

Day Thirty-Five

SANDRA GAIL LAMBERT

On September 7, 1940, a twenty-mile swath of bombers and their accompanying fighters flew from Germany, over the English Channel, and on to London. The nine hundred and sixty-five planes bombed the city. The raids continued for fifty-seven consecutive days. One million bombs were dropped.

Jostled by neighbors carrying sleeping bags and children and suitcases of precious things, Lena and Yvonne climb the concrete steps. They have spent the night in the tube station. Mother and daughter, arm in arm, they rise toward the gray light above them. They pause at the top. A snow of ash, cotton ticking, and feathers swirls through the air and, mixed with fog and the scent of burnt asphalt, clings to their sweaters. Somewhere there is fire. Somewhere close there will be a home whose mattresses and pillows have been exploded out of windows. A siren signals all clear.

Yvonne rushes ahead of her mother and her gait is a fourteen-year-old mixture of languid woman and bony-kneed gallop. Lena calls her daughter back to her side and teaches by example the brisk walk that is just as fast, but gives no outward sign of panic. They move through the debris on the narrow streets, through the crowds of tired people all doing their own brisk walks, all not quite

breathing until they reach the corner that will give them the first view of their own houses. Before Lena and Yvonne arrive at theirs, a man in a steel helmet intercepts them. It's safe. It wasn't ours. Bernard says this close to the ears of his wife and daughter. It's cruel to announce good fortune. He walks a little way with them, telling light-hearted stories about his night watch, about helping a dog give birth, about the dotty old woman who left her curtains open again. I'm going to have a cup of tea at the warden post. I'll be home to change for work. Lena and Yvonne watch him disappear into a cloud of smoke.

They turn their corner and get the first glimpse. Each house in the row is still attached to the one beside it, and not a single grime-stained brick is thrown into the street. No windows are shattered onto the rose beds underneath them. Lena and Yvonne have developed a routine. Yvonne goes through the house by feel, past the still blacked-out windows, to the bathroom in the back garden. Lena stokes the stove and fills a pot for tea. She sets out three precious eggs to boil and slices the hard end of a loaf. They pass in the hall. Yvonne goes up the narrow stairs to her bedroom where she pulls back the drapes and dresses for school in the thin light. Soon she hears her mother climb the stairs, humming, ready to change into overalls for her factory job. Yvonne is in front of the mirror, trying out a new hairstyle, when her mother screams. She rushes to her parents' bedroom, a brush gripped in one hand.

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