

## CHAPTER ONE



*Warsaw, Poland*  
*September 1939*

Plummeting from the ceiling, the library dome's chandelier exploded into a million crystal shards as it crashed to the floor—the floor polished three days before to a high sheen. Sophie Kumiega dove beneath the reading table as the bomb hit, shielding, as best she could, her stack of first editions, and the baby in her womb. A second bomb rocked stonework and shattered the floor-to-ceiling window, despite row upon row of crosshatched tape. Marble busts exploded. Great chunks of plaster crashed to the floor. Acrid flames burst from the shelves.

“Get out! Get out of the building now!” Stefan Gadomski, the library's junior officer, cried.

“Move those books first! We must save the books!” insisted the librarian in charge, shoving a cart at breakneck speed to the far end of the building.

“If we move them, the next bomb is likely to fall there!” Pan Gadomski shouted.

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“Then we will move them to the basement,” the librarian shouted back.

Sophie could take no more. She’d worked hard to obtain her position in Warsaw’s library—a coup for an English foreigner, a greater coup for a woman. But she would not risk their baby—the baby she and Janek had prayed for, saved for, planned for every day of their married lives. Even now, Janek played cat and mouse in his Polish fighter plane, dodging the Luftwaffe in bomb-bursting skies above. The least she could do was save their unborn child.

She dropped the first editions into their designated crate and had nearly made it to the door when the librarian thundered after her, “Pani Kumiega, come back! If we lose our library, we lose everything!”

But Sophie didn’t turn. She feared she might relinquish her purpose, as crazy as such hesitancy was. She’d always submitted to authority, but not now. Two children had perished within her in two years. This child must live.

Sophie cowered in the shadow of the library door, uncertain which way to turn, to run. Day after day, more of Warsaw was being reduced to a war zone, and still the relentless bombs fell on new targets or punished old. Low-flying Heinkels strafed men, women, children, without mercy, without discrimination.

Finally she dodged between buildings, crouching beneath overhangs and awnings and in the crevices below steps as far and as long as she could. If they could not see her, would she be safe? Which could be worse? To be crushed by a familiar roof or gunned down in the street by German planes? Block after block she alternately crept and ran through the rubble city, praying for the safety of her husband, praying for their baby, praying that their apartment building had not been obliterated. She reached their street and had glimpsed her apartment in the block ahead when a brief whistling came from high overhead, a sudden silence, then a brilliant flash of white light and fire before her, opening a chasm without end.



“Sophia! Dear girl, you must wake up. Please, please, wake up.”

*Janek, dearest Janek.* Sophie barely heard him through dense fog and a constant rumbling in her ears. She tried to open her eyes, but her lids lay too heavy.

“She’s coming round.” Another voice—Pani Lisowski, her neighbor from across the hall, surely.

“Thank God! We thought we’d lost you. I thought . . .”

Through slits Sophie did her best to focus, to find her husband’s face, but it wasn’t there.

“You’re alive. That’s all that matters.” It was her neighbor, her friend, old Pan Bukowski.

Her heart caught. “Janek? Am I bleeding? Am I bleeding?” Fear pushed her up.

“No, no, my dear, lay back—only your forehead and knees.”

“I’ll find bandages. You musn’t get up, not yet.” Pani Lisowski again.

“Your Janek is in the skies, still fighting for us.” She heard the pride in Pan Bukowski’s voice.

Sophie pushed hair from her forehead; her fingers came away sticky and red. “An explosion. I remember an explosion.”

“The whole street is gone . . . rubble.”

“Our apartment?”

“The front blown off—open, like a doll’s house,” Pani Lisowski insisted.

Sophie tried to remember if she’d washed the dishes that morning. What Pani Lisowski must think if she’d left a mess upon the table for all the world to see.

“Stay here, stay quiet,” ordered Pan Bukowski. “I’m going to get help and then salvage what I can. I’ll come back.”

“Don’t leave. Don’t leave me, Janek.” Her mind reached for his coat, but her arms refused to obey.

THE MEDALLION

“Your Janek will be back before you know it. I won’t be gone long. I promise.”

“Bring me—”

“Yes, I’ll bring all I can. Whatever is still there, I will place in your hand.”



When Sophie opened her eyes, she lay on a pallet in a room smelling of smoke and scorched metal, burned paper and wood, smoldering hair. The only light came from a shielded lantern on a small table in the center of the room. Ash crusted her teeth, her tongue, matted the hair stringing her face. The rumble of explosions came from farther away, as if her hearing had dimmed. A dark form huddled in a chair beside her pallet. It was too slight, too slumped, too round to be Janek.

“Pan Bukowski?” she whispered.

The form stirred, sat up, lost its roundness. She heard the vertebrae pop in his neck. “Ah, you are awake, Sophia Kumiega.”

“Pan Gadowski?” She had not expected her coworker, but then, the man was also godfather to her Janek.

“*Tak*, it is I. It’s good to see you in the land of the living. You’ve slept for three days.”

“What are you doing here? Where am I?”

“You are in a storeroom in the basement of the library—the safest place I could find at the moment. Though here we’re likely to be buried in all the knowledge of the ages if this bombing continues. Still, that is better than the rubble of the meat market. At least, I like to think so.”

“But, Pan Bukowski—the last I knew, Pan Bukowski—”

“The radio reports one hundred people have been killed. You won’t recognize the city. The zoo is a shambles. Zebras, lions, tigers, wallabies—they’re saying all the wilds of Africa, of Australia, of the world have escaped. A pedestrian’s nightmare and a hunter’s holiday.”

“What? They bombed the zoo?” It made no sense.

Pan Gadomski shrugged, as if he could read her mind. “What of reason is found in this? Jan’s heart must be broken—he’s poured his life into that work—not to mention Antonina’s.”

“The zookeepers. I know them. Janek and I love to . . .” But she’d heard nothing of Janek since the bombing began. Her eyes must have shown her pleading.

“We’ve heard only that they’re fighting, called back, regrouping, doing all they can. Janek is a good man, a strong pilot. You must trust that, my dear.”

Sophie swallowed, her throat thick. She knew Pan Gadomski worried for him too. He loved her Janek, almost like a son. She wanted to trust.

“Mayor Starzyński is pleading with the citizens of Warsaw to dig trenches—there are signs everywhere, calling us to arm ourselves, to cross the Vistula and regroup for a defensive line. Shovels and trenches against German panzers,” he chided. “Still, I must go and help.”

“Here? Now?”

“Not yet, but they’re coming, crawling their way across Poland, preceded only by hundreds—thousands—of refugees pouring into the city. Ironically, they believe themselves safer beneath German bombers than in the countryside. No matter that most of Warsaw is now without running water, many without electricity.” He shook his head. “All is chaos, but all is not lost . . . not as long as Władysław Szpilman continues to play Chopin for Radio Poland.”

“Pan Bukowski?”

Pan Gadomski looked away. “France and England have declared war on Germany. Between explosions and the rubble of fallen buildings, our citizens rejoice in the streets—they even tossed the French military attaché into the air outside the embassy, all the while singing the *Marseillaise*. Do you know how poorly Poles sing in French?

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Thank God in heaven, at least we won't be alone now. But we must wait it out. Victory will take time."

"Pan Gadomski—where is Pan Bukowski?"

A long moment followed. "He had his son bring you back to the library when you passed out, thinking there might be refuge among the stacks. Apparently your apartment building is no more. I'm sorry."

"Janek . . ." Every picture, every book, every memory of Janek and their life together was in that apartment.

"Your friend sent these for you. There is a photograph of your husband." Pan Gadomski pointed to two bags. "After he sent you back, he salvaged all he could for everyone on your floor, before . . ."

"Before what?"

Pan Gadomski moistened his lips, hesitating again.

"Where is Pan Bukowski?" Sophie insisted, while her heart quickened.

"I'm sorry to tell you that your friend was hit, strafed by a plane as he left the apartment for the last time. His son was with him, caught him as he fell. He did not suffer long, so the son said. He brought these things for you yesterday."

"No . . . no!" Sophie's heart stopped. It wasn't possible. Pan Bukowski, her friend, her only real friend besides Janek since coming to Poland.

"He said his father's last words were for you. 'Tell Sophia to fight, to keep faith.' Something about, 'Remember the Red Sea.'"

*The Red Sea . . . how Adonai will make a way where there is no way . . .* It was what he'd always reminded her of when she was tempted to despair.

The tension and the worry, the anguish Sophie had suppressed ever since Janek left for the battle, ever since the first bombs fell on an unbelieving Warsaw, finally ruptured in her chest. The cry came

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first as gasping breaths, then deep heaves, bursting from a place she'd known only in the losing of her babies—primitive, naked keening.

Pan Gadomski slipped from the room as the storm played out.



When Sophie woke again, the lantern still burned, casting weird shadows on the wall. There was a small loaf of bread and some cheese on the floor beside her pallet, and a cup of water. The smells of burned clothing and hair were still there, but the silence was new. She heard only her own breathing . . . slow, fluid.

And then she remembered. Pan Bukowski. Silent tears escaped her eyes, rivuleting her sooted cheeks, dripping down her neck. She swiped them away and sat up, her swallow painful. Had he been hit while saving her treasures? Nothing she owned was worth that.

Sophie had no idea of the day or the time. She must be in an inner room—no windows. No wonder the bombing had sounded far away. Now she heard no bombing. Whatever that meant, it was a relief.

A cramping in her belly brought her wider awake. She felt for the mound of her baby and breathed, relieved again.

She must get up, must find the restroom, must eat something. But when she pushed back the blanket, her pallet was covered in blood.