

Chapter One

Losing Larissa — 1943

The room smelled of soap and the light was so white that it made my eyes ache. I held Larissa's hand in a tight grip. I was her older sister after all, and she was my responsibility. It would be easy to lose her in this sea of children, and we had both lost far too much already. Larissa looked up at me and I saw her lips move but I couldn't hear her words above the wails and screams. I bent down so that my ear was level with her lips.

"Don't leave me," she said.

I wrapped my arms around her and gently rocked her back and forth. I whispered our favourite lullaby into her ear.

A loud crack startled us both. The room was suddenly silent. A woman in white stepped in among us. She clapped her hands sharply once more.

"Children," she said in brisk German. "You will each have a medical examination."

Weeping children were shoved into a long snaking line

that took up most of the room. I watched as one by one other children were taken behind a broad white curtain.

When it was Larissa's turn, her eyes went round with fright. I did not want to let go of her, but the nurse pulled our hands apart.

"Lida, stay with me."

I stood at the edge of the curtain and watched as the woman made Larissa take off her nightgown. My sister's face was red with shame. When the woman held a metal instrument to her face, Larissa screamed. I rushed up and tried to knock that thing out of the nurse's hand, but she called for help and someone held me back. When they finished with Larissa, they told her to stand at the other end of the room.

When it was my turn, I barely noticed what they were doing. I kept my eyes fixed on Larissa. She was standing with three other children. Dozens more had been ordered to stand in a different spot.

When the nurse was finished with me, I slipped my nightgown back on. I was ordered to stand with the larger group — not with Larissa's.

"I need to be in that group," I told the nurse, pointing to where Larissa stood, her arms outstretched, a look of panic on her face.

The nurse's lips formed a thin flat line. "No talking."

She put one hand on each of my shoulders and shoved me towards the larger group. A door opened wide. We were herded out into the blackness of night.

Larissa screamed, "Lida! Don't leave me!"

I looked back into the room, but could not see her. "I will find you, Larissa!" I shouted. "I promise. Stay strong."

A sharp slap across my face sent me sprawling onto the

cold wet grass. I scrambled up and tried to break through the sea of children. I had to get back to Larissa.

Strong arms wrapped around my torso and lifted me up. I was thrown into blackness. With a screech of metal the door slammed shut.