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UPRISING



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While inspired by real events and historical characters, this is a work of historical fiction. The author has tried to be accurate in portraying people, places, and events, but some elements have been fictionalized by the author. Some names have been changed for the sake of privacy.

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CHAPTER ONE

September 1, 1939

If I'd known what was coming that morning, I'd have done things differently. I certainly wouldn't have fought with my mother.

"I want to go with Papa to the lake," I told her. Back then, these were the things we fought about.

It was a perfect late summer day, the kind that made my country of Poland so beautiful. It was also our last day of visiting Grandfather Albin's house in the countryside near Warsaw, and Papa had promised I could see the lake.

But Mama had other plans. "The men will go. They shouldn't have to watch you when they could be fishing."

"No one needs to watch me," I protested. I was twelve years old, plenty old enough to look after myself.

Mama humphed, settling the matter in her mind. She glanced back at me from her position in front of the mirror. "You can help your grandfather here. Do something useful for once."

I held my ground, determined to win. "Papa said we'd all go to the lake today. You and me and Ryszard."

“I have no interest in the lake, and he and Ryszard will have a better time on their own. Go and gather the eggs, Lidia.”

I glared back at her, feeling my temper warm. “What if I ask Papa?”

“Then he will tell you to respect your mother. Gather the eggs so your grandfather doesn’t have to do it.”

I left her bedroom and sauntered downstairs, determined that if I had to be displeased, I’d make sure everyone else was too. Grandfather had a beautiful piano at the bottom of the stairs, one I played as often as I could every day. I knew what Mama would say if I played it now, so early in the morning.

She’d be angry. Even angrier if I played it poorly.

I chose Chopin’s “Minute Waltz.” If I played it fast enough, I’d be finished with it and out the door before Mama could reach me.

I began to run my fingers over the keys, though I was only playing out of revenge, so the song had none of the joy that it should have. Instead, it sounded like the tune of a childish tantrum, which was exactly what this was.

“Lidia!” Mama yelled from her room.

I played to the final note, finishing just in time to hear her footsteps marching toward the stairs. I ran into the kitchen, grabbed the egg basket, and raced out the back door.

The morning sun was low in the sky and a haze hovered in the air, creating a spectacular golden sunrise. I walked deeper into the field to take it in, building a plan in my mind for how to join Papa and Ryszard at the lake. Papa would understand why I did it. Papa always understood me.

Then a distant humming sound interrupted my thoughts, an airplane engine somewhere along the western horizon. I knew the Polish Air Force was constantly on the watch for any sign of

Germans, so this wasn't the first time we'd heard airplanes, but it was always interesting to watch.

I turned to look for the plane, and saw it pass over the tops of the trees, the Nazi cross painted on each wing. My heart slammed against my chest.

That was a German plane!

I dropped the basket with every intention of running but had no idea which way to go. Instead, I crouched low to the ground, glancing up in time to watch the plane's belly open. Something round and gray dropped from it.

A bomb. That could only be a bomb.

Even before I could turn to run, it landed in the hayfield beside the barn, creating an enormous funnel of dirt that rose high in the air and scattered like heavy rain on top of me. That was followed by the creaking sound of one barn wall, which collapsed, then the barn itself toppled over, like it had fallen to its knees.

I was on my knees too, so full of fear that I couldn't make myself move. Instead, the music notes I had just played on the piano were repeating in my head.

Chopin gave Poland the "Minute Waltz."

The Nazis gave us a minute of bombing.

"Lidia!" Papa's urgent voice pulled me back to my senses. "Lidia!"

He was running from the house, his hand outstretched to me. Finally, I stood and ran toward him, stopping only when I saw his eyes become wild with fear as he looked skyward.

I followed his gaze as the world around me seemed to freeze. Everything stopped, except for that bomber, which was circling around toward me.

“He’s seen us,” Papa said. “The pilot has seen us. Lidia, run!”

Papa pushed me ahead of him, shouting to run faster. Chopin’s song played again, each footstep another note. The song moved faster, a pat-a-pat-a-pat as the plane began firing directly at us.

“Don’t look back, just run!” Papa shouted.

So I did, racing toward the house, as if that would be safe, but it was still too far away and the airplane was right behind us now. So close. Too close.

Papa grabbed my arm and pulled me sideways with him. He covered my body with his as we landed in some tall grasses in front of an enormous tree. It was so high that it forced the pilot to pull upward on his plane, and the bullets that had been spraying the path hit the house instead.

By then, there were more engine sounds, more airplanes.

“Mama!” I struggled to get back to my feet. Mama was a stubborn woman, but not strong, not like the rest of us. She wouldn’t know what to do.

“Ryszard will find her,” Papa said. “Your grandfather will protect them both and I’ll protect you. Stay close to me.”

I always did, and always would.

Papa took my hand and together we entered the house. A hole had perforated the door I’d used to walk outside and another one pierced the roof.

No sooner had we entered than more explosive sounds echoed throughout the countryside. With each one, my heart pounded harder. It was too quiet in here. What if the planes returned before we found them?

Papa called out, “Where is everyone?”

A pause followed, a long silence that sent a new wave of panic through me.

Finally, Grandfather called back, “We’re under the piano.”

Papa let out a breath of relief and led me there, where I saw Mama huddled between her father and Ryszard.

“Is it safe?” she asked.

Papa shook his head, his expression somber, but with an intensity in his eyes I’d never seen before. “We can’t stay here.”

Ryszard was first to climb out. He was blond haired, with natural curls I could never seem to achieve. Maybe that’s why he was Mama’s favorite. I didn’t mind that, though. Until anyone proved otherwise, I thought he was almost as perfect as Papa. He brushed himself off and asked, “Will the planes come back?”

Papa was slow to answer. “Most likely, though they’ve already done their work here. The next raid will be somewhere else.”

Outside, we heard a woman screaming. Papa said, “All of you wait here.”

He hurried out the front door and, despite Mama’s objections, I followed. When he saw me coming, Papa turned back. “It’s not safe out here, Lidia.”

“It’s not safe in there either,” I replied. “I want to help.”

The cobblestone road that had been in front of Grandfather’s home was now a giant dirt crater. The woman who had screamed seemed to be in her fifties and was standing at the edge of the crater, wailing for anyone who would listen.

Papa pointed to a boy standing near the woman. “Do you know her?” When the boy nodded, Papa said, “Make sure she gets home safely.”

The boy took her by the arm while Papa stepped out farther to check the skies. Despite what he had said to Ryszard, I asked again, “Will the planes come back?”

This time, Papa didn’t answer, and I understood that he

couldn't possibly know anything for certain. I hated that, the thought that my father, a university professor who always had the answers, could have nothing to offer me now.

After several seconds of staring upward, he said, "The attack doesn't make sense. Why would they target civilians rather than military areas?"

"It destroyed the barn." Tears welled in my eyes and I sucked in a harsh breath. Had I not complained, I'd have been inside that barn. Had I not thrown my tantrum to play the waltz, the barn would've collapsed on top of me.

Papa took my hand again. "Let's go back inside."

Grandfather was tuning his radio as we entered, and we gathered around it with Mama and Ryszard in time to hear the announcer's static-crusted voice say, "The German invasion of Poland has begun. All citizens are urged to take shelter immediately. All able-bodied men are requested to join in the fight to defend the home country."

I looked over at Papa. He had fought in the Great War some twenty years ago, back when he wasn't much older than Ryszard was now.

"Listen carefully, everyone," Papa announced. "We need to get back home. Pack your things as quickly as possible."

"You'll take what food is in the house," Grandfather said. "I have chickens and cows. I will have enough for my needs. But you'll be in the city."

"You must come with us," I said.

Grandfather only shook his head. "I wish instead that you all would stay here."

"Our home is in Warsaw," Mama said. "That's where we must go."

“But we thank you for the food,” Papa said, and shook Grandfather’s hand. His voice was calm, but I saw the expression in his eyes and it terrified me. Papa knew more about what was happening now than he wanted to speak aloud.

I asked him, “What does it mean to be at war?”

Papa frowned back at me. “It means no bread. That’s why we must accept your grandfather’s gift.”

“If there’s no bread, then we’ll eat rolls,” I said, my lame attempt at humor. No one smiled back at me. No one considered it any kind of a joke.

And it wasn’t. If only hunger had been the worst of what was yet to come.