

CHAPTER ONE

It was dark when Joel Kozak pulled the sputtering car into the driveway. He stepped out of the car and hurried to open the door for the man in the back.

“Thank you, *Robert*,” the man said as he stepped out. “I know I said you could take the car with you tonight, but it looks like you’ll need to fix it first.”

Joel nodded. “You’re right, Herr Kesler. I’m just glad we made it back. I’ll come in early tomorrow.”

Kesler shook his head. “Don’t bother, I don’t need to be anywhere. You can use the morning to work on the car. Do you have an idea what it might be?”

“Probably a broken clutch; it felt a bit heavy. I can take a look now if you want?”

“No, no. Please go home. You don’t want to be out on the streets after curfew.” Kesler disappeared inside, and Joel sat back in the car. As he turned the key, the engine made a spluttering sound. Joel tried again, but there was only a soft clicking noise. He got out, opened the hood, and the smell of warm oil entered his nostrils. He shined a small flashlight under the hood and cursed—the motor was covered in oil. *Not just*

a broken clutch, then. Joel closed the hood and locked the car—it was no use trying to fix the engine in the dark.

He stepped into the street, closing the gate behind him. Working as a driver for the Germans meant he enjoyed an amount of freedom few people in Ciechanów did. His driver's permit—secured by Mr. Kesler—allowed him to pass through the German checkpoints unhindered.

The streets were quiet, and Joel checked his watch—almost seven. Even though curfew wouldn't be for an hour, he instinctively checked his jacket for his papers. They were still there, and he let out a deep sigh.

He walked on, and large homes made way for smaller houses packed closer together. The pavement narrowed until it merged into the street. Joel walked through the gates of the city center, the sign above him indicating he was now entering the Jewish Quarter. *Quarter*, Joel shook his head. *They should call it what it is.*

He turned the corner to find the street ahead blocked by a dozen people milling about. They had their backs to him, focused on something on the cobblestones. It didn't take long to see what they were looking at; the bodies of two men lay face down, a dark puddle of blood around their heads—small holes in the back of their necks testament to the execution.

The people crowding around were in various stages of shock. Two women—presumably the men's wives—stood with their hands covering their faces, shaking as they cried. Other people looked on in horror. A man with a determined step exited one of the houses, carrying a set of bedsheets. He put his hand on the shoulders of the two women and gently spoke to them. Through their sobs, they nodded, and he knelt beside the bodies. A lump formed in Joel's throat. *Those poor women.*

“Can you give me a hand?” The man spoke to no one in particular, yet to everybody. When nobody responded, Joel stepped forward. The man looked at him in surprise but quickly handed him the other side of the sheet. Two more men found their courage, wrapped the first man in the sheet, and carried him inside the house.

Two other men stood a little distance from the group. Joel's blood ran cold when he saw the glint of the lightning-strike-shaped *S*'s on their dark green uniforms. A German patrol.

“Well, well, look here.” One of them spoke as Joel and the three

other men returned. “You’ll need to hurry, it’s almost curfew.” The man looked to be in his early twenties, only a few years older than Joel.

No one responded, keen to finish their gruesome task. Joel knelt and gently lifted the dead man’s feet when he felt a presence. He turned and found one of the SS men hovering over him. He met the man’s eyes and was dismayed to see a spark of recognition.

“You look familiar,” the man said, his brow furrowed as he scanned Joel’s face. “But I can’t quite place you.” His eyes ran over Joel’s arms, and his expression changed from one of curiosity to suspicion. “Where’s your armband?”

Joel’s eyes followed the man’s gaze. The other SS trooper joined them. “What’s going on, Gerhardt?”

“He’s not wearing his Jew armband,” Gerhardt said, taking a step closer, forcing Joel to readjust his stance to avoid tumbling onto the dead man on the pavement.

“I’m not a Jew.” He reached into his jacket and produced his driver’s permit. The German inspected it, his eyes narrowing as he read it aloud. “Robert Kozak, a *Volksdeutsche*.” Then, a triumphant smile appeared on his face. “So that’s why you look familiar. You work for Kesler!”

“I run errands for Mr. Kesler,” Joel said, carefully replacing the permit in his jacket pocket.

The German looked more relaxed, but his partner spoke in annoyance. “What are you doing in the ghetto? Don’t you know aiding Jews is forbidden?”

Joel stood up, towering over the Germans. “I’m sorry, I was rushing home and didn’t realize I was passing through the ghetto. Before I knew it, I ran into this group, and they needed a hand.” He waved his hand at the mourners looking at him wide eyed. “I thought we couldn’t just leave these bodies in the street. What would the city come to if we just leave people to rot?”

“I don’t care about Jews rotting in the street.” The SS man looked at him with a neutral expression. “They should’ve thought about the consequences before doing whatever they did to get shot.”

Joel gritted his teeth. “I understand. I apologize for my mistake.”

The trooper was about to say something when Gerhardt spoke up. “Come on, Hansie, let’s move on. Mr. Kozak will make his way home

and out of the ghetto.” He looked at Joel sternly. “We won’t see you helping out Jews in here again, will we?”

“Of course not, thank you, sir,” Joel said as he turned away from the group. He met the eyes of the man with whom he’d carried the first body inside. An unspoken look of understanding passed between them.

As he walked away, he heard the troopers say. “And be careful in the ghetto. Those Jews might just rob you, or worse.”

He crossed through small streets, careful to avoid the main thoroughfares. He couldn’t risk running into the SS patrol again, even though he was going a different direction. Five minutes later, he reached a small house, a faint flicker of candlelight making its way through the curtains. He turned the key and opened the door with a creak, the homey scent of lavender hitting his nostrils.

“Joel, is that you?” a familiar voice called from the back.

He hung his coat on the rack. “Yes, *Mama*.” Before stepping into the cramped kitchen, he opened a drawer and put his papers inside.

“I was worried; you’re home so late,” she said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek as he sat down at the kitchen table. She placed a steaming bowl before him.

“I’m fine, Mama, it just took a little longer to get home today.” He didn’t want to bother his mother with the gruesome details.

She sat opposite him as he almost inhaled his soup. “You know you can tell me when something’s wrong, right?”

Joel put down his spoon. “I promise I can take good care of myself.” He stood, keen to get to his room. “I’m going to make it an early night. Mr. Kesler’s car broke down, so I best be in early tomorrow.”

His mother remained seated and smiled. “We are so fortunate you’ve found a job with Mr. Kesler. I’m not sure how we would survive on normal wages. Especially since it’s just you and me.” Her smile faded slightly, her eyes suddenly a little distant.

Joel’s heart ached, as he hugged his mother. “I promise we’ll be fine. Mr. Kesler is very pleased, and there is so much work that he’ll need me around for quite a bit longer.”

“I know, Joel. I just want you to be careful. Every day I worry you might not come back in the evening. Those Germans are so unpredictable.”

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He broke their embrace and looked at his mother. “Mr. Kesler is different. We can trust him. He wouldn’t have arranged those papers for me otherwise.”

She nodded, and Joel kissed her forehead. “Good night, Mama.”

He climbed the narrow stairs and headed for his room, where he lay on the bed. He closed his eyes. *Those Jews will rob you, or worse.* He opened his eyes and shook his head, the pillow softly crunching as he did. *If only they knew.*

CHAPTER TWO

Agnes stood near the bridge. *What's taking her so long? She should've been here fifteen minutes ago.* She tapped her foot, her eyes on the crowded street across the bridge. The sun was out, and it was an uncharacteristically sunny April day for Amsterdam.

The people on the bridge rushed by without notice. A young man caught her eye; late twenties, early thirties, walking purposefully, with a straight back and broad shoulders. He wore a suit—no overcoat was needed today—and carried a doctor's bag. He must've felt her looking at him since he turned her way and smiled. Agnes returned the smile, then averted her eyes. A few seconds later, she looked in his direction again—he was already halfway down the street.

"Sorry I'm late," a familiar voice said, interrupting her thoughts. She turned to find her sister standing beside her. "The tram was stuck, and the driver wouldn't let me get off. I swear I left in time," Yvette said, slightly out of breath.

Agnes looked at her younger sister as she stood panting beside her. Relieved, she hugged her. "I was worried about you, it's not like you to be this late," Agnes said.

Yvette Markx, at nineteen years old, was two years younger but a head taller than Agnes. At first sight, it was hard to believe they were

sisters. Agnes had a full head of blond curls, whereas Yvette liked to keep her dark brown hair cropped short. It only became apparent when the girls talked that the pair were siblings: their voices were nearly identical.

“Did you get in touch with Johannes?” Agnes asked as they crossed the bridge.

“He should be at the market now; I handed him our coupons yesterday. He said it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Where are we meeting him?”

“The southern entrance. We should still be able to make it,” Yvette said as she eyed the church clock farther down the street.

“Yve,” Agnes said, using her sister’s nickname. “You sure we can trust Johannes?”

Yvette stopped and turned, frowning. “He’s done this for other people as well. We can trust him.”

I’m not going to argue with her. “Great, then let’s go find him.”

Since the Germans had taken over, they had been imposing new restrictions on the Jewish community. Not being allowed to go to markets made it nearly impossible to get fresh produce. Thankfully, Yvette had come up with the plan to ask some Dutch friends of friends to visit the market for them. She hoped Johannes would come through.

Yvette had picked up her pace and turned into the street leading to the market. As soon as she did, she stopped and sighed. Agnes caught up and understood why. Two trucks on either side blocked the street, and green-uniformed men were busy checking papers. The German *Grüne Polizei*—the Green Police—had set up a checkpoint.

“Great, what do they want to check this time?” Yvette said as she reluctantly joined the small queue.

“They’re not really checking anything. You know that,” Agnes said as she reached for her papers.

The queue moved quickly, and when the sisters stepped forward, the German policeman gave them a friendly smile as they handed him their papers. Agnes returned the smile, Yvette stared at him blankly.

He opened their papers, and his smile vanished. “This area is closed to Jews.” He handed back their papers.

“Why?” Yvette’s eyes shot fire.

“No Jews beyond this point.” He waved his hand dismissively, indicating for them to move back.

“But we need to meet someone just a little farther up the street.” Yvette didn’t move, and Agnes’ throat felt constricted. *Come on, sis, don’t push your luck.*

The policeman cocked his head. “What for? For getting illegal produce from the market?” Yvette blinked hard, and he smiled. “We know you’re getting Dutch people to get food from the market for you. Well, not anymore.” He pushed Yvette back. “Now get out of here before I decide you’re a real nuisance. We have plenty of space in the back of these trucks.”

Agnes grabbed her sister’s wrist and firmly pulled her away. “Come, Yve, let’s go.”

“Mom and Dad are going to be furious,” Yvette said. “I gave him all our coupons for the rest of the month.”

They stood a hundred meters from the checkpoint, where more people were turned away.

“Come, take a breather,” Agnes said as she guided Yvette to a small bench. “I’m sure Johannes ran into the checkpoint and will realize what’s happening. He’s not going to steal our coupons.”

“How long do you want to wait?” Yvette looked up at her with tears in her eyes. *She always pretends to be tougher than she really is. She’s still my little sister, and she needs me now.*

Agnes smiled. “As long as it takes for him to show up. Did you agree on a time with him?”

“We were supposed to meet around the entrance now,” Yvette said as she looked at the clock across the street. “Hopefully, he’ll understand we couldn’t make it there.”

“If not, you’ll be able to find him, right?”

Yvette nodded half-heartedly. “Don’t you have class?”

“I can wait with you.”

“No, you should go. It was hard enough to get into the classes. Papa

won't be pleased if he hears you're skipping them. Let's not both disappoint him today."

It had been more than a year since Agnes was banned from nursing school. But the Jewish community in Amsterdam responded swiftly, setting up small underground schools, as Jewish teachers were fired from their jobs as well.

"Come, Agnes, go," Yvette said, interrupting her thoughts. "There's no use in us both sitting around waiting for him. If he doesn't show, I'll find him somehow. Go and enjoy your class. I know how much you look forward to it."

"Are you sure?"

Yvette groaned in frustration and playfully pushed her away. "Argh, yes, go. I don't want you here any longer. I'll see you at dinner, whatever that may be."

Agnes was panting when she arrived at the school—an old office building on the outskirts of town. The back door was locked, as expected. The rules were clear; whoever was late would have to wait for the break to come in. It meant Agnes had to wait for the good part of two hours. Worse, she would miss an exciting lecture. *If I'm going to be told off, might as well make sure I do it properly.* She waited for a few seconds, straining her ears for sounds on the other side of the door before knocking.

Ten seconds later, a muffled voice answered from behind the thick wooden door. "Who is it?"

She recognized her teacher's voice. "It's Agnes, Mr. Klein."

A pause, then the lock clicked. A tall man with horn-rimmed glasses perched on his nose opened the door. Mr. Klein looked flustered and relieved. "Agnes, I was wondering what happened to you." He stepped aside. "You haven't missed a single class, never mind being late."

Agnes entered and let out a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, it was a bit of a mess in the city, and I got stuck on one of the trams." A little white lie she could get away with.

Her teacher closed the door—making sure to lock it—and shook his

head. “Well, you didn’t miss much yet, so better hurry inside. But Agnes —” He looked at her sternly. “Please don’t be late again. I get nervous when students don’t show up.”

She nodded; Mr. Klein risked so much for their little class of ten. She climbed the broad stairs to the second floor, where she was glad to see the other students sitting around in a circle. She greeted them as Mr. Klein entered, leaving the door to the hallway open. The class resumed, and Agnes caught up quickly. Mr. Klein was an excellent teacher, always able to explain complex material in a way they could all understand. Many of Agnes’ friends weren’t as fortunate, teaching themselves from old books at home.

Time passed quickly, and when Mr. Klein called for a short break, Agnes was keen to stretch her legs. She found one of her friends, Mario Nacamulli, standing near a window in the hallway.

“Funny how it’s so quiet around here,” Mario said as she approached. “This area used to be so lively before the war.”

“No need for the office workers here anymore,” Agnes said. “I’m just glad the owner is letting us use it.”

“He’s Jewish. Our people are helping each other wherever they can.” Mario looked pensive as he stared out the window.

Agnes stood next to him and watched the abandoned square below. Bike racks stood empty; the only sounds were those of a few birds twittering away.

“We need to stick together.” She told Mario about the checkpoint earlier that morning.

He looked sympathetic. “I’ve heard plenty of stories of people approaching strangers to get them something from the market, only to have them run off with their coupons. It sounds like Yvette could trust him, though.”

Agnes smiled back, reflecting his optimism. She was about to speak when movement on the square below caught her eye. “Look!”

Mario’s ever-present smile vanished. “Oh shit.” His face turned a shade paler, and his eyes narrowed.

A dozen men in black uniforms rushed from the road, heading straight for their building. Agnes was dismayed. “How did they find out about us?”

“Someone must’ve seen us and told the Germans or the police.” Mario was already on his way back to the classroom.

They stepped back into the classroom and found Mr. Klein holding a sandwich, in midbite. “What’s wrong?”

“Blackshirts are approaching the building.” As Mario spoke, there were heavy thuds on the door one floor below. Voices shouted for them to open up, and for a moment, nobody in the room moved. The other students turned to Mr. Klein, fear in their eyes. He calmly stood, adjusted his glasses, and said, “Stay here. I’ll handle this.”

“Are you sure you don’t need help?” Mario said. Agnes froze to the spot.

“That won’t be necessary. Just stay quiet. I’m sure I can reason with them.” He left the room, closing the door behind him.

“I don’t think words will help,” she said to Mario. The men in the black uniforms were part of the Dutch Nazi Party, the *NSB*. Similar to the Brownshirts in Germany, they brought violence wherever they showed up.

He shook his head and looked around the classroom. “We need to find something to defend ourselves with.” The rest of the students looked scared, a few pleading to let Mr. Klein handle it.

Mario was adamant and searched the cabinets in the room. “If Mr. Klein’s plan fails, we can’t just let them come in here and give us a beating.” He focused his attention on the other two young men in the class. “You’re with me, right?”

They reluctantly joined him as the noise downstairs increased. Mr. Klein had reached the door. He was playing dumb, asking the men their business.

“It doesn’t sound like they’re convinced,” Agnes said as she stood by the stairs, ignoring Mr. Klein’s advice to keep the door to the classroom shut.

Mario appeared next to her, holding an envelope opener. “Look, Agnes. There are at least ten of them, maybe more. Only three of us, four with Mr. Klein, but I don’t know what they’ll do to him downstairs. If it comes to fighting, you must take the back door with the other girls, okay?”

She shook her head. “I want to fight.”

“No.”

There was a tremendous crash downstairs, and Mr. Klein appeared at the foot of the stairs. He looked panicked, his face red as he rushed up the stairs. “They broke down the front door! Get away from the stairs!” His voice sounded unnatural as he used the railing to propel himself up. He had barely reached the top when the first of the Blackshirts followed.

Mario grabbed Mr. Klein’s hand and called for the other men to join him at the top of the stairs. “Come on. This is the best place to stop them.” The other students were armed with pieces of wood, and it dawned on Agnes that they’d probably smashed a chair to create their weapons. “Agnes, get out of here, and take the other girls!” Mario said. She could see him tightening his grip on the letter opener.

The young Blackshirt paused halfway up the stairs, sizing up the men waiting at the top, hatred spewing from his eyes. *He doesn’t even know us.*

Within seconds, the stairway was filled with black uniforms. Agnes counted at least eight on the stairs, with the same number downstairs. “Just come with us now; there’s no need to fight,” one of them shouted. “You don’t stand a chance, anyway, Jew boys.” The man’s voice boomed through the building, the words landing viciously.

“He’s right,” Agnes said to Mario. “Come with us. Maybe we can lose them in the streets.”

Mario shook his head, focused on the men on the stairs. “I’m so tired of these thugs. It’s time to fight back.”

“This is not the time,” Agnes said. *He’s going to get himself killed.*

He turned to her, and as she looked into his eyes, she saw a determination that she knew no words of hers would weaken.

“Take the other girls, Agnes, and run. We’ll hold them off as long as we can. Don’t worry about me. This isn’t my first fight. Now go!” *He’s willing to do whatever to get us out.* Mario turned his face back to the Blackshirts, who were now moving up the stairs, one step at a time. They had fallen into something resembling a battle formation.

Agnes turned to find the girls shaking and crying and realized Mario was right: there was no sense in all of them being beaten, arrested, or worse. She swallowed hard as she stepped away. “Follow me,” she said to the girls, taking quick steps toward the back entrance.

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She opened a window and guided the first girl onto the fire escape stairs. She quickly climbed down; they were only on the second floor, after all. When the second girl climbed out, there were screams from the other side of the hallway. Agnes turned to see Mario and Mr. Klein lashing out viciously at the first Blackshirts. The third and fourth girl hurried out. Another roar as one of the Blackshirts tumbled down the stairs. *Maybe they can hold them off, after all?*

The last girl climbed through the window, pausing to see how the men were doing. At that moment, Mr. Klein fell backward onto the floor. Mario and the others tried to close ranks, but they were too late. Two Blackshirts broke through and were now at the top of the stairs. Mario's small legion was surrounded. They tried as best they could, but soon more Blackshirts poured upstairs, and Agnes reluctantly climbed outside. She looked back, where two Blackshirts descended on Mario like rabid hyenas. He tumbled to the ground, and their eyes met. The last thing she heard was him roaring. "Run!"

CHAPTER THREE

Samson Tarski was exhausted as he carried his small toolbox. His legs protested as he placed one foot before another, moving almost mechanically among the group of workers entering the city. *Only another kilometer left.*

The day had been like any other, and he'd almost gotten used to the grueling work of sorting scrap metal in the yard outside Kraków. As one of the largest men in the detail, Samson was always picked to push the heavy metal carts from one side of the depot to the other and help load the trucks.

“Keep moving, you dogs! I want to be home in time for dinner!” Jerzy—an especially vicious Volksdeutsche—boomed from the front of the column. Samson detested the Poles who had discovered some distant bloodline making them *part German*, and thus qualifying as Volksdeutsche. It meant slighter better treatment by the Nazi occupiers, resulting in larger food rations and jobs overseeing people like Samson.

The work detail trotted through the city and soon crossed the Vistula River. The walls of the ghetto loomed, and the front of the column entered through Lwowska Street. The Jewish Police, wearing long jackets and hats, were especially vigilant at the gate that evening. They picked out people walking by, interrogating them and then—

depending on the answers—let the men pass or directed them to wait near the wall. The latter was not a good omen. Samson was still a ways from the gate when he felt the gaze of one of the policemen on him. He looked back, trying to appear as composed as possible, but there was no doubt: the officer was focused on him. *What does he want?*

He was still a good fifty meters away when the uniformed man started making his way toward him. Samson gripped his toolbox tighter.

Set up to keep order in the ghetto, the men wearing the badges of the *Ordnungspolizei*—Jewish Police—had taken to the task with a zeal that required little German involvement in making the ghetto a frightening place. They were keen to impress the Gestapo and SS, favoring them over their own people in the Jewish council. Samson kept his head down as he approached the gate, praying he had mistaken the man's gaze.

A strong hand gripped him by the shoulder. "Come with me." Samson was hauled to the side, the other men of the work detail averting their eyes.

"Is something wrong, officer?" Samson said, biting his tongue as he emphasized the last word.

"Shut up unless I tell you to speak." The man spoke in a thick Krakówian accent. "You missed a day's work yesterday."

The suggestion was as ludicrous as it was untrue. Samson had been at the yard for seven days in a row. He was scheduled to have a day off tomorrow, although that was hardly a certainty. He opened his mouth, then remembered he hadn't been given permission yet.

"You know the penalty for missing scheduled work? I'll have to write you up and report you to the council." As he spoke, a smile appeared on his face. He then looked as if he suddenly remembered something. "And to the Gestapo, of course. They'll be very interested in speaking with you."

Samson could no longer hold his tongue. "What are you talking about? I haven't missed a day's work in over a week."

In a flash, the policeman smashed his baton into Samson's groin. He winced and stifled a groan as he bent forward, dropping his toolbox with a clang. A wave of nausea rose but he managed to suppress it just in

time. Some of the men passing by looked up in shock, then—realizing what was happening—quickly looked the other way.

“Are you calling me a liar?” the policeman barked at him, using the tip of his baton to lift Samson’s head. “If I tell you you’ve been missing work, that’s what’s happened, you hear me?”

Samson looked up at him, his vision clouded. He controlled the anger building up inside. Slowly, he straightened his back and looked at the man opposite him. He was half his size, but the unexpected blow had knocked the wind out of Samson. His vision cleared and he looked the man in the eye. The policeman faced him challengingly, and Samson realized he couldn’t win this argument.

“What will happen when you write me up, sir?”

“You’ll need to report to the council, if you’re lucky. More likely, the Gestapo will come and have a word. You can forget about this job in the future, that’s for sure.” The man looked gleeful as he took out a small notepad. “Now, name.”

Those last two words confirmed what Samson suspected; the man had no idea who he was. He was just randomly picked. He’d heard about this happening before, although he’d never seen it happen. Samson looked around and suddenly realized it was an organized effort by the Jewish Police. All around him, men were stopped and interrogated in the same way. They all had been selected; they were strong, healthy-looking men like himself. *Selected for what, though?*

“Have you lost your tongue?” The officer poked him in the ribs with his baton. “Your name, Jew.”

Something in Samson snapped. Had this man completely forgotten his background? He looked the man up and down, a foul taste appearing in his mouth. The officer wore an armband: white with the abbreviation “OD” reserved for the Jewish Police. A little to the side, however, on his right breast pocket, he wore the same insignia Samson had. A yellow Star of David. He was no less Jewish than Samson, yet only one of them had sold his soul to the Nazi devil, betraying their own people.

The officer’s patience had run out, for Samson saw him raise his baton again. Before he could bring it down, Samson reached for the man’s arm, grabbing his wrist. The officer’s eyes registered surprise, and

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then Samson squeezed with all his might. The policeman let out a shriek, dropping the baton. Without another thought, Samson snatched it midair with his free hand. He pulled back his arm and—surprising himself—smashed it into the man’s face with all the force his tired arm could muster. The man’s eyes rolled back into his sockets as his legs gave out, and he fell down on the cold pavement with a dull thud.

Samson looked at the man on the ground and dropped the baton. It had become eerily quiet around him. The monotonous drone of hundreds of feet passing in the background had ceased. The procession had come to a standstill. All eyes were fixed on him. Their expressions ranged from dismay to fascination—he had done what many of them had only dreamed about, but had thought better of at the last minute. *Oh shit. What have I done?*

Samson didn’t get a chance to ponder his actions; the next thing he heard were heavy footsteps approaching. As he raised his hands and slowly turned around, all he comprehended was a ferocious blow to the side of his head and the sky turning black.