

CHAPTER ONE

Six students sat scattered across mismatched tables and chairs. Felcia Hodak looked on as they furiously scribbled and allowed herself a wry smile. It had been over three years since she taught at Kraków's prestigious Jagiellonian University. In August 1939 her boss had called her into his office and announced she would be promoted to associate professor, taking over several classes. It had been Felcia's proudest moment, and she had taken to the preparations with zeal. How much her life had changed since.

"I don't think this is quite right."

She looked up to see the confused face of Julian, the youngest—and brightest—of the group. "What's that?" Felcia stood and crossed the short distance to his little table, leaning to follow where his finger was pointing at the textbook.

"I can't make this formula work, however hard I try."

"Let me see what you've got so far." She patiently listened to his reasoning and quickly identified where his train of thought veered off the rails. It took her five minutes to convince him the formula in the book was correct after all, and he reluctantly returned to the assignment.

Felcia returned to her small desk and enjoyed the quietness of the

surroundings, the soft scribbling of pencils on paper the only sound. The clock on the wall ticked over to half past five. They had half an hour left, another ten minutes to finish the assignment. It gave her some time to consider her position. A botanist by trade, she'd discovered she enjoyed teaching a wider array of subjects in her clandestine classes. When Professor Sobczynski approached her to teach high school students a year ago, she hadn't expected she would enjoy it quite as much as she did. Now she couldn't imagine spending her afternoons anywhere else but in the small apartment in the nondescript building just outside Kraków's city center. She checked the textbook, but it was hardly necessary. She could solve these equations without even thinking about them, and she was curious to see how the students had fared.

"Okay, everybody, that's it." Her voice was soft, but she spoke with authority. "I know Julian had a creative interpretation of the formula, so I can't wait to see what the rest of you came up with." The other students chuckled while Julian looked up bashfully, and Felcia gave him a quick, reassuring smile. "Kasia, why don't you start?"

Before the tall girl could speak, the screech of tires and roar of engines sounded from the street two stories down. Felcia raised her hand to signal silence, but it was unnecessary. The entire class sat frozen, six pairs of eyes focused on the window. Felcia could feel her heart beating in her ears as the vehicles halted in front of their building, brakes grinding. Doors opened, boots landed on the pavement, and a booming voice shouted commands in a language Felcia had become accustomed to hearing everywhere for the past three and a half years. Fear gripped her throat, and she swallowed hard. *I'm in charge, I need to be strong.* Her hands were shaking and she gripped the sides of her desk. The young students in her care looked oddly calm, with the exception of Kasia, who was shaking in her seat.

"Everybody stay quiet," Felcia whispered just loudly enough to get the students' attention. "We don't know they're here for us." She had trouble believing her own words, and she hoped her voice didn't betray her. Two of the students nodded; the others turned their gazes to their desks while they listened to what was happening outside.

Car doors slammed, and for a moment all was quiet outside, but

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Felcia could feel their presence, even from two stories up. A gruff new voice barked a short command that spurred the men back into action, their boots pounding on the pavement. Felcia held her breath. Seconds later the unmistakable cracking of wood confirmed a door was broken down. The building's front door. Felcia closed her eyes and tried not to despair. *Keep it together. These kids can't see you break down.* The sound of boots reverberated through the open staircase of the building.

She opened her eyes; there was nothing she could do but wait. There was only one way out of the building, and it was no longer an option. If they were coming for her, she was leaving with her head held high. She'd seen enough of the men in green uniforms to know they fed on the fear of those they hauled off. Listening closely, she estimated there must be at least a dozen of them, if not more. She would not fight or cower; she would deny them that pleasure.

Slowly rising from her chair, Felcia placed her hands flat on the desk. Her students looked up wide-eyed, and she made it a point to meet each and every one of their gazes. The first of the intruders had reached their floor, heavy footsteps audible at the far end of the hallway. She took a deep breath and glanced at the rickety wooden door that was their only protection. They would be here any moment now.

"We will not show fear. We will stand tall and proud. This is our country, not theirs." Felcia's voice trembled while she whispered the words loud enough for the students to hear. "Say nothing."

The stomping reached their door, and Felcia took two steps toward it, placing herself between her students and their assailants. She could feel the eyes of the six young people burning into her, and she threw her shoulders back. *No fear.*

Time appeared to stand still as Felcia braced for the inevitable.

When the crash came, she shut her eyes but caught the shriek welling up from her throat before it could escape her lips. Floorboards creaked as boots thundered inside, a host of voices screaming a confusing number of commands in German. High-pitched voices of children mixing with the baritones of grown men jerked Felcia back to the present. She opened her eyes to find their front door intact. She shook her head in confusion as the sounds of the raid flooded her senses.

She turned around to find her students gaping back at her. They looked horrified, surprised, and relieved as their heads were turned to the wall to their right. The adrenaline coursing through Felcia's veins subsided and she took a deep breath. *They're not here for us.*

The family of four kept to themselves. Felcia estimated the two girls were five and seven, both cute as buttons with their blond curls. The brutes in green hauled them down the stairs, their little wails for their mama echoing. Felcia could hear the woman's voice begging to follow her daughters, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. Felcia's heart froze with fear. Had she been teaching her underground class next to a hiding place all this time?

The woman didn't respond, repeating in a stupor her pleas to join her daughters. Felcia couldn't imagine what she was going through. The little girls had reached the street below, their cries filtering in through the open window.

"Let her go, and I will lead you to the Jews." A strong male voice spoke defiantly, and Felcia gasped in horror. "You can do what you want with me, but please spare my wife and children. They have nothing to do with this."

Felcia returned her attention to her students—Kasia had gone pale as a sheet, while Julian looked like he might throw up any moment. The other four sat motionless, captivated by the horror unfolding on the other side of the thin wall. *They have probably only heard of these things happening.*

"Fine, we'll let her join your daughters." Felcia recognized the voice of the man who had issued the order to storm the building earlier. "I'm a father myself, and I understand you need to think of your family. You're making the right decision."

It was silent for a moment, then soft footsteps sounded. A number of heavier footsteps followed, and Felcia heard the jingling of keys. Felcia let out a breath she didn't know she was holding as she pictured the man walking toward the hiding place. *It must destroy him to betray those people.* Even though Felcia didn't have a family, she understood his choice. A door creaked open, and Felcia closed her eyes.

A loud crash shook the floor, and animal-like roars resounded from the other apartment. The sound of something wooden splintering

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against the wall was unmistakable, and it was followed by a roar of pain. One of the Germans swore loudly as he called for his colleagues. It took a while for the men in green waiting in the hallway to make it to the room, and the struggle continued. *They're fighting back!* Her pulse was racing, but she also knew the efforts of those brave souls on the other side of the wall would be in vain once the other troopers arrived. More cries in Polish and German. Felcia could almost see the people from the hiding space hacking away with whatever crude weapons they possessed.

The fight ended as abruptly as it started. The backup from the hallway arrived and opened fire without warning. The guns in the confined space sounded like explosions, and Felcia's hearing went in an instant, a high-pitched ringing in her ears blocking out all other sound. Unable to follow what was happening in the apartment next door, she felt disoriented as she shook her head, trying to regain hearing. The ringing only intensified as she heard distant, muffled gunshots. Despite that, she could still feel the reverberation of the guns fired on the other side of the wall.

She held her hands over her ears and forced herself to focus. *I need to keep these kids safe.* Looking up, she saw the students in her little classroom were in various states of disarray. Julian and Kasia sat shaking, while the other four had covered their ears, their heads down on their tables, withdrawn into their own refuges. Felcia stood and waved at them, drawing Kasia's eyes, who tapped the girl sitting next to her. Within seconds, she had the attention of all six students. They looked up at her wide-eyed, but with clarity. Felcia put one finger to her lips, while she motioned with her other hand up and down slowly. The students nodded and remained at their tables while they waited for the violence to subside.

The sound of her surroundings rushed back to Felcia. The shooting had stopped, but the effects of the massacre could be heard through the wall. People were groaning, one man wailing incoherently and incessantly.

"Take the live ones outside and line them up in the middle of the street. Leave the bodies." It was the same voice she'd heard before, no doubt the commanding officer. Felcia looked to her students and was relieved none of them had moved. They sat motionless as they listened

to the events unfolding next door. More cries seeped through the wall as the German soldiers dragged people outside.

It took but a few minutes for the apartment to be cleared as the wailing faded down the stairway. Felcia stood and walked to the window, peeking through the blinds and into the wet street below. She caught the first soldiers exiting the building, unceremoniously dragging their prisoners down the building's small steps and into the street. Even from the third floor Felcia could see that the men forced to kneel in the middle of the dark street were in a sorry state. Blood was forming puddles around them, and one was unable to stay upright. One of the troopers grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head backward. It drew no response from the apathetic man as his shoulders slumped forward, his entire upper body held in place by the German's iron grip on his hair.

Felcia wanted to look away, but something forced her to keep watching. *These people deserve to have witnesses.* Four men were lined up when a woman stumbled out of the building, almost losing her balance as the soldiers pushed her down the steps. Her panicked cries filled the empty street as she collapsed to her knees in front of one of the soldiers, holding up her hands in a pleading gesture.

"Please don't kill me! My children need me. What will happen to my darlings?" Her voice was shrill and filled with emotion. Felcia felt her eyes burning, her heart aching for the woman. The soldiers paused and looked back. A large man in a different uniform appeared from the building. He stopped and looked down at the woman on the wet pavement. When he opened his mouth, Felcia recognized the voice of the commander.

"Get up, woman, and face your death with some dignity. Your children will be taken care of. You forfeited your life when you hid those filthy Jews in your house."

An ear-piercing shriek filled the night sky as the woman collapsed on the ground, tremors taking over her body.

In a move that surprised Felcia, the German commander unbuckled his sidearm and aimed it at the woman's head. She was still banging her hands on the pavement with the same relentless energy. With what appeared like a shake of the head the man pulled the trigger, silencing

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the woman as her lifeless body slumped onto the cold, wet street. He calmly replaced his gun and stepped over her body, toward the men lined up in the middle of the street.

A flick of the wrist was enough for four rifles to go off simultaneously, bringing silence to the street once again.

CHAPTER TWO

Sabina Krupka stepped into the kitchen to find her parents halfway through their breakfast. She gratefully accepted the boiled egg her mother handed her.

“Eat, eat. You’ve got a long day ahead, don’t you?”

“Full day at school.” She cracked the egg, pleased to find it soft-boiled—just how she liked it. “It’s a nice break from spending my afternoons in that stuffy filing room.” She scooped her egg onto a small piece of dark rye bread and took a bite.

Her father frowned from across the table. “You should be pleased with that job, Sabina. It’s difficult to get a job these days, never mind a cushy one in an office.”

“You’ve seen the girls working the fields and factories, right?” her mother chimed in.

Sabina sighed. They had this conversation at least once a week, and it was exhausting. “I know, I know. I’m thankful, but I love going to school. It makes me feel at least a little normal.”

Her father’s face softened, and he put his fork down. “I’m sorry, sometimes I forget you’re only seventeen years old. You’ve grown up so quickly these past two years. Your mother and I are proud of you for juggling school and your job.”

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Sabina took another bite. Her parents meant well; it wasn't easy for them, either. It was hard to believe it had been three years since the Nazis evicted them from their home in Rajsko. And they had been among the fortunate ones, as her father worked a job as an overseer in a nearby mine. It meant they were assigned a new house a few kilometers up the road in the city of Oświęcim. Most of their neighbors were less fortunate, deemed less essential by the Nazis, and moved to the new General Government area a few hundred kilometers to the east. Sabina hadn't heard from her friends who had moved there, and she often worried about them. Especially knowing what horrors were unfolding only a few kilometers down the road.

Her father finished his plate and stood. "Speaking of work, I should be heading out. No doubt the Germans will be bringing plenty of new workers into the mines today, and we need to get all of them up to speed." He placed his plate in the sink and let out a heavy sigh. "For what it's worth, anyway."

"That bad, still?" Her mother stood and put a hand on his arm.

"It's only getting worse, I'm afraid. They upped the quotas last week. I've worked in this mine for twenty years, and what they're expecting from these people is impossible." He leaned on the table and met Sabina's eyes. "Even if they sent us strong, well-fed men used to working in the mines, we would struggle to reach half of the quota. But these people, well, you've seen them on their marches to work every morning, right? Every day, they drop like flies. Yesterday, we had four carts loaded with bodies before midday." His voice trembled, and Sabina felt sorry for her father. It wasn't the first time he shared the miserable conditions in the mines. At first, he'd tried reasoning with the SS officers, but they had quickly told him to shut up and just do as he was told. When he insisted the workers they sent from the camp were in no way capable of doing the backbreaking work required, they had told him it wasn't his problem, nor theirs. He'd also received a visit from one of the senior SS men, informing him they expected him to carry out his job without complaints, or they would find someone more agreeable. The threat had been clear, and her father now exclusively voiced his concerns within the confines of their home. He grabbed his coat and kissed her mother before heading for the door.

“Try to stay away from the SS, love. There’s no reasoning with them,” she said. “We just want to see you back home safely.”

He smiled and nodded as he stepped outside, closing the door. Sabina quickly finished her plate, scooping up the remains of her egg with a piece of bread. She cleared her plate and looked at her mother.

“He’ll be okay, Mama. Papa understands there’s no sense in trying to change their minds by now.” She hugged her mother, who put on a brave face.

“I know, dear, but you know your father. He has trouble ignoring injustice, even when there’s nothing he can do about it. He always tries to find a way.”

“He’ll bite his tongue, Mama. Don’t worry.” Her mother shrugged, and Sabina stood and made for the front door. “Papa will be fine, he always is.”

The walk to school was about twenty minutes. On a good day, she took a trail around the city, doubling her commute but surrounding her in greenery and views of the Soła River running below. Today, she was running late and took the short route cutting through town.

Elena Glowa was waiting as she crossed the central square, and Sabina smiled on seeing her. Both born and raised in Rajsko, the girls had grown up together and had been inseparable since their first meeting in kindergarten, now almost a dozen years ago. Elena’s father worked as a signalman for the railway, and they had also been exempt from moving to the General Government.

“You’re late!” Her friend stood with her arms crossed, tapping her right foot. “You know we can’t be tardy for school, or they won’t let us in before the break. And we’ve got that exam we need to prep for, remember? I need Mr. Pach to explain it to me one more time before I feel ready.” Elena’s words came at her rapid-fire, and Sabina couldn’t help but smile as her friend spun on her heel and started crossing the square at a breakneck pace. Sabina hurried to catch up with her.

“Sorry, breakfast took a little longer than usual.” She glanced up at

the church's bell tower, which indicated it was half past eight. "We've still got plenty of time. Don't be so fussy!"

"Well, I don't like to take any chances, Sabcia. Keep moving." Elena always used Sabina's childhood nickname.

They reached the other side of the square and quickly traversed the narrow side streets. It wasn't until they exited onto a larger street that Elena slowed her pace, turning to her friend. "One other thing. Have you heard about what's happening back in Rajsko?" Sabina frowned and shook her head, and Elena tutted. "You do work at the municipality, don't you? Shouldn't you be the first to hear about new developments in the area?"

"I work in the archives. The only thing I'd be able to tell you is how many new people arrive in the camp every day, if I cared to pay attention." Sabina blew raspberries. "But besides that, they don't really tell me anything."

"Fair enough. Well, then let me tell you what I've heard. Apparently, there's a big construction area around our old school."

Sabina tilted her head. "When they moved us they just demolished all the houses to make room for their farm buildings and set up those huge fields. Are they expanding the farms?"

"My father passes by every day on his way to work, and he said there's hundreds of men erecting buildings around our old school. The area is littered with building materials. He even spotted large rolls of barbed wire."

"Barbed wire?" Sabina arched her eyebrow. Prisoners from the nearby Birkenau camp tilled the fields of Rajsko, commuting from their barracks in the main camp to the farming outpost. The presence of guards was enough to deter anyone from making a run for it. Besides, few of the prisoners were in any shape to attempt an escape even if they wanted to.

"Sounds like they have big plans. Maybe it won't be just a farming outpost anymore," Elena said casually. They walked in silence for a few minutes, but Sabina needed to know what was going on.

"Let's go there after class."

Elena stopped and turned, shock on her face. "You're kidding, right? We're not allowed anywhere near there."

“Aren’t you curious? I want to see what they’re building.” Sabina felt a jolt of adrenaline at the thought of returning to the place she’d grown up. “I haven’t been back to Rajsko for over a year. We’ll keep a safe distance. If we see any Germans, we’ll get out of there quickly.”

“I really don’t want to get into trouble. Maybe it’s better if you see if anyone at work knows more about it?”

“Come on, we’ll be very careful!” Sabina said, a little louder than she intended. Thankfully, there was no one else around. “I promise it’ll be fine.”

They turned off the main street and into another narrow alley. The girls stopped in front of an unassuming two-story house. Its once-white-turned-gray paint, like that on the surrounding buildings, was chipped. Sabina tugged on her friend’s arm. “Come on, it’ll be an adventure.”

Elena looked at her and let out a deep sigh. “Fine. We’ll go right after school. But we’ll observe from the trail running above the road and stay out of sight.”

“Yes, promised.” Sabina held out her hand and Elena reluctantly shook it.

“Let’s go inside, or we’ll be late after all.” Elena rapped her knuckles on the old wooden door, and they only had to wait for a few seconds before the door creaked open. A man wearing large glasses appeared and smiled when he recognized them.

“Girls, so glad you’re here. Quick, come inside before anyone sees you.”

“Good morning, Mr. Pach,” the girls said in unison as they entered the old building. Their teacher led the way and Sabina was pleased to be at school. Even though education beyond primary school level was strictly forbidden, Sabina and Elena attended underground classes three times a week. Sabina was one of the top students, but as she sat down at her small desk that morning, she could hardly concentrate on the day’s material. She was too distracted by what was happening at her old school in Rajsko.

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The sun was already creeping toward the horizon by the time the girls made it to Rajsko. Their classes had gone on longer than expected, as it wasn't just Elena who had a lot of questions to prepare for their exam. It had frustrated Sabina, as they now had less time to investigate Rajsko. They couldn't be caught wandering between Oświęcim and Rajsko after dark. Elena had proposed going another day, but Sabina wouldn't hear of it; she wanted to see what was going on today.

They found an elevated spot between the bushes across the road from their old school building. Sabina squinted as she marveled at the hive of activity around the farming camp. Elena's father hadn't exaggerated.

"There have to be at least a hundred men working on those buildings behind the school alone," Sabina whispered, her eyes focused on a group of men pushing a large cart loaded with wooden beams. "They all look alike."

"The buildings or the men?"

Sabina chuckled, realizing her mistake. The men did all look alike, sporting the shaved heads and faded blue-and-white striped uniforms of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. She pointed at the identical-looking buildings a bit farther away. "That set of buildings there, they look much like the barracks in Birkenau, don't they?" Elena nodded, and Sabina continued. "And there's the barbed-wire your father mentioned. That's not enough to block off the entire camp, though."

"Perhaps they're just using it for a part of the camp?" Elena suggested. "But why?"

Sabina scanned the scene in front of them. The construction site was surrounded by lush fields dotted with women wearing identical prisoner uniforms. It was April, and Sabina knew enough about crops to see they were tending to cabbages. On the far right side of the camp about fifty women were making their way back in the direction of Oświęcim. "What if they're preparing to house those women working the fields in the camp?"

Elena frowned. "Why would they do that? They can just have them make the walk from Birkenau every day. Seems like a lot of work."

Sabina was discouraged. "I suppose you're right. But why else would they expand the camp like this?"

There was movement on the road as a large truck approached. The girls ducked, keeping their heads low as it passed. The truck stopped in front of their old school building, and a burly SS officer jumped out. He scanned the area and stalked toward a group of prisoners, lifting heavy beams onto a cart. The man barked commands at the dozen men, who dropped a beam and followed him. The SS man opened the tarp and pointed inside the truck, then at the school building. Soon, the men were carrying large boxes—marked “Fragile”—into the building. The officer watched over the prisoners like a hawk, shouting at them to be careful.

“Whatever’s in there must be valuable,” Sabina mumbled, more to herself than Elena. When her friend didn’t respond, she turned her head. Her heart dropped. Towering over them were two men wearing the distinctive uniforms of the SS. Sabina was used to dealing with the German soldiers in the municipal registry, and her eyes instinctively went to their jacket collars. They were marked with only the double lightning bolt *SS*’s, identifying them as *Schütze* or *Oberschütze*—the lowest-ranking members of the SS guard corps.

“Don’t you realize this is a restricted area? What are you doing here?” The tallest, sporting a thick bundle of blond hair, addressed them in German. Sabina had enough grasp of the language to understand, and she took a deep breath to compose herself. From experience, she knew the best way to handle these lower-ranking soldiers was to make them feel important.

“I’m sorry. We were just on a hike around the city when we realized we were close to our old home. We grew up here.” She pointed in the direction of Rajsko, and forced a smile. “Then we saw the activity around our old school and we just wanted to see what was going on.”

The soldier looked at her suspiciously, tutting before he responded. “That’s all well and good, but you can’t be here. Especially now that there’s so much going on. You wouldn’t want to be mistaken for escaped prisoners.”

Sabina felt a chill run down her spine. She had her papers on her, but she was hesitant to produce them without being asked. It would be better if they could get away without a fuss. She held up her hands and spoke in her most innocent, sweet tone.

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“We understand. Apologies. We’ll continue on our way and I promise we’ll steer well clear in the future.”

The blond soldier looked her up and down again and appeared to weigh his options. The other soldier then made the decision for him.

“Why don’t we just let them go? They’re just girls. What’s the harm? They got lost.” He turned to Sabina. “Right?” His face wasn’t unfriendly, and she nodded.

“I suppose so. But we’ll need to report this.” The blond soldier looked uncertain.

“Nonsense, two girls lost on their stroll through the woods is hardly something we’d want to bother the commander with.” The other soldier waved his hands at the construction across the road. “He’s got enough on his plate. Let’s just send them on their way.”

The tall soldier’s eyes bored into Sabina’s, and she felt nervous as she held his stare, not wanting to seem weak or suspicious. *I have nothing to hide*. After what felt like minutes, he slowly nodded. “Fine. But if I see you around here again, it will be a different matter.” He waved his arms impatiently in the direction of the road. “Just stay on the road as you go home. It will be dark soon, and you don’t want to get lost in the woods.”

Sabina nodded and motioned for Elena to follow her. Her friend didn’t need to be told twice. “Thank you, sir. This won’t happen again.”

When they were out of earshot, Sabina glanced over her shoulder. The soldiers were still watching them. She picked up her pace, suddenly anxious as the adrenaline faded. She wanted to get as much space between the soldiers and them, before they changed their minds.

“That was close,” Elena said when the road turned, obscuring them from the soldiers’ view. “I told you we shouldn’t have gone. I’m never going back.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. We shouldn’t get this close to the camp again.”

CHAPTER THREE

Felcia sat across from the man who'd been a mentor to her over the past five years. Professor Sobczynski leaned forward and reached for the bottle of vodka. He refilled his glass and held it out to Felcia, who shook her head.

"Thank you. I have a class to teach later."

He smiled. "Might help with the jitters, you know?"

"I'll be okay, professor. I'm glad you took some time out of your busy schedule for me."

Sobczynski took a sip and smacked his lips, set the glass down, and made a dismissive gesture with his hands. "My days aren't as full as I would like, if I'm totally honest. The most challenging part of my new job is to make sure all the classes have enough textbooks and writing material. Meeting with you is a delightful break from that grind." There was a fatherly affection in his eyes. "It feels a lifetime ago when we would sit in my office at Jagiellonian and you would suggest improvements to my lectures. Do you remember?"

Felcia felt her cheeks blush at the memory. "I was perhaps a little too brash after you promoted me. I wanted to impress you."

"Nonsense!" He slapped his hand on the table before downing the last of the vodka in his glass. "I didn't promote you to be docile. You

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were a welcome change from many of the others, who simply did as they were told. I was proud of you; you proved me right in promoting you.” A sad look crossed his face. “It’s a shame you never got the chance to teach those classes.”

She remembered the day the Nazis came for the professor. It was November 6, 1939, only a few months after her promotion. Felcia and Professor Sobczynski made an early start, eager to finish planning the curriculum. All senior staff were summoned to a presentation on the future of education in Poland by Kraków’s Gestapo chief Bruno Müller, now that they were under German rule. Sobczynski instructed Felcia to continue working on the curriculum. To this day, Felcia wondered if the professor sensed something wasn’t quite right when he asked her to stay in his office. Less than half an hour after the professor crossed the street for the meeting in the Collegium Novum building, the campus was in turmoil. Trucks pulled up in front of the building, and when she looked out the window, the armed policemen jumping out told her everything she needed to know.

It took less than thirty minutes for the Gestapo—assisted by the police—to herd some of the country’s brightest minds into the backs of the trucks, kicking those who didn’t move quickly enough for the German brutes’ liking. Professor Sobczynski was one of the last to be escorted from the building. As he made his way down the steps, he looked up and their eyes met. He gave her an almost imperceptible shake of the head while mouthing, “Hide.” Felcia had hurried from campus, and she hadn’t returned to the university after that, terrified she would be next.

“Tell me what happened the other night.” Professor Sobczynski had refilled his glass and looked at her keenly. “Your message sounded urgent. Are you all right?”

Felcia recalled the raid in the apartment next to her class, her hands shaking as she described what happened to the woman in the street. “It was all so senseless. There was no need to kill that woman.”

“They were hiding Jews in their home. If they hadn’t fought back, she may have ended up in one of the camps, but as soon as those men attacked the Gestapo, they forfeited their lives.” Sobczynski’s voice sounded oddly detached, used to the rule of terror inflicted on their

country. Felcia nodded: this wasn't her first encounter with Nazi violence, having seen the bodies of resistance fighters and other alleged criminals swinging on lampposts across town as she made her way to work in the morning. Yet, the other night was the first time she had witnessed an actual execution. She looked at Professor Sobczynski as he took another sip and reminded herself he had survived Sachsenhausen for three months. *What horrors he must've witnessed in a German concentration camp.* It had changed him—somehow he had hidden depths, enough to insulate himself from the terror. But there was also a fury burning underneath his calm, detached exterior. A mere three months after returning to Kraków, Professor Sobczynski reached out to Felcia to ask if she would be part of his underground teaching program. She didn't need to think about it, agreeing on the spot to become one of his first recruits.

"You're worried about getting caught, aren't you?" The professor crossed his legs, his bright green eyes piercing hers.

"When the trucks arrived in the street, I was certain they were there for me."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Terrified."

Sobczynski filled his glass and then another, sliding it across the table to Felcia. He raised his vodka in salute, and they clinked glasses. Felcia took a sip and enjoyed the warmth of the vodka sliding down her throat, instantly relaxing her.

"You can always quit, Felcia. I realize teaching these classes is nerve-racking on the best days. There's always the threat of getting caught, of someone talking to the wrong person. Hell, the bounties offered for ratting out fellow Poles have gone up recently, so it might even be your suspicious and greedy neighbor that reports you."

Felcia took another sip of her vodka to calm her nerves. *This isn't helping.*

He caught her look and raised his hand. "I know this isn't what you want to hear, but I think it's important to repeat. Higher education for Poles is prohibited. It's illegal. That's why we went underground. But never forget why we're doing this." His eyes were sparkling, his cheeks a little puffy from the alcohol. *This is the man I remember from Jagiel-*

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lonian. “We’re doing this because we can’t sit by while the Nazis destroy Polish culture and science. This war won’t last forever, and there will be a day when they are swept from our lands, and we’re an independent state again. We *will* survive this and come out stronger. And when the time comes, we need those young minds, the future generations, ready to rebuild Poland. And that’s why we do what we do, Felcia.”

Listening to the professor, a fire ignited inside her. She’d spent the past two nights questioning her commitment, the thought of quitting so tempting, so easy. But now she realized it was never an option. She was part of something much bigger than herself. She cast her mind back to the night of the raid. The couple that hid those Jewish people had risked so much, and paid the ultimate price. In a sense, Felcia felt strangely connected to them; they were all part of the resistance. They had a common goal, albeit with different means. The promise of a free, independent Poland. She turned back to the professor, who studied her intently.

“I’m not going to quit.” She stood, the vodka making her feel light-headed for an instant. She composed herself and looked Professor Sobczynski straight in the eye. “If you’d excuse me, I have a class to teach.”

The afternoon class went by quickly, despite a few testy moments when cars passed by in the street below. They’d started by talking about what had happened the other day, and Felcia had been impressed by her students’ willingness to share their feelings. They had been nervous about coming to class, but they felt showing up was essential to who they were, and who they would be in the future. Felcia had shared some of Professor Sobczynski’s inspirational thoughts, and they soon returned to their textbooks.

Felcia was tidying up when Kasia approached her. The other students had already left, and the girl had evidently waited to get a word alone with her.

“What can I do for you?” Felcia gave her a warm smile. She had a lot

of time for Kasia, who was always punctual and often one of the first to ask questions during class.

“I was thinking about what you said earlier, about Poland being a free country again.” Kasia spoke in a soft but determined voice. “Do you really believe that will happen?”

“Yes. It’s why I do what I do. And it’s not just me. There are good people everywhere.”

“Like those people who were murdered the other night?”

“They died for what they believed in. Others fight back, sabotage German operations, or teach.” She felt pride well up in her heart.

Kasia looked uncertain as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Now I feel like I’m not doing anything meaningful.”

Felcia instinctively put her hand on the girl’s arm. “You shouldn’t think like that. You continuing your education is one of the best forms of resistance. We’ll need bright women like you once the war is over.”

A weak smile played on Kasia’s lips as she blushed. “I don’t think I’m that smart.”

“Most smart people don’t.” Felcia smiled as she picked up her backpack. “Now go home. I’ll be right behind you. I just need to check a few things in the back. I’ll see you on Thursday.”

“Good night, Felcia.” Kasia disappeared into the hallway and Felcia leaned on her desk for a moment. It had been an intense class as they shared their emotions around the earlier raid, and now Kasia requiring some more assurances. Felcia felt she’d handled it well while she folded the chairs and hid them in one of the closets. Satisfied the living room no longer resembled a classroom, she turned and left the apartment.

In the hallway, the evidence of the raid was still visible. The remnants of the door hung loosely on its hinges. Felcia considered peeking inside but thought better of it. She made her way down and stepped into the street. It was a chilly night, and she pulled the collar of her coat a little higher. There were few people out, and she enjoyed the relative peacefulness of her walk. She treasured walking the streets of her hometown by herself. The early mornings and evenings were especially pleasant, when the sunlight hit the tops of the buildings, but the streets were shrouded in semidarkness. Felcia liked to look up and admire the

contrast between the buildings' brightly-lit facades and shadow-filled storefronts at ground level.

The solitude also gave her an opportunity to process the day's events.

She opened the door to her building and stepped inside, crossing the small courtyard to the stairs leading to her second-floor apartment. The lights of the elderly couple's apartment next door were on. She slowed down as she passed their kitchen window, where she spotted Mrs. Adamski peeling potatoes. She waved and the woman returned a wide, toothy grin. Even though Felcia enjoyed living alone, she had to admit it was nice to have some interaction with the people around her. Felcia unlocked her door and stepped inside. It was cold and she kept her coat on as she shivered. *Better get the heat going first.* She crossed the small hallway and stepped into the living room, where she opened her wood-fired heater and tossed a few logs inside. She was about to light it when there was a knock at the door. Felcia wasn't expecting anyone.

She crossed to the front door and opened it. Two men wearing black coats stood on the other side. One of them frowned, then produced a smile that sent a shiver down Felcia's spine.

"Miss Hodak?" He spoke with such conviction that his words were phrased more as a statement than a question, and all she could do was nod. His smile widened as he took a step toward her. "Would you mind coming with us?" Again, it wasn't a question, but it was the heavily accented Polish that made Felcia's heart skip a beat.

"What's this about?" Felcia managed to stammer.

The man's face hardened as he spoke the next words. "We've been informed you are involved in illegal activities. Matters that threaten *the Reich.*" There was no accent when he pronounced the last two words. The other man also stepped forward and they each grabbed an arm, firmly pulling her into the hallway. Felcia wasn't sure the tears welling up in her eyes were from their iron grip or the realization of what was about to happen.

She didn't remember much of the ride or her arrival at the prison. The only thing she recalled was getting tossed into a cell with at least a dozen other women, and space for only half of them. All bunks were occupied; Felcia found a spot in the corner. In various states of shock, some of the women had withdrawn into themselves, oblivious to their surroundings. Others looked around with shifty eyes shooting between their cellmates and the occasional guard passing by in the hallway.

Felcia sat with her back to the wall and closed her eyes. The men who had picked her up hadn't spoken on the way over, nor had anyone in the prison told her anything. The uncertainty was gnawing at her, and she felt her temples throbbing, a headache imminent. She tried to block out the sobbing of the women around her, the constant screaming in the cells farther down the hallway, but it was impossible. Covering her ears with her hands, she pulled up her knees and placed her bone-tired head against them.

Felcia almost jumped out of her skin as she awoke with a start. A gruff voice was barking into her ear.

"Get up. Don't you think the rules apply to you? Get moving before I beat your sorry ass outside!" The large man wearing a guard's uniform prodded the tip of his baton between her shoulder blades, and Felcia shot to her feet. The cell was almost empty, the door open. A stream of women ahead were shuffling single file in the hallway. Her brain was still foggy after getting yanked from her sleep.

A sharp blow to her cheek had her seeing stars, and she struggled to stay on her feet.

"I told you to get moving!" The voice of the guard sounded slightly distorted as a burning sensation spread across the right side of her face. A violent shove in the small of her back forced her toward the open cell door. "Single file, and keep moving!" the guard yelled into her now painful ear. Without another thought, Felcia squeezed into a small space between two other prisoners. She was relieved to see the guard move in the other direction, entering the next cell.

Felcia moved with the crowd as guards harried them out of the

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hallway and into the central courtyard. The brightly lit red brick buildings—each with barred windows—towered above them, contrasting with the dark sky. She breathed in the cool night air, clearing the fog from her mind, but not the pain. Her cheekbone was throbbing, and when she rubbed it, she felt a bump forming.

She was given no time to consider her injury as men in green uniforms shoved them toward open trucks. The woman in front of Felcia was grabbed by her hair as she hesitated when one man barked a command in German. He was at least twice her size and tossed her into the back of a truck like a rag doll. She slammed face-first into one of the wooden benches, almost knocking her unconscious, and lay dazed on the floor. Some of the other women helped her up onto a bench. Blood was pouring from the woman's nose, but the man in green had already moved on.

Felcia made sure the same fate didn't befall her, hastily boarding the truck she was sent to. It filled quickly, and as soon as the tailgate was closed, the truck's engine fired up, and they hobbled out the gate, into the dark streets. Felcia shivered, as the wind had free rein in their truck. She sensed wherever they were headed would be worse than the prison.