

# The Umbrella Maker's Son

## Chapter 1

The night before everything changed, I had a vision.

Zelda gripped my hand, leading me through a pitch-dark forest with no path. The fall air was cool, the sky ink black and moonless. Our footsteps crushed dry leaves and snapped twigs and branches, breaking the haunted silence. Oaks and elms loomed over us with their long and knobby armlike limbs twisting and bending above. An eerie wind, heavy with the scent of damp soil, rustled the dying leaves. The dark wood, full of ghosts, reminded me of my family, making me long for them.

“Which way is it?” I whispered to Zelda.

“I’m not sure. Maybe this way.” Still clasping my hand, she towed me toward the marshy scent of the Vistula River.

We crossed a small meadow of wet tallgrass and entered a tangled thicket that clawed at our arms and legs. The ground turned soft. Black clay sucked at our boots, the pungent river scent growing stronger. Shadows darted between trees. *Germans*, I thought. I wanted to run.

“What’s wrong?” asked Zelda.

“Nothing.” I didn’t want her to think I was afraid.

We followed the rippling sounds of water running over rocks and logs to a clearing. The river revealed itself, its glassy waters shimmering in starlight, snaking between shores overgrown with dense bushes and brambles. Next to the river, several weeping willows dipped their stringy branches into the water. One of them

was the same willow where I had kissed Zelda for the first time, hidden beneath its curtain of branches. We were twelve years old. She had initiated the kiss. I was shy. She was bold. Four years later, at that same willow, I got up the nerve to ask her to marry me. “I will,” she said, “when we’re older.”

She led me to that willow. We sat beneath it, our eyes locked on the river, waiting for a boat to take us north, somewhere far away from the dark forest and shadows. As we watched for the boat, small black domes floated on the surface of the water, drifting toward us. When they got closer, I realized they were umbrellas.

## 2

My alarm abruptly ended the vision at six in the morning. It was the first day of the new month, 1 September 1939. I'd turned seventeen three days earlier. As I lay there in bed, sheets moist with sweat, my mind drifted, disturbed by the vision, unsure of its meaning.

At the foot of my bed, the thin white window curtains fluttered and billowed in the unusually warm wind coming off the river. They reminded me of Zelda's sleeveless blue summer dress with yellow sunflowers. I liked that dress. It showed off her long slender arms, freckled and tanned by sun and wind. I was hoping she'd wear it that morning. We were to meet by the river soon to take our morning walk, a ritual of ours, before parting for work.

I got out of bed, threw open the curtains, and started for the bathroom when a heavy blast echoed in the distance, like a burst of thunder. But that couldn't be right—warm sunlight was pouring through my window. I scanned the morning sky above the three- and four-story apartment buildings lining our neighborhood, Kazimierz. The sky was cloudless, a seamless expanse of brilliant blue. Then another blast, closer this time, rattled the windows and doors. This was not thunder.

I yanked on my suit trousers, nearly ripping a seam, and ran to the sitting room hollering, "What the hell was that?"

"The *farshunkten* reporter knows nothing!" shouted Bubbe—my grandma. Planted in her plush, maroon velvet chair, she was

listening to the radio, drinking black tea from a teacup and saucer with trembling hands, gnarled and arthritic from old age and decades of sewing clothes. She nervously set the teacup on the side table and grabbed the armrests to hoist her barrel-shaped body out of the chair.

Papa leaned out the French doors that opened to the street, searching the sky for clues. His left hand gripped the iron balustrade outside the window, a cigarette pinched between his thumb and index finger, a cup of coffee rocking in his other hand. Dressed in his chocolate-brown suit, he was ready to go to the umbrella shop. He was always ready to leave before me.

He nervously tapped the cigarette against the balustrade to get rid of an ash that wasn't there, took a deep inhalation from it before exhaling a stream of smoke. "Reuven, see over there." He pointed with the cigarette, dribbling a small amount of coffee on his trousers. He didn't notice, and I said nothing. "See what's coming from the airport?"

I leaned out the window and spotted an ominous column of black smoke churning and billowing in the sky. Several large twin-engine planes appeared from the west and circled the city like hawks. Something was so very wrong.