. We *feel*. Elegant prose, thorough research, and intriguing characters thread throughout this outstanding novel. Truly an exceptional work.”

Sarah Sundin, bestselling and Christy Award–winning author of
The Sound of Light and *Until Leaves Fall in Paris*

“With her signature attention to detail and commitment to historical integrity, Amanda Barratt gives us a story not to be forgotten. When two sisters choose their own paths of resistance under German occupation, both are irrevocably changed. *The Warsaw Sisters* is a wide-eyed, unflinching look at the heartbreaking plight of a people grasping courage even when they can’t find hope. For fans of Martha Hall Kelly and Amy Harmon.”

Jocelyn Green, Christy Award–winning author of
The Metropolitan Affair

“In *The Warsaw Sisters*, Amanda Barratt has created a suspenseful and deeply emotional journey through the perils of the Polish resistance during WWII. Readers will be kept up turning pages as these sisters fight for their cause and try valiantly to protect the ones they love. But it is the relationship between Helena and Antonina that readers will remember long after the last page. I highly recommend this evocative novel of thrilling escapes, desperate heroism, and the courage it takes to choose hope in a time of turmoil.”

Amy Lynn Green, author of *The Blackout Book Club*

“Amanda Barratt honors the victims of horrific brutality during Poland’s Holocaust by sharing a glimpse of their stories. Twin sisters battle against the evil that permeates their beautiful city in *The Warsaw Sisters*, a tragic and poignant reminder of the cruelty of

war, the courage of the Polish Resistance, and the immeasurable cost of freedom.”

Melanie Dobson, award-winning author of
Catching the Wind and *Memories of Glass*

“*The Warsaw Sisters* is a profound and deeply researched novel that deftly exhumes themes of hope, resistance, and the familial bonds that withstand the most harrowing of circumstances. Barratt is one of the most exceptionally talented writers of historical fiction I have ever read, and this recent offering proves she’s at the height of the game. Certain to enthrall readers of Patti Callahan Henry and Mario Escobar, *The Warsaw Sisters* is a story whose pages I foresee turning again and again.”

Rachel McMillan, author of *The Mozart Code*
and *Operation Scarlet*

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Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author’s imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For the sparks of light in the night of war,
the ordinary who quietly resisted.
For the ones who fought and fell in Warsaw,
a city of two risings.
For the six million Jewish men, women,
and children who perished in the Holocaust.
For sisterhood, the most resilient of bonds.
For Your glory, Lord. Always.



ANTONINA
AUGUST 31, 1939
WARSAW, POLAND

Antonina-and-Helena.

That was how I remembered our names. Spoken in a single breath, always blended together.

Antonina and Helena. Helena and Antonina. Two lives braided into a single strand. A tie as certain as the ground beneath our feet and the air flowing through our lungs.

A bond that would remain immutable even as we watched our father go off to war.

For war would come to Poland. Few remained in doubt of it. Only the delusional, or the desperate, clung to the unraveling hope of peace.

I wasn't delusional. But weren't we, all of us, a little desperate? Maybe desperation bred delusion as we sought assurance that the ordinary would remain unbroken. That nothing would happen in the end. That the rumblings would die away, after all. We told ourselves and each other and kept telling ourselves because who, in spite of the flush of patriotism and bravado, could reckon with the alternative?

I stilled in the doorway of the bedroom. Beside the bed, Tata stood, his back to me as he fastened his rucksack. I stayed where

I was, taking him in, gathering the moment close. The constancy I always found in his presence without him even speaking a word. His hands, steady and methodical, as they secured the rucksack. The way morning light touched his profile, outlined his uniformed shoulders.

He turned, caught sight of me. “Tosia.”

I gave a little smile, abashed to be found hovering in the doorway like a child, and crossed the room. “I wanted to see if there was anything you needed.” My fingers brushed the rucksack on the bed, the lumpy canvas out of place against the cream-hued counterpane.

“I think I have everything just about sorted.”

“Good.” I paused, trying to look only at his face and not at the uniform that transformed him from an attorney in a pressed suit to an officer in the army. He’d served during the last war—not the Great War, he hadn’t been old enough then—but the one that followed, between Poland and the Bolsheviks. Helena and I hadn’t been born yet; our parents hadn’t even been married. Tata returned in 1920, the Bolsheviks defeated, the independence of the infant Republic of Poland established. I’d glimpsed his old uniform hanging in the back of the armoire and seen the earnest young man in the photograph taken before he left, but neither had prepared me for the reality of him in uniform, as if time had unrolled backward twenty years, to another war and a younger man.

Silence lay between Tata and me. I didn’t know how to fill it, what to speak, what not to speak. The women of the previous generation were no strangers to sending their men off to war.

I’d had no practice. Not yet.

He paused, drew something from his pocket, held it in his palm a moment. “Your mama gave me this the day I left. The first present I ever had from her. When she found out I would be leaving, she came straight away, didn’t even stop to put on a coat. I can still see her, so young and lovely, her cheeks bright, shivering as she insisted she wasn’t cold. Stubborn as ever. Quite like someone else I know.” He gave me a pointed look and chuckled.

I tried to laugh, but it tangled in my chest.

“We stood in front of my parents’ house, and she unfastened

the chain from around her neck, placed it in my hand, and told me to keep it safe.” His mustached mouth softened, his gaze far away. “I suppose that must have been the moment I realized she cared as much as I did.”

He’d told us the story when we’d been young, but never quite like this. Then it had seemed a scene out of a novel, the heroine bidding farewell to her sweetheart before he marched into the glory of battle. How romantic I had thought it. For it had been only a story, a glossy reminiscence.

It had not been real then.

He pressed what he held into my hand, the small oval still warm from his touch. The medallion he always carried, the tarnished silver engraved with the image of Christ. “I want you to keep it now, while I’m away.” He swallowed, and it twisted something inside me, such a look on my father’s face.

I inhaled a breath. “We’ll be fine. I will look after Helena. And Aunt Basia will be here.” She’d come last night to say goodbye, for they couldn’t spare her at the hospital today. Throughout our growing up years, our aunt—Tata’s only sibling and a respected physician—had reared her twin nieces as if we were her own, filling the place of the mother who died when my sister and I were scarcely a year old.

“Yes.” He nodded. “Basia will be here. I am glad of that.” He gave a brief smile. The same one he’d worn last night when we packed his belongings and he said he wouldn’t need much because he would be back soon. Then, as now, I read in his eyes what he did not speak.

Tata—so strong and steady—was afraid.

I did not let him know I knew this. Or that I was too. Our fear remained unvoiced, its presence thickening the air between us. It wouldn’t do to speak of such a thing, not at a time like this.

He’d spent the years sheltering my sister and me, making our lives safe and good and beautiful. Now I wished I could protect him as he had shielded us.

I wished . . . but I could not.

So I would give him what I could in these last moments together.

The memory of his daughter, steadfast and smiling.
And he would know he did not need to fear for us and that we
would be here.
Waiting, until he returned.

HELENA
AUGUST 31, 1939

There were no memories before him. He was my first and part of all the ones that followed. Drifting asleep to the sound of his voice spinning tales of mountains of glass and princesses in distant towers. My hand tucked in his as we walked to school, the September morning crisp, my heart beating fast beneath my coat. His rumbling laughter blending with crackly records as he taught Antonina and me to dance. His arms solid and comforting as I sobbed because the boy I'd secretly been fond of had begun a flirtation with one of my prettier schoolmates. My father's voice gentle as he told me that I did not need to change to be loved, that the right man would prove himself worthy of my heart, not the other way around, and that I would always be his *kwiatuszek*—his little flower. The days working side by side at his firm, him meeting with clients in his office while I managed his appointments and typed his correspondence.

For as long as I could remember, he had been a constant in my—our—world.

Now a different world lay before us.

Sunlight warmed my face as we stepped onto Marszałkowska Street, the broad thoroughfare lined with edifices of stuccoed brick, shops and cafés with brightly lettered signs and elegant awnings, squat domed advertising pillars and slender iron lampposts, manicured trees planted at intervals. Red trams glided along the rails embedded in the cobblestones, automobiles and taxicabs sped up and down the street, carts and droshkies clattered and clip-clopped, bicyclists rode past, and pedestrians thronged the sidewalks.

In recent days, Warsaw sizzled, an electric current pulsing faster, faster. Passersby no longer walked, much less strolled. They hurried, rushed, strode, as though driven by wind at their backs, every step

one of purpose, nearly all carrying the now-ubiquitous gas masks. Women hastened along the sidewalk, laden with shopping bags and baskets, expressions agitated, almost hunted. People sought to lay hold of what provisions they could, fearing shortages. Last month, at Tata's advising, we laid in a supply of tinned goods, dried peas, kasza, sugar, and coffee. We bought no flour, for it might grow musty if stored too long. Four days ago, we'd gone to the shops and found them alarmingly sparse, no flour to be sold.

How could it be that only a few weeks ago all had been ordinary, the storm clouds gathering, but yet in the distance? Over the years we'd read the papers and talked of foreign politics, of Germany and Adolf Hitler, hailed as Führer by his adoring people as he regenerated a country crippled after the Great War and the Treaty of Versailles. Somehow it all seemed far off, removed from our lives in Poland. Troubles happening "somewhere else."

But as Germany annexed Austria and then occupied Czechoslovakia, the storm swept closer. Closer still as Hitler issued demands to which our government staunchly refused to cede, among them the return of Danzig—a major port on the Baltic coast and a free city under the Treaty of Versailles. Only a few days ago, we had listened, stunned, to the announcement over the radio that Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a nonaggression pact, the two countries, once bitter foes and agelong enemies of Poland, agreeing not to make war against the other.

In that moment, a memory had surfaced. I had come into the sitting room one evening, just as Tata rose and turned off the wireless, Hitler's fiery oration reverberating in the silence. He had turned to my aunt, sitting on the sofa, and said with a look I had never forgotten, "When a man is a fanatic, he is capable of anything, and that man Hitler is one of the greatest fanatics I have ever heard."

The years had tested my father's words, but only time would prove their measure.

Tata hailed a taxicab and asked the driver to take us to the Main Station.

War had not even begun, but already it had left its mark upon the city. Almost every window of the buildings we passed bore a pattern

of thin white strips of paper, ours no exception. The newspaper said it would protect the panes from shattering due to the vibration of nearby explosions and thus safeguard against injury from flying glass. I wondered if it had ever been put to the test.

Posters on walls and advertising pillars announced a general mobilization of our army. Amid the mobilization sheets hung a different poster. This one depicted a swastika from which an enormous hand seemed to sprout, bony fingers reaching, almost encircling a map of Poland. A Polish soldier stood in a warrior's stance, bayonet fixed, poised to plunge the blade through the grasping hand.

Why had the artist rendered such a large hand compared with the height of the soldier?

Though the sun shone bright, I shivered.

We reached the Main Station, and the taxicab stopped. As we made our way into the station, I kept glancing at Tata, distinguished and somehow strange in his crisp tunic and peaked cap with its Polish eagle badge. He had been a soldier once, and with the mere act of the uniform mantling his shoulders, he returned to that part of himself again, as if a soldier was something one donned instead of became. But I could not admire him in military dress, no matter the chorus ringing out as men marched past, voices lusty.

“War, oh war, what a grand lady you must be, that you are being followed, that you are being followed by such dashing fellows.”

There was nothing dashing about a man leaving his home, his family, without knowing when or if he would return. Though, of course, he must go. Of course he must fight, if necessary. Perhaps I should have been filled with pride as my father left to defend our country, but my chest tightened so I could not tell if I was proud, only afraid.

The station swelled with men, youths who barely looked of age shoulder to shoulder with the more mature. Some boisterous, mingling with comrades like schoolboys setting off on an excursion to the zoo, others somber and silent, staring down at their feet or into the distance. A couple embraced, holding each other for a long and quiet moment. A woman waved a handkerchief in a gloved hand, calling out, “Goodbye, see you soon,” though to whom it was im-

possible to tell. Loudspeakers echoed, announcing boarding calls. The air was thick with heat and cigarette smoke and the unknown.

As we wended through the swarming multitude, I suddenly wished I could cling to Tata's hand as I'd done when I was a child, his broad palm enfolding my fingers, an anchor when the world felt so very great and I so very small. But I was eighteen, a grown woman, and so I must make my way on my own.

When we reached the platform, he set down his rucksack. Antonina stood beside me, an emerald hat slanted over her reddish-gold curls, her features serene. But the rigid set of her shoulders and the way she clutched her handbag betrayed her inward struggle. I bit my lip hard.

Since the moment I glimpsed Tata's mobilization orders—who could imagine one could hate and fear a simple white rectangle so much—I'd steeled myself for this parting. Told myself I would not break, nor even crack.

For long seconds, he stood, gazing at the two of us. "Take care of one another for me. Hold the other close."

"We will." I looked back at him steadily, gathering his face into the folds of my memory, wanting to remember for this and every moment until he returned.

"That's how I can leave you this way. Knowing you'll be together, no matter what comes."

"You're not to worry about us." Did Antonina hear how her voice caught at the end? Did Tata?

"I'll be home soon."

Of course. Of course he would be.

He opened his arms and pulled us close, my sister and me. Crushing us against him, his breath tickling my ear, my own snatched from my lungs with the strength of his embrace.

"My beloved girls," he whispered. "My Tosia and Hela."

He drew away.

"I love you." I smiled, forcing out the words through the swelling ache in my throat.

How fragile they sounded. They weren't enough. How could they be?

He shouldered his rucksack, met our eyes, the tenderness in his unraveling me piece by piece.

Then he turned away, faded into the crowd, one in a mass of uniforms. I blinked hard. Though tears burned, they did not fall. I should have been proud of myself for staying strong. But I wasn't. Not really.

Time lengthened as we stood side by side, our shoulders brushing. The whistle gave a piercing blast, and the wheels of the train began to turn, slowly at first, then gaining speed. The faces of the men filling the windows passed as shadows, blurred by the rise of steam. I wanted to push forward, try to catch one more glimpse of Tata, but the crowd pressed too tight and the train passed too quickly until all that remained was the echo of the whistle and the people left behind.



HELENA
SEPTEMBER 1, 1939

The cool stillness of early morning greeted me as I stepped into the kitchen. I crossed to the tall oak dresser, eyes gritty as I stared at the dishes neatly arranged on its shelves.

I had woken at half past six, though indeed, I barely slept, the hours stretching as I lay on my flattened pillow staring into blackness. I told myself it was the coffee I'd drunk last evening that kept me awake, but in truth, the fault lay with my mind. My thoughts wouldn't silence, no matter how I sought to quiet them. They traveled a path of fears, speculations, and uncertainties that ran in loops and circles and never reached a destination.

But with dawn came clarity. Or at least renewed determination. I would prepare breakfast. Go to Tata's office and attend to any business left unfinished. Put emotions aside.

Crash.

I jumped. Heart thumping, I rushed into the sitting room.

Antonina sat in a chair drawn close to the wireless. Brown liquid dripped down the front of her peach satin dressing gown. Bits of china scattered the floorboards.

"What happened?" I gasped, my jittery nerves on edge.

"Shh." She didn't look at me, her gaze on the set.

It was only then I registered the crackle of the wireless, the measured tone of the announcer.

“Early this morning, German forces invaded Polish territory . . .”

It’s come. The words repeated in my mind, a rising clamor, inescapably real. *It’s come.*

My stomach tightened. *Where are you, Tata?*

Antonina turned. Our eyes met.

She pressed her lips together, face chalky.

Static garbled the announcer’s voice.

Antonina smacked the top of the set with the flat of her hand. It only made the static worse. She turned it off with a soft huff—the same sigh she gave when she smudged her lipstick or the tram was late.

Silence echoed in the room that suddenly seemed so very empty. Antonina ran a fingertip across her splotched dressing gown, as if only just realizing she’d spilled coffee on herself. I chafed my arms, my summer frock no match for the ice slicking my skin.

Tick-tick went the clock on the wall. The delicate black hands read 7:05.

Antonina rose. “I should dress.” She gave a glance at the splattered floor and shards of china. “Then I’ll see to this.” She started to leave the sitting room.

I looked down. Bloody footprints tracked the floorboards.

“You’ve cut yourself,” I called after her. The first words I’d spoken since the broadcast. Surprisingly, my voice sounded the same as always.

Antonina came back into the sitting room, feet bare beneath the hem of her nightdress. She lifted her right foot and held it up with both hands, wobbling on one leg. A tiny slice marred her heel. Though the cut continued to bleed, it didn’t look deep, but I wouldn’t be able to tell until it had been cleaned.

“I should see if there’s any glass in that.”

She lowered her foot. “I don’t know how it happened. I couldn’t sleep, so I made some coffee. I thought there might be news.” She drew a shaky breath, my usually poised sister anything but in her stained dressing gown, her hair tied up in a scarf. “When I heard the announcement, I—I just dropped it.”

“It’s all right,” I said in a soft voice.

How easily my reassurance came, though I wasn’t certain what it really meant. Wasn’t certain if anything could be “all right” anymore.

Antonina gave a little smile, but her features were strained. She was afraid too. Somehow, I was glad not to be alone.

ANTONINA
SEPTEMBER 25, 1939

Death was coming for us, there in the cellar.

I did not want to meet it. Not in the stagnant darkness among strangers as terrified and certain of their end as I was. Once the cellars of Warsaw stored coal, potatoes, firewood. Now humanity cowered in their depths, hiding from death.

I have barely begun to live. I have barely—

The drone of the planes. That terrible, grinding whine.

Then silently I counted in cadence with my shallow breaths.

One. Two. Three.

I had been doing this since daybreak. Measuring the seconds between the first shrill of a falling bomb and when it struck its target, instinctively gauging the distance. That and wondering when we would die.

Four. Five. Six. Seven.

The whining amplified, a kettle shrieking untended, pressure building, building—

Impact. Crushing. Quaking the walls, resonating in my bones.

Not us this time.

In the early days, when there was still a reprieve between air raids, *not us this time* meant something, even if only a few moments of relief.

But days had become weeks and now there was no relief. Only the roar of the planes and the shuddering crump of explosions as wave after wave of bombers darkened the skies, mechanized birds of prey swooping low to disgorge deadly loads, pounding the city to rubble.

“Speaking to you now, I see her through the windows in all her

greatness and glory, shrouded in smoke, red in flames. Glorious, invincible, fighting Warsaw!”

Mayor Starzyński’s deep, steady voice returned to me. He had addressed the population every evening, his broadcasts a lifeline of courage. So long as Starzyński still spoke, people said as they queued for a loaf of bread or waited out an air raid, surely we had reason to hope.

Two days ago, the radio fell silent. Bombs struck the power station and we heard the voice of our beloved mayor no more. We had no gas or electricity. Our taps had gone dry—the waterworks had been bombed. Now Varsovians had nothing but sand and their own strength to battle the inferno. Food had become all but unobtainable. Bread could scarcely be found, and women stood for hours outside the butcher’s in the hope of a little horsemeat. I would have been more worried about starving, but I had begun to doubt whether we’d last long enough for that.

Since the first day of September, I’d wanted to fight—fight with everything in me. For Warsaw, glorious, fighting Warsaw. For Poland, the country of my birth and of my heart. But in the airless cellar, bodies pressing around me, Stuka bombers screaming overhead, muffled explosions juddering the walls, I wondered, *Are we fighting or are we only dying?*

There had been hope at first. On the third of September, we cheered when Great Britain and France declared war on Germany, embracing friends and strangers in the streets and chorusing “God Save the King” and “La Marseillaise” and then the rousing words of our own anthem, “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego.”

“Poland has not yet perished . . .”

But only two days later, rumors spread that the government had evacuated Warsaw. What a tidy word, *evacuated*. In truth, they had fled, abandoning the capital and its more than a million inhabitants. Mayor Starzyński, however, remained. The following evening, the army issued an order for all men able to bear arms to leave the city and make their way east where they would form a new line of defense. This news suggested the capital would be surrendered without a fight, and thousands streamed out of Warsaw, not only

men but women and children too, a panicked flight as the German army continued to advance.

Contrary to the order issued on behalf of the army, Mayor Starzyński called upon Varsovians not to evacuate but to stay and aid in the defense of the city. Those who had left, he urged to return. Each must do their part. If we held fast, we would be victorious. Morale rose; our purpose had been renewed. Warsaw was ours, and we would not abandon her.

Yet as the curtain fell on the first full week of war, the city lay under siege. By the twelfth day, they no longer sounded the air raid alarm, for hundreds of enemy aircraft overtook the skies each day. We ventured out only when necessary and, then, at a dash. Bombs descended like molten rain, artillery whistled and slammed, tearing craters in the street, in the very place my feet had touched barely a moment ago.

But for as long as I could, I had refused to cower belowground. In an instant, a bomb could fall on our building and I could be buried under the ruins as easily as I could be machine-gunned by a low-flying plane or struck by an artillery shell while crossing the street. Though I could not be a soldier, I certainly intended to do my bit. In response to the call for civilians to dig trenches to fortify the city against the advance of tanks, Helena and I reported, digging as bombs exploded, far enough away for us to continue the work but still uncomfortably close. I flinched at each detonation, but I did not leap into the trench and cover my head as others did. Instead, I gritted my teeth and stabbed my spade into the ground, impaling the baked earth as if it were Hitler's chest and my spade a bayonet.

Scarcely had the war entered its third week when the news reached us. The Soviet Union had invaded Eastern Poland. Germany from the west, north, and south, now the Soviets from the east, squeezing Poland in a vise, crushing her slowly but surely, even as she fought with every particle of her crippled strength.

Hadn't we believed that if war came, it would quickly bring about the defeat of Germany and the restoration of peace? Hadn't people said the German military was poorly equipped, their tanks flimsy, their aircraft running on synthetic fuel not fit for a cigarette

lighter? Instead our troops had been forced repeatedly to retreat. Some had returned to the city in bedraggled columns, their filthy uniforms and glassy stares speaking without words of the situation at the front. Tata had not been among them, and we'd had no word since his departure.

The city was surrounded, cut off, gasping for air, suffocating in the smoke and the flames. Burning alive, and with it, its citizens. Two days ago, German planes had flown overhead, dropping not bombs but leaflets. "*This is our final warning*" declared the message. If Warsaw did not surrender immediately, the city would be utterly destroyed. Not one inhabitant would be left alive.

Warsaw fought on, and our enemy was not one for empty promises.

The quivering flame of a candle stub threw shadows onto the faces of our companions—fellow tenants, refugees, and passersby off the street who had sought shelter in the cellar of our building. There were at least thirty of us. We'd been thrust together, not as neighbors or comrades or even as strangers but as human beings united by the sole desire that the next bomb find its target anywhere but the roof above our heads. Though perhaps some did wish for it, anything to end the awful waiting.

Helena sat beside me, her shoulder pressed against mine. I drew an unsteady breath, the atmosphere rank with unwashed bodies, stale cigarette smoke, and a baby's soiled nappy.

The wail of diving bombers swelled.

One. Two. Three.

The building tremored with another blast.

The old woman opposite us recited the rosary, her gnarled fingers entwined with the beads. "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name . . ."

The throb of planes over the roof all but drowned her papery voice.

I found myself murmuring the prayer along with her, my throat dry from lack of water.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Deliver us.

It wasn't only for us that I meant the prayer but for Tata. For

Marek, too, somewhere in the vast unknown of war. He had tried to enlist the day of the invasion, but the army wouldn't take him. Perhaps the fact that he was Jewish had something to do with it. Though even if he hadn't been, he still might not have had much success in joining the army upon the outbreak of war, for other acquaintances of ours had not been called up and presented themselves to the military authorities with similar results. The manner in which the mobilization had been handled had been a grievance I'd often heard repeated during past weeks.

In the end, Marek left the city on the seventh of September in response to the call for all able-bodied men to head east. He shouldn't be out there. He was born for a world of concertos and sonatas, not bombs and terror. When Marek Eisenberg took up his violin, he didn't merely draw his bow across the strings but gave himself to the notes, each one an invitation not to listen but to experience.

And I loved him. That was why he shouldn't be out there.

In the guttering candlelight, Helena's face was pale, and though she didn't speak, I could feel her slight frame trembling. I wanted to say "it will soon be over" or "we'll be all right," something to comfort her, to steady both of us, but there wasn't anything to say. Nothing that would be true, at least, so I slipped my arm around her and she rested her head on my shoulder. We sat, holding each other, our backs against the clammy wall, as explosions crashed, so many I no longer counted the seconds between the piercing whine of the planes as they dove and the impact of the detonation. One of the neighbors clung to her husband, whimpering as she'd done for hours.

"Why won't it end? Oh, why won't it end?"

The building convulsed. Fragments from the ceiling dislodged in a rain of debris. Women screamed.

"It's a hit," someone shouted.

I coughed, choking on the dust that filled my throat.

A man burst into the cellar. "Fire's spreading to the back of the building." His words came in gasps. "The house next door took the worst of it."

In the murky light, Helena's eyes shone with panic.

"Children and the old, stay here. Everyone who's able, follow me."

In an instant, I was on my feet, Helena beside me. Others rose, moving toward the cellar steps in a herd, our leader's electric torch a bobbing light ahead of us as we ascended the narrow stairs.

It can't burn. I can't let it burn.

"I'll need strong men on the roof. The rest of you, fetch buckets of sand," the man yelled. "Form a line."

I darted into the courtyard after the others.

I stilled. The crackle of burning, the *vrriiii* of the planes, the deafening boom of explosions, my own ragged breaths . . .

The scrape of metal yanked me from my daze. Women and old men dug with spades, filled buckets with dirt. They'd buried some people here last week, so the cobblestones had already been pulled up in a portion of the courtyard.

One of the women thrust a full pail at me. I ran into the entrance hall, pushed the bucket into waiting hands, and rushed out again. Helena had joined the digging, her hair straggling around her cheeks. Our eyes met, a fleeting glance, then someone shoved another pail into my hands.

Running inside, taking the empty pail handed to me, dashing into the courtyard again. I stopped thinking about the planes swarming overhead or anything at all. I only ran.

Flames writhed in the shattered windows on the fourth floor of our building. The fire was spreading.

I snatched a full pail and raced inside. Footsteps clattered as people flooded down the staircase. A stout woman trotted past, arms overflowing with a fur coat, a jewel box, and a silver platter. Pani Puchalska from the second floor.

"What's happening?"

Pani Puchalska turned, shook her head. "Can't be done. Not without water. Best save what we can."

Before I could answer, she'd moved on.

I pounded into the courtyard, the abandoned expanse cast in a strange, dancing light. Only a lone old man continued to dig, shoulders stooped as he filled buckets left behind.

Helena.

Panic tasted of metal. My heavy pail clattered to the ground. I

ran inside, started up the stairs. One flight, two. My lungs burned, my eyes stung. I coughed, gasping for breath.

Smoke filled the third-floor landing. I reached our door, jerked the knob. It turned. The smoke wasn't as heavy inside. Yet.

"Hela!" The shout scraped my raw throat. "Hela!"

Through the sitting room, into the dining room, I ran, shouting my sister's name, the darkened rooms eerily alight.

Into our bedroom. Empty.

I pushed into Tata's room. "Hela!"

My heart stilled.

On the floor beside the bed lay my sister's crumpled body.

No. Please, no.

I rushed to her, dropped to my knees. She lay curled on her side on the glass-strewn floor, her face turned away from me. Blood trickled from a gash on her temple. But her chest rose and fell.

"Hela." I bent over her, touching her shoulder. "Hela."

Somewhere above came shuddering, cracking. I raised my gaze to the ceiling.

"Hela, wake up. You need to wake up." I slapped her cheeks gently, trying to rouse her.

Her lids flickered, her eyes unfocused. "Tosia." Her voice was raspy. "What—what happened?"

"You must get up. We have to go." I put my arm around her, helping her to her feet. "That's it. Come." I led her from the room.

"No. Wait."

I glanced at her.

"Mama's picture." Her words spilled out. "I came to fetch it."

Blood trailed down her cheek, but her eyes sparkled. She wasn't leaving without that picture.

"I'll get it." I ran back into the bedroom. The oval frame wasn't in its usual place on the bedside table. Panic swelled. There wasn't time for this. My gaze swept the room.

There. On the floor. It must have fallen. I snatched up the frame, a crack now webbing the glass, and rushed out again.

A sickening crumbling. The building shook.

Not a bomb blast. The roof. The roof was collapsing.

Bits of plaster fell from the ceiling as we ran, bent into ourselves, choking on the suffocating fumes.

Down three flights, through swirling smoke, clinging to one another.

We sprinted across the entrance hall, staggered outside. Helena coughed. I gulped in air.

A bloody glow illuminated the sky. Marszałkowska Street was burning. Flickering silhouettes rose stark against the night, masses of black smoke roiling above the buildings. Brilliant flashes burst on the horizon, the ground shuddering with detonations. Somewhere close by, a woman screamed.

A man said something about a shelter nearby, called out for everyone to follow him. Wind whipped a dry, crackling heat as we darted down the street. The air was alive with burning cinders, whirling and dancing in the glow of the flames. If they landed on us, I didn't notice. Planes roared overhead, their pulse filling my brain as I ran, my feet pounding the cobblestones, my sister's hand clutched in mine.

A whistle. Searing brightness. A building erupted. Flying brick and glass and enveloping smoke.

Nearly to the other side of the street, I flung a glance over my shoulder.

There it stood, illuminated in a nightmarish radiance. Crackling flames leapt in the gaps where windows used to be, consuming the four-story structure. The place I would always remember as home.

Then I ran. And I did not look back again.

I barely remembered reaching the courtyard where the shelter was. Along with the others, Helena and I stumbled down the short wooden steps into the musty dimness.

Only after I sank to the floor did I realize how badly I was shaking.

As a child, I'd feared sleep and the terrors it held. For months, the sound of my own screams lurched me awake. Tata would rush into my room, his warm arms and strong chest a shelter for my trembling body. Though the panic of those moments had been real, I viewed them now with a kind of wistfulness.

Huddled in an overcrowded cellar, as fire fell from the skies above Warsaw, I said goodbye to the girl who had only dreams to fear.