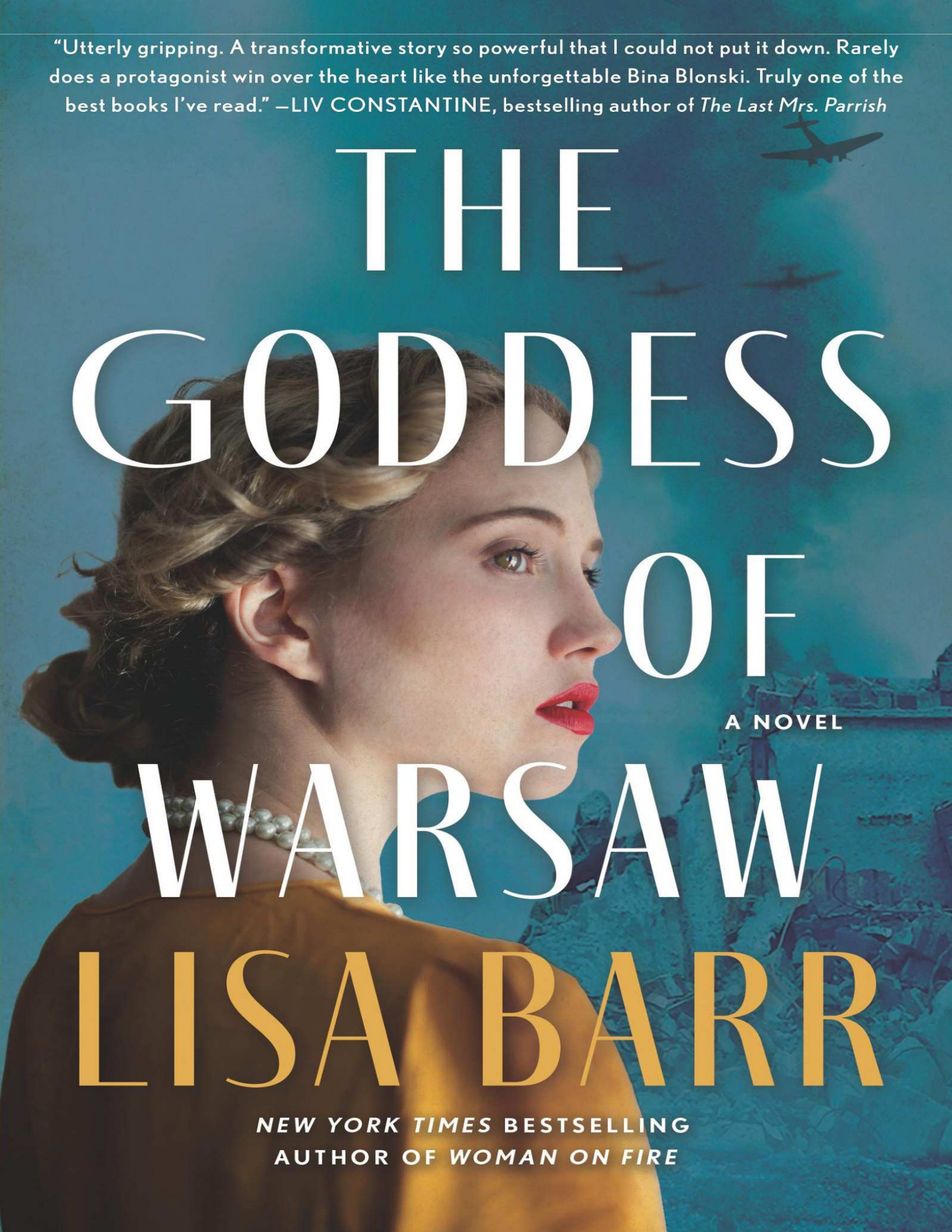


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THE GODDESS OF WARSAW

A NOVEL

LISA BARR

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *WOMAN ON FIRE*

THE GODDESS OF
WARSAW

A NOVEL

LISA BARR

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

Dedication

FOR BRUCE BALONICK

*In loving memory of the man who relished telling everyone
that he was my “first reader”—our thing. Find a cushy cloud
Up There, Bruce, and read this with your favorite tequila.
Miss you.*

Epigraph

I am not a has-been. I am a will be.

—LAUREN BACALL

If you want to see the girl next door, go next door.

—JOAN CRAWFORD

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Prologue

HOLLYWOOD, 2005

THE YOUNG STARLET stares at me with her multimillion-dollar pout, sapphire eyes wide and mesmerized, but she doesn't fool me. I have seen that canned look in her last three movies. Sienna Hayes at twenty-seven is Hollywood's "It Girl"—on the cover of every grocery-store rag and getting paid more than any other actress in town. She is the fresh new face of filmdom, and I'm the stale, old "Living Legend" with the obvious wig and the barely there penciled-in brows.

She sits cross-legged on the couch in my library (rumor has it that those extralong stems are insured for \$10 million). I can see why she is a major box office draw. "Fuckable" is what the studio heads in my day would have said about her, what they used to say about me behind my back—as if I didn't hear. But this young woman is not in my home to gossip or to braid my hair. She wants something from me. I know what it is, and I'm going to make her work for it. Let's see what she's made of.

"So . . . my agent said you needed to see me, that it was urgent," I purr, jasmine tea in hand, pinkie finger extended in a perfected side split as though I were the Queen of England. I allow the delicate cup to graze my mouth but not touch it. I take my time and see the unnerving effect this has on the girl, who is now wagging a shiny, red-lacquer-bottomed stiletto in anticipation. *Good.* I remain silent for two additional elongated sips. "What brings you here?"

The wagging halts, and the girl's lineless face the color of clotted cream lights up, reminding me of the fake oversize moon in my 1953 picture *Moon Over Monaco*. "Ms. Browning," she gushes. "You're the reason I became an

actor.”

I put down the teacup with a harder thud than I'd intended. *Oh God, spare me.* Holding my breath, I wait for the next predictable line. *My mother and grandmother have seen every one of your films.* I could write this highly disappointing conversation starter with my eyes closed.

“And now”—she leans forward, her gushing expression waxes feral—“you’re the reason I decided to become a director.”

Now we’re talking.

“A director?” I feign surprise. When my agent first mentioned this, admittedly, I flipped. Who the hell does she think she is? The girl has been in the biz just shy of seven years. Add seventy-eight to that number and you’re looking at me. Do the math. Yes, eighty-five. I have been a working actress since I was in my teens. “A little ambitious, wouldn’t you say?” I arch my brow and lower my chin—my signature “look” seen in all my films.

Sienna slowly runs her fingers through her long, highlighted blond hair as though she were searching for a hidden treasure among those thick, enviable golden strands. I’ve seen that gesture too—everyone has. “Perhaps,” she says, treading carefully. “But I’m so over the ‘It Girl’ label. That’s not why I became an actress. I set out to do something real, serious, make movies that matter.” She pauses. “I’m here because I want to direct a biopic of *your* life. Act *and* direct—call my own shots.”

Call her own shots. Movies that matter—hah! So young, so green, so infuriatingly bold. I stare her down. *You think this is your big idea, Sienna?*

The sole reason I chose Sienna Hayes from among the slew of blond, blue-eyed cookie-cutter actresses who have yearned to portray me over the years, who were determined to take on the “glamorous” life of Lena Browning, filled with the clichéd revolving door of leading men, furs, flash, and crimson Rolls Royces, is because *she* wants to direct the film. Not some overpaid Hollywood hack I couldn’t control. This girl, malleable and inexperienced, is perfect for what I need—to steer the chain of events.

“Interesting,” I respond vaguely, betraying nothing.

Pushing aside the tea, I lean back with a dramatic arm drape over the couch. I raise my brow for an encore performance, only higher. These brows (which I famously refused to tweeze) have made headlines throughout my career. The most memorable caption that still makes me chuckle was splashed across the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*: LENA BROWNING’S EYEBROWS STEAL THE SHOW. Of course, I framed it. And yet, these brows, once

lush statement makers, are now wilted. That's the curse of having possessed luminous beauty. It fades too quickly before everyone's eyes—and all you have left is shadow, a silhouette of what was once exceptional.

Cocking my head slightly, I observe the young woman closely, this baby director wannabe. Undeniably beautiful, Sienna Hayes is not the typical glorified stripper I see prancing around town. She is feline, elegant, and sensual, like a slow dance. This girl could take on any role she wants for any amount of money with a snap-snap of her fingers. *So why this, why now, why me?*

"You don't know me at all." I challenge her with my long, bony, bejeweled finger, keeping up the charade.

"I've done my research," she says, shoulders squared and determined.

"Research—*please*." I let out a cackle. "Let's see . . . the men, the booze, the pills, the ups and downs. Tabloid fodder." I reach for my Chesterfields. I'm not supposed to smoke. My doctors forbade me once the cancer made its debut in my esophagus three months ago. But I have smoked my entire life. *These aren't cigarettes*, I assured the handsome young doctor. *These are a prop, just like that stethoscope around your neck. I'm not about to stop now.* Pulling my silk robe tighter, I lean toward Sienna. "My story—the one you *think* you know—like your own name, Miss Hayes, is pure Hollywood fabrication."

She flinches slightly. I admit, that was a low blow. Her real name is Sally-June Johnson, from a nowhere town in Arkansas, a pretty little girl whose single mother pushed her into kiddie beauty pageants to support her drug habit and then overdosed in her trailer. Sally-June found her. I do my homework too.

Sienna meets my eyes with a formidable gaze. "Clearly, Ms. Browning, you don't know me either," she counters boldly. And I'm admittedly impressed. She hasn't been in town long enough to earn the right to stand up to me. Not a shrinking violet. I like that. "I am here because I *want* to know you." Her searing baby blues ignite. "I know what they've done to me. I can only imagine what they did to you."

I throw my head back and belly laugh. But it's not a laugh; it's a lifetime in one sound. "That's the thing, honey . . . You've been around the block for maybe five minutes. You can't possibly even begin to imagine," I drawl. And I don't have a southern accent, but it works for this scene.

I think back to all the Hollywood moguls I encountered, with their fat

bellies and chunky cigars hanging from their salivating grins . . . This girl is too young, too overpaid, to understand any of it—my past or my path. Perhaps I was too quick to roll the dice with her. I cross my arms, wait for her next move.

Wordlessly, Sienna stands, takes a breather without asking permission, walks around the room, and observes the shelves filled with photos and stills from all my films, my myriad awards, charity affiliations, honorary college degrees—all the razzle-dazzle and glitz. This is not merely a library, rather it's a makeshift Hollywood historical museum. Those personal items that really matter to me remain under lock and key in my bedroom safe.

She spins around on her high heel purposefully. “I want to get behind the façade, behind ‘the Face.’ They call me ‘the Face,’ too, you know.” She folds her arms defiantly, as though she were my equal.

“No, I haven’t heard that,” I lie. And yes, maybe I am being a little competitive, but I want Sienna to know from the get-go that she is nowhere near my match.

She exhales deeply. “I hope to create something authentic so that young actresses can learn what it really takes to succeed in this brutal business—the climb without the illusion. You are a legend, Ms. Browning, a woman who did it all. You called the shots when no actress in your day could. You were the highest paid actress of your time and the first to make serious demands in your contracts and get what you wanted. The ‘no crying’ clause was groundbreaking. This is not just about you—it’s about control. It’s about teaching aspiring actresses that they can be the leading lady of their own careers.”

She moves toward me with the grace of a catwalk model. “I want to know who you really are, what makes you tick. Forty-one films . . . every leading man who mattered, roles in which you were not simply arm candy, rather the main draw. You never married or had kids. Yet you gave birth to the term ‘femme fatale.’ I mean”—she points at me—“you are *goals*.”

“Goals?” I counter with a sneer. “Please don’t reduce me to that.”

I stare at the girl. She has no clue. *Never married, no kids*. She should only know what happened to my husband and the baby growing inside my belly. Who can blame her? No one knows. But she’s trying. A grandiose speech, as far as elevator pitches go. Some might even call it *moving*. She wants to create an indie film for a mainstream audience to take seriously. But can anyone really grasp the depths of hell in a mere two hours? I shake my

head. This girl will never be the same after I'm through with her.

Sienna's eyes expand to saucers, her hands clutch her hips like a folk dancer. She is clearly not backing down. "I'm not here to pitch you, Ms. Browning. We can leave the bullshit to our agents. I came only to prove to you that I am worthy of you. Don't judge me. I may look a certain way, but it's not who I am. My sense is that your Hollywood story is not who you are."

Not bad. Taking an unintended deep breath that I can feel quake at my chest, I stand, too, sluice around the library for dramatic impact, feeling Sienna's hot gaze at my back. I pivot, then plant myself in front of her, peer directly into her captivating eyes. She is tall, practically my height. My once celebrated mouth is just inches from hers.

"Let's be clear. I am not a star. I am a comet—a ball of gas, rock, and debris camouflaged in a spray of light." My gaze narrows as if she were a lowly grip on my set. "Here's what you don't know, Miss Hayes, what the *Enquirer* has not yet uncovered . . . Browning is not my real name. It's the make of the gun I used to kill the Nazi who pistol-whipped my father to death."

She stumbles backward slightly, but I lunge toward her in my fur kitten-heeled slippers. "How's that for the Face? Did you know, Sienna, that I've killed more people in real life than my characters have in my movies?" The eyes pop wider. *Yes, yes, darling. Shall I keep going?*

"My life is not a manual for young starlets," I spit out, feeling the errant droplets dot my lips. "It is a survival kit for animals—daunting and tumultuous. Contrary to popular opinion, my superpower was *not* my looks, but my brain and my will to survive. My strategic ability to one-up all those men who tried to put me in my place. And I'm not talking about skirting Hollywood's infamous couches and scoundrels." My smoky voice morphs into a calcified whisper. "Are you ready for this, Sienna? Are you prepared to go the distance, to push aside the Walk of Fame Disney version and do something that's dark, harrowing, but real?"

"More than ready." The girl's breath is equally heavy. I feel the warm stream of it loll against my face. Her voice is raspy, too—not my level of depth, but in time she will get there. Sally-June Johnson from the trailer park, child beauty queen at seven years old, with her Crayola-blue eye shadow, cheap drugstore lashes, and microscopic sequined showgirl dress—a pedophile's centerfold—is ready to play me, direct me, *be* me. I see it inside

her fervent flashing pupils, in the same way I know the exact shot my cameraman captures of me from any vantage point.

Sienna Hayes is about to land this coveted role, but with one caveat. “There is a nonnegotiable before I approve any of this.” I am prepared, as always. I know my lines, my worth. “Nothing is free, Sienna. In my day, you paid the piper. In your day, you have options—you can *be* the piper. Different times . . . better times.”

My voice softens slightly. I may be tough and tested, but I’m not stone cold. I have loved hard, been loved even harder. “Give me your hand, young lady.” She obeys. “Smooth and lovely, with so much potential.” I then let it fall to her side and show her mine. “Like a dried-up branch that snapped off a rotted tree.” I laugh, but not really, as I gaze down at the canvas of brown spots, the skin so thin it could split open at any moment. I feel a burning sensation judder between my breasts, which my doctors warned me about. “I’m asking you one last time: Are you strong enough to direct what may take down everyone’s distorted image of the ‘Great Lena Browning’?” I have always found it extremely effective to talk about myself in the third person.

“Yes,” she says without hesitation, her fixated gaze never leaving mine.

Surprisingly unintimidated, the girl reclaims my hand. I can see down her blouse, at the lovely twin mounds that gave her instant fame when she bared them for the camera. A mistake she can’t undo. But when I look up, her eyes are keener, more intelligent than she’s been given credit for. And that’s why she is here, why she needs me. She yearns to be more than live feed for teen boy fantasies. It’s a win-win.

Admittedly, with her flawless skin and sharp cheekbones, she is the perfect physical match to play the younger me—a woman who could seduce with her lashes while picking your pocket. An actress renowned for her Waspy looks but who is really a Jew. A woman who slept with countless men but loved only one. An assassin who killed for good reason and didn’t think twice about the blood on her hands, only about the blood that stained her dress, because at the time she didn’t own another one.

“This is not a ‘Liz Taylor and her seven husbands’ story.” My voice is taut, unrelenting. “There will be betrayal, deception, death, blood, and revenge—all the cinematic goodies that your audience will devour with their buttered popcorn and Raisinets. But if I agree to this”—I transmit my seasoned stare that has brought decades of men to their knees—“then you’re going to do the ending *my* way. I will be performing, and *you* will direct it.”

“D-Do you mean . . .” she stutters as I return to the couch.

“Yes . . . the last segment of your biopic is going to be in real time. I intend to correct my past while I still can.” I pour each of us more tea, then pause, chin down, cerulean gaze smoldering. “Do we have a deal?”

Her cheeks turn flush, her eyes glow. She’s seeing Oscar gold. “Hell yes.”

Book I

WARSAW

1943

Chapter One

I STARE AT ALEKSANDER'S long, muscular back through his sweat-stained matted shirt as he leads us underground into the grainy darkness of the sewer passageway. I imagine the naked contours of his body beneath the sticky material and my heart hammers. It doesn't matter that I am covered in rot, slime, and stink. All that matters is that I am near him. Despite the stench drowning my nostrils, his musky scent is intoxicating. I cling to it, inhaling his essence as my husband, Jakub, trails a few paces behind. I am sandwiched between the two men I love. Scratch that. One I love, the other I want to devour. Take a guess which is which.

Yes, I'm going straight to hell, even though, let's be honest, I am already here. There is no escape out of the ghetto—our prison sentence for being born Jewish. Right now, in the bowels of the sewer, we are trying to stay alive, smuggling supplies for ourselves and others. And yet, this death trap is no match for the lust eclipsing my heart, the constant unrequited craving. If I die tomorrow, I want him. Once. I'm asking you, God. You've taken so much already. Give me Aleksander and the rest of my fate is yours to play with. Do we have a deal?

Aleksander turns, as though cued. His forehead drips with adrenaline. "You okay, Bina?"

Am I okay? Do I laugh now or later? Not okay. Nowhere near okay. I'm walking through waste and contaminated knee-high water for food and medicine. Could it be possible that just a few years ago I was sashaying across a magnificent stage in a custom-made costume to a standing ovation? I must have dreamt that, not lived it. But the way Aleksander's green eyes sparkle—a magnetic glint in the shadows—somehow makes everything, even the worst of it, okay. If we die right now, right here, and his face is the last I

see, that would be enough. Except it is not enough. I want him inside me, penetrating me, releasing me—then I swear, I will go, surrender myself to this cruel, bottomless night. My husband’s hand suddenly clasps my shoulder protectively from behind, puncturing my duplicitous thoughts. I turn slightly. A sharp reminder: *Snap out of it, cheater.*

“Are you okay?” Jakub asks, as if Aleksander hadn’t asked the same question just seconds earlier. There are only three of us here—he heard.

“Yes, kochanie. And you?” I touch my husband’s arm and camouflage my guilt with an endearment. A lie covering a lie—my specialty these days.

Before Jakub can respond, we all jump back, startled, as a loud barrage of gunfire pounds above our heads, followed by piercing screams. Not screams of war, but the hauntingly familiar cries of more terrorized Jews. Like dominoes, we fall. Like stepped-on rodents, we flatten. It doesn’t stop. The gunshots, the cries for help, the deafening silence, the repetitious sounds of unnatural death. Acceptable Murder—a Nazi Olympic sport—day in, day out. While we sleep. If we sleep. Will we ever sleep again?

We stop in our tracks, trying desperately to ignore the pervasive thought banging in our heads: *When is it our turn?*

Aleksander stops walking, points upward. “Damn it, those bastards showed up. That’s not the information we got earlier. There’s a good chance the exit may be sealed shut or surrounded. But still, we need to get Bina outside somehow.” He searches his older brother’s face for answers.

Yes, his brother. I know . . . I’m a terrible person. But not always. This war—this brutal attack against us—has changed me, destroyed what was once good, sensible, faithful. The three of us have lost so much. Aleksander lost his wife and my best friend, Karina, and their baby daughter, after their home was set on fire by the Nazis before we were herded into the ghetto. He survived the blaze; they didn’t. And as for us . . . I glance back at Jakub, then quickly push away those images . . . I can’t think about that right now, or the guns firing above us. Better to focus on Aleksander’s muscular shoulders. Better to think about touching him—about anything live, kinetic. Move forward. Stay in motion. Outsmart them. The only way to survive this endless nightmare is to pretend that our past, the lives we once thought belonged to us forever, never existed. This is who we are now: smugglers, fugitives, burglars—those dregs of society we once called criminals.

My face is our ticket to survival. I have been able to fool the Nazis because of my appearance. I am a tall, willowy, blond, blue-eyed Jew—not

the stereotypical mousy, cowering Jewess falsely depicted in their anti-Semitic propaganda, rather the dreamy breed of Aryan goddess seducing an entire nation. This face enables me to slip out of the ghetto to the Aryan side, past the ten-foot-high walls covered in glass splinters and barbed wire with fourteen tightly guarded entrances, without getting shot. I have been successfully smuggling food and medical supplies through the sewers for nearly two years. I pretend that I am one of them, move among them freely. But sadly, the Nazis are no fools. They are ravenous monsters, lurking at every corner, waiting for me to trip, fall, betray myself and others. One slipup, and this guise is over.

I glance again at Jakub and see the look I do my best to avoid. Pain, despair, and resentment rolled into one tormented gaze. My husband is forced to turn the other cheek for what I'm about to do. Smuggling has a steep price. Let's call it what it is: whoring for food and medicine. Yes, fucking for potatoes and antibiotics if basic flirting doesn't work. That's who I am now.

Jakub and I never discuss it aloud, but it's there, the silent executioner between us, permanently destroying what little we have left in our young, thwarted marriage. Those heavy-hooded accusatory eyes speak volumes. I see it, feel it, but act like I don't. This war has turned me into that kind of human—someone who ignores her husband's pain, who desires her husband's brother, who seduces for scraps of food and medical supplies, who steals with a counterfeit smile, to feed him, myself, others. Survival is not heroic; it is ugly. All those things you would never do in a normal, moral, refined life is now your only way of life.

Don't get me started on how many we have lost in this war. Thousands. Countless men, women, and children. Family, friends, neighbors. The ten-block radius of the sealed ghetto was once crammed with nearly four hundred thousand Jews. Thirty percent of Warsaw's population was Jewish, the largest Jewish community in Europe. But they have murdered so many of us at this point—including at least 99 percent of our children.

The three of us are among the sixty thousand Jews who remain. We used to be among Warsaw's elite. Aleksander used to be a celebrated painter. I used to be an actress. Jakub used to be the top journalist for *Nasz Przegląd*. We used to be wealthy. We used to drink fine wine and talk about books and art and theater. We used to laugh. We used to be secular, cultural Jews, mingling with the upper echelon of Warsaw society. We used to speak only Polish—not Yiddish, like most of the ghetto inhabitants. A maid used to

wash my hair, and another used to lay out my clothes. Our so-called friends used to be loyal, until they eagerly handed us over to the Nazis like Beluga caviar on a platter without blinking an eye or pausing between shots of Żubrówka. We aren't just Jews, I tell Jakub. We are inhabitants of a planet called Used to Be.

Despite appearances, I do know right from wrong. The other Bina—the one who used to laugh hard and live large—would be mortified by my transformation. If Jakub's mother knew . . . but she's dead. Or his father. Dead. Or my parents and sister—all dead. Two sets of grandparents—gassed on the first transport to Treblinka. The baby I was carrying . . . dead too. The only light in all this darkness is that no one I loved and cared about will ever know the extent of my desire for Aleksander, my burning for a man I can never have.

I have been professionally trained to pretend and camouflage. The other Bina was once a drama major at the Warsaw Imperial Academy of Dramatic Arts, a top student. So much promise. Gifted, my teachers used to say, destined for greatness. Little did they know that my acting skills, especially here in the ghetto, would be the gift that keeps on giving.

It feels like hours, but it's only minutes before the shooting above us stops. We wait until the ear-piercing screams wane, the surrounding voices grow dim, and the careening screech of vehicles diminishes. We wait until the wait itself is unbearable. And then quietly, coolly, Aleksander lifts Jakub onto his broad shoulders. My husband feels the movement of the unsealed sewer lid above us and lightly pushes it up, revealing a narrow stream of icy night air and light. He takes a panoramic view of the area, peers down at us, and nods, then quickly returns the lid to its place. Regaining his footing on the sewer floor, Jakub gives me one last lingering, heavily hooded look: Showtime.