



## Chapter One

Central Poland, Early Spring 1943

Pain ripped through Natia Palinska's midsection. She grasped the bedcovers as another contraction gripped her and stole her breath. "*Nie, nie.*"

Her husband, Teodor, smoothed her hair from her damp forehead, his fingers calloused. "*Moje słońce*, it will be all right, my sunshine. Just hang on. Please, let me fetch a doctor."

She released the sheet and grasped him by the elbow. "Don't leave me. Our baby . . ." Her heart pounded. She had failed him again.

"Hush now."

"It's too soon. Not another one gone." The pain in her heart was greater than that in her abdomen. This time, she'd held on to the pregnancy longer. This time, their child had moved within her.

The contraction ended. She sucked in a deep breath.

"You need a doctor. You're bleeding so much." His voice cracked.

She did this to him. Caused him this sorrow. Tears blurred her vision. "What doctor? The Germans took them all."

"Then the *babka* at least. She'll know what to do. This delivery is different." He gripped her hand until he almost crushed it.

"Don't go. Please. What if I need you? I'll be alone." The back of her throat burned. If only Mama were here.

He caressed her cheek. "*Pani Nowakowa* is right down the road. I'll be back in less than five minutes."

Another pain racked her body. She returned Teodor's crushing

grasp. If only the Lord would make it stop. The agony in her body. The agony in her soul.

She focused on breathing until the physical anguish passed. “Go, go. Before another pain comes.”

Teodor kissed her brow and hurried from the small bedroom, the scent of the fresh outdoors lingering behind him. She stared at the small crucifix on the wall at the foot of the bed as she smoothed down the soft cotton sheet, hot tears racing down her face. “It’s not fair, Lord. Do you hear me? It’s not fair.” The words tore from her, and she wrenched the sheets. “Why are you ripping this child from me? From us? Teodor hasn’t done anything wrong. He doesn’t deserve such a terrible thing. And neither do I. Please, please, just make it stop. Save our little one. That’s all I want. All I have ever wanted.”

Sobs consumed her, every bit as breath stealing as the labor pains. She fought for control as her abdomen tightened. Where were they? She needed her husband. She couldn’t do this without him. Only his presence would give her the strength to continue.

The click of the door announced Teodor and *Pani* Nowakowa’s arrival as another full-blown contraction hit. The floor creaked, and the two of them stood on the bedroom’s threshold.

The stooped and wrinkled *babka* shooed Teodor from the room. “You stay outside.”

“*Nie*. I want him here.”

“The birth room is no place for a man.” *Pani* Nowakowa lumbered to the bedside, turning sideways in the narrow passage between the bed and the wall. “There now, my dear, remember God is in control. He is the one you want.”

Natia nodded. That was the truth, her head told her. But her heart, her soul, said something different. How could God have ordained this for them, all the hardships of these last few years?

Once the pain passed, *Pani* Nowakowa examined her. “You’re almost there. Soon, you will remember your discomfort no more.”

*Nie*, this agony would stay with her for the rest of her life. Just

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like twice before. Her heart hadn't healed then. This wouldn't be different. "Ah!" How could something so small hurt so much?

The tiny life slipped from her body.

No wriggling.

No crying.

At least not from the child.

"It's a boy. Too young to survive." *Pani* Nowakowa wrapped Natia's son in a towel and rubbed him. He didn't respond. Didn't squall. Oh, what Natia would give for even one tiny cry from him.

"All right, dear, let's finish up. You've had a rough go of it. You need your rest."

A short while later, with the bleeding stopped, fresh sheets, and a soft, clean nightgown, *Pani* Nowakowa handed Natia her child. A wisp of light hair, like his father's. Fists curled, fingers complete with the littlest of nails. She stroked his fragile, cold skin. If not for his blue tinge, she would think him just sleeping. So very, very small. Yet so very, very perfect.

Why did she have to lose him?

The *babka* opened the door and motioned for Teodor to enter before she slipped away.

"See our son." Natia held him out to her husband. "He's perfect."

Teodor's hands shook as he cradled the stillborn. "Beautiful. He looks so much like you."

"*Nie*. Like you." The lump in her throat swelled until it all but cut off her breath. "I'm sorry. I can't give you a child."

He leaned over and whispered in her hair, "At least I have you and we're together. That's all that matters." Yet his voice was husky, and moisture gathered in his eyes.



Teodor sat on their bed beside Natia, who held the body of their son. A thin, colorful quilt covered her skinny legs. Light streamed into the bedroom window, over Reverend Jankowski's shoulder, and illuminated the baby's face. The once-retired pastor sprinkled

water over the child's forehead. "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I baptize you Andrzej Ludwik Palinski."

Teodor's heart clenched at the words. At the stillness of his son. His hands shook as he wiped the moisture from Andrzej's eyes with a handkerchief and then dabbed Natia's tears.

"He is in heaven. His suffering is over." Pastor Jankowski rubbed Teodor's shoulder.

Natia gave a small, single nod.

Teodor swallowed hard. "Thank you, Reverend. We cling to the Lord's goodness in such times as these." The right words to say, but did he believe them? They'd had so much pain and suffering. This would be their third little mound on the hill.

What if the Germans hadn't killed their village doctor at the beginning of the war? Would this child have survived if he had medical care? Teodor fisted his hands.

With trembling, age-spotted fingers, the good reverend capped the bottle of baptismal water with a *clink*. "Such faith like that will sustain you. It's all we have these days. Let me know if there is anything I can do. The church is always open for prayer, and I would be happy to share words of comfort."

Natia kissed their son's damp forehead. "You have been good to us, Pastor. We're in your debt."

"Nonsense. That is what the Lord has called me to do." He made the sign of the cross and then showed himself to the door.

"Let me take him now." Teodor held out his hands, and Natia placed the tiny, lightweight child in his arms. If not for the Nazis, this child might have lived.

She was pale, her green eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "What might he have grown up to be? What would his life have looked like?"

Teodor closed his eyes, trying to imagine this little, still boy bursting with life and exuberance. "He would have climbed every tree in the village, come home wet every evening after playing

in the creek, and would have snatched every *kołaczki* cookie you baked.”

Natia sniffed. “He would have followed you everywhere. He would have helped you in the fields and would have milked the cow. With him around, you wouldn’t have to work so hard.”

He opened his eyes and rubbed his wife’s soft hand, his eyes burning. “You work hard too. Maybe God will grant us a girl to help you in the kitchen and around the house.”

“I can’t go through this again. Three times we’ve lost a child. Two little markers in the field, and soon another one. My heart can’t endure another loss.” She stroked her still-swollen belly.

His heart couldn’t take much more either. Her soft eyes, the downturn of her mouth almost undid him. How could he have prevented this? She did work too much. He should have helped her more around the house and lightened her load.

Natia bit her full, red lips. “And I’m about to suffer another loss when that German family comes from Ukraine and takes over *Tata’s* farm.”

*Lebensraum*. Living space for the Germans, colonists who would push out and enslave the native Slavs.

By all outward appearances, the Lord had forsaken them. Taken their children and their food. They had to produce more and more to stay alive. Made it impossible for him to care for his family. Now they were about to take their farm. Their livelihood. The letter from the Germans lay unopened on the cracked and faded kitchen counter. He didn’t have to read the contents to know what it said. But he couldn’t tell her.

“Teodor?” She touched the back of his hand, and a tingle raced up his arm.

“What?”

“You grew so quiet. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Everything. He stared at his son’s flawless, tiny face. Soon, they would have to leave this child and their others behind. But how did he tell her?

Now was not the time. That much he knew. She would need to prepare to leave their home, the only place they'd ever known, but first, she needed to heal, both in body and spirit.

He scrubbed his face as heat built in his chest.

When the Nazis forced them out, would they ever come home?



The rolling hills spread out in front of Teodor, the expansive sky blue above him, a tree line in the distance. From across the adjoining farm fields, Teodor's father-in-law, Filip Gorecki, waved at him as he picked his way over rough clumps of dirt, sturdy work boots on his feet, a gray cap covering his dark, curly hair.

Teodor waved back and trod over the furrows, the stubble of last year's rye crop rubbing against his brown wool pants. Though the weather had warmed and tiny green sprouts burst from the soil, he hadn't plowed under his fields. There was no point. A weight pressed on his chest. He shook his head to clear away his thoughts and met Filip halfway between their small houses. "Good morning to you."

"Good morning, Teodor." Filip clapped him on the shoulder. "How are you and Natia doing?" He glanced at the three crosses on the hill. His grandchildren. He held up a basket covered with a white napkin. "Helena made some sausage and cabbage soup to help Natia regain her strength."

Teodor took the rustic woven basket, the spice of the sausage tickling his nose. "*Dziękuję*. Natia will like to taste it and see how her sister is coming along as a cook."

"How is she holding up?"

"For two days now, she just lies in bed and stares at the wall."

"Natia's a strong woman, just like my Berta." Filip stared beyond Teodor and into the past. "We lost two children between Natia and Helena. Each time, Berta pulled herself from bed and returned to her life. God was her strength. Even when the cancer

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ravaged her body, she was the strongest woman I knew. Natia is much like her.” Filip shook his head. “What about you?”

“It never gets easier. I thought maybe this time . . .” Teodor sucked in a steady breath and rubbed his rough cheek. How long had it been since he shaved?

The older man stroked his graying mustache. “You look like the horse trampled you.”

“I haven’t slept much. My mind replays what I could have done differently.”

“Don’t blame yourself. You’re still young. You never know what the Lord has in store.”

“Especially these days. How are the preparations for your departure going?”

Filip’s features sank, as if he grew a year older with each passing second. “How are we supposed to pack up and leave everything we know and love? I was born on this farm. I brought my new bride here, and she gave birth to our children here. And here I buried her. Now, because the Nazis don’t like us, they force us from our homes and into camps.”

“I understand.” Teodor glanced at the cemetery at the end of the field. “We got our notices the day the baby came. We leave with you.”

“Oh, Teodor. How awful. This surely isn’t helping Natia.”

“I haven’t told her.”

“You can’t put it off.”

“How can I deal her this blow when she is in mourning? Right now, she can’t handle the news.” Right now, he can’t handle it. Loss piled on top of loss and threatened to rip him open. How could he walk away from the land that cradled his children?

“The German settlers will arrive no matter what. Give her time to say good-bye.”

“I’m worried about her fragile nerves.” If he couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, what about his wife? She would shatter, and he

wouldn't be able to pick up the pieces. She'd never survive the camp.

"I understand. You'll have to be gentle, but you must tell her. Either you go peacefully, or they force you out. That would be much worse."

"The trauma of not being able to say her farewells might be her undoing. But why now? Why not after she's healed?" As if the wounds from the loss of each child would ever scab over for either of them.

"It's never convenient to leave the only life you've ever known."

Teodor forced himself to breathe in and out. Their tiny blue stucco house lay behind him. In front of him stretched their few acres of farmland where they grew potatoes, beets, and cabbage. The small, red barn stood empty to his left. Not much, but it was theirs.

"If I can do anything, let me know." Filip's voice was husky.

How much worse for him to leave, an old man with two younger children at home. "If only I could stay on my farm." He would go to any lengths to spare Natia the pain of leaving.

"You could if you signed the *Volksdeutsche* paper stating you're willing to denounce your Polish roots and become Germanized."

"Never. That equals betrayal of our nation, the highest form of treason. I love Poland and would give my life to protect her. I cannot turn my back on her."

"Not even for your wife?"

Teodor strode in a circle, kicking at stones. Could he do that to shield Natia and save their home? "It goes against all I've ever believed. And everyone in Piosenka would hate me. In doing so, I would make myself and my wife outcasts."

"I'm not sure there will be many Poles left here soon."

"And I doubt the ethnic Germans would accept us. In the end, we would lose all we've worked for anyway. Not even for Natia could I sign that paper. We must be willing to suffer to remain loyal to Poland."



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Filip stared at the brown earth for a long while and then sighed. "I'll send Helena over later to sit with Natia. Heart wrenching as it is, she'll come out on the other side."

A small smile tugged at Teodor's lips. "And as stubborn as the winter's snows. But two blows in quick succession could be too much for her."

"I'll pray the Lord will give you the right words to say at the right time."

The men parted, and Teodor carried the basket with the soup back to the house. He entered the cool interior and pulled off his heavy dark-brown wool coat, his eyes needing several seconds to adjust to the dimness. "Natia, look what Helena made for us. Some cabbage soup, according to your father. It smells delicious. She didn't burn it this time." At the enticing aroma, his stomach rumbled.

After a few moments, Natia shuffled from the bedroom, still in her housecoat, her brown hair disheveled, a curl over one eye. "Do you want me to heat it for your lunch?" Dark half-moons underscored her green eyes.

"*Nie*, you sit down. I'll warm it." He moved about the kitchen, so small that a few steps took him from the door to the little stove on the far side of the room. Within moments, heat bathed them, and the sweet aroma of sausage filled the air. Teodor sat beside her while they waited for it to warm. "I'm glad to see you up."

"I want to stay in bed forever. But I can't. There are chores to be done. You'll be planting soon."

"You're remarkable." He rubbed her shoulder.

"Like Mama. Life hit her hard, but until her final illness, she always got back up. I also know there is something you are keeping from me."

He shook his head, probably more than necessary.

"You're not sleeping. In the middle of the night, I hear you pacing. You tread on that squeaky floorboard in front of the sink."

"If Poland ever needs spies, I'll give them your name."

A brief flash of amusement lit her eyes and then faded like the sunset. “What is it?”

“There is time. Right now, you concentrate on getting your health back, and let me do the worrying.”

“So whatever you have to tell me isn’t good?”

He should have his tongue cut from his mouth for not watching his words. “Don’t press me.” He rose and stirred the thick soup.

She came behind him and wrapped him in an embrace. Her touch was warm. He should be comforting her, but instead, she did the soothing. “Please, tell me. Don’t leave me to wonder.”

His stomach fluttered, and not from hunger. “Your family is almost ready to leave. *Tata* told me they have packed what they could and given away what they couldn’t.” He was a coward for not saying the words, but maybe she would catch his meaning and he wouldn’t have to utter them.

Though they had only been married three years, they understood each other’s thoughts as well as couples married for decades.

Natia gasped. “We got our notices.”

Cold surged through his midsection. He nodded.

She slipped to the floor.



## Chapter Two

*Nie, Teodor, nie.*” His words about the Germans’ orders to leave shattered the small piece of Natia’s heart that remained. How could she endure it?

He knelt beside her on the uneven wood floor and pulled her close, his wool sweater rough against her cheek. “I know.” His words were soft.

“How can we leave? We just buried Andrzej.” Every muscle in her body clenched. She couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t.

“The Germans don’t know our pain.”

“Even if they did, they wouldn’t care. They hate us. They want to be rid of us.”

He stiffened. See, her words hit a nerve, for they were true. The Nazis had almost as much disdain for the Poles as for the Jews. They would stop at nothing to Germanize this part of the world. Including ripping apart families.

“We’ll make do. At least we have each other. We’ll go together, be together, along with your father and Helena and Zygmunt.”

She sat up straight and grabbed his arm. How could he even think of leaving this place? Their children? Even if it meant being with her family, she would refuse to go. “We’ll ignore their order. What does one couple more or less mean to them? Let’s run away, hide in the forests like the partisans. There we can be free. If we do what they command, they will win.”

“How long before they discover us? Days, maybe weeks if we’re lucky. And then winter will come, not for a while, but it will come. We can’t survive the cold without a roof over our heads.

*Nie*, we'll pray for God's protection and go to the labor camp. I'm not afraid of hard work."

Couldn't the man see reason? What had turned him so compliant? "It's not the hard work I fear but the living conditions, the disease, and the hunger. All the unknowns." They had heard about the horror of these places. Only crazy people wanted to go. Was that what happened? Had the loss of their child addled his brain?

"If we hid, those things would be no better than in the camp. Maybe worse."

"And most of all, I'm afraid of being separated from you." He gathered her close. She nestled into his sweater that carried his unique, fresh smell of outdoors and laundry soap. If only she could stay in his embrace forever. Safe. Sheltered. Secure.

They sat together until the shadows on the floor lengthened. At last, much too soon, he released her. He touched her chest. "Here, *Natia*, in here is where I'll be. Always in your heart. I don't know if we'll be allowed to live together or even see each other. But we are married. A part of each other. One flesh. That will never change."

She kissed his work-roughened fingers. He was right, of course. Very few choices presented themselves. They were at the mercy of the Germans. Men who showed no mercy. "Can we do this?"

"There is no other way. We have to obey. So we will. Each day, we will get up, get dressed, and do what is required. We'll carry on, always looking forward to that day when we can return here and resume our life together."

"We'll be back?"

"I promise."

"I'll be with my babies again?"

"You will. I'll do whatever I must to make that happen."

"Knowing that gives me a reason to keep moving forward."

"You will survive, *Natia*. I have every faith in you. You're a stronger woman than you realize."

"With you by my side, I am."

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“With or without me. When you need it, you have a reserve of fortitude you can only imagine.”

What was it Mama always quoted from the Bible? “*Strength and honor are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.*” But Natia wasn’t like Mama. “I’m still scared. Aren’t you?”

He kissed the top of her head and then rose to his feet, reaching out to help her stand. “Are you ready to start packing?”

It wasn’t until she lay in bed that night, the darkness falling heavy on her, the wind moaning outside of the window, Teodor snoring beside her, that it hit her. He had never answered her question.

He was afraid.

And she should be too.



Teodor’s slow footsteps carried him into the only town he had ever known, the only place he had ever lived. One street ran east and west and boasted most of the businesses. He strolled by the little tailor shop and clothing store his father’s friend had owned. Both men now lay cold in their graves, *Tata* for twenty years, since Teodor was five, leaving him and Mama alone.

No sweet, enticing scents rose from the bakery. Since the arrival of the Nazis and rationing, the business had been shuttered. There was no flour or sugar.

He approached the first of several north- and south-running streets. He turned to his right and could just make out the gentle curve of his aunt’s tiled roof. Or of what had been his aunt’s home, the place he’d spent his summers playing with his cousins. More than ten years had gone by since they emigrated to Australia. Did any of them fight for their adopted country?

For several more blocks, he wandered down the street, hearing the voices and seeing the scenes of his childhood. Playing *serso*, a toss-and-catch game with sticks and a ring, with his cousins. Acting as Joseph in the Christmas play at church. Stealing kisses

from Natia underneath the willow. His vision blurred. How could he leave this place, the one thing he loved only a little less than God and his wife? The timbre of well-known voices, the sweet recognition of friendly faces, the soft darkness of familiar soil.

This place that held the graves of his three children and both of his parents.

For the last time, he turned the cool metal knob on the door into the small grocery store and entered. "*Dzień dobry.*"

The middle-aged woman, gray streaking her braided hair, came to the counter, a reproduction of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa behind her. Most of the shelves surrounding her bore nothing more than dust. "*Dzień dobry, Teodor. What brings you in? I thought you'd be preparing to leave. How is Natia faring? We are sorry for your loss.*"

Which of her questions did he answer first? Perhaps it was best to steer clear of the more emotional topics. Take care of business and walk out before he broke down. He focused his gaze on the Madonna's golden halo. "I've come to settle my account. I don't know when, if, we'll be back to pay."

*Pani Lisowa* nodded and shuffled to the far end of the well-worn wood counter, bent over, and produced the account book. She flipped the pages until she came across Teodor's name. "It's not much."

"I'll feel better leaving no balance."

"That's why we'll miss you. The Palinskis were always the most honest, hardest working among us. I have a difficult time imagining that, once you leave, there will be no more of you here. I've missed your mother so much in the four years she's been gone."

He nodded, unable to force any words through the narrowing in his throat. Maybe if he had helped Mama with the heavy chores, made sure she ate more, provided for her better, her heart wouldn't have given out when the Nazis entered their village. So many maybes in this life. Unable to choke out any words, he pushed the *złoty* across the counter and paid his bill.

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As he did so, *Pani* Lisowa grasped him, her hand warm, her grip firm. “Your parents would be proud of you. Your mother was. She always talked about you and how much she loved you. Don’t let those Nazis rob you of who you are.”

Again, all he could manage was a single nod.

“You take care of that wife of yours, you hear?”

“I will.” Teodor croaked out the words. Pressure built in his chest.

She leaned across the counter and pecked him on both cheeks. “God go with you.”

“And with you.”

Before he lost control, he spun and sprinted from the store. He raced down the street until he left the town far in the distance. By the time he slowed, he was almost back to the farm. He stumbled from the dirt road and ambled over the one soft part of the field he’d plowed under in the fall.

With a shudder, he fell to the ground. The loamy scent of the earth surrounded him. He picked up a clod and rubbed it in his hands, staining them with dirt. Maybe in this way, he could have his farm with him. He and this ground were connected. He had slaved and saved to buy the small plot he called home. But it was his. His and Natia’s. Together, they sweated to plant the crops and to harvest them. To store a bit away for the winter’s food and for the spring’s planting.

What loomed in front of them? What awaited them?

Even if they returned, could they ever recapture their peace and happiness?

Could he keep his promise to his wife?



Natia bent over the yellow and white daffodils that bobbed their heads in time to the music of the wind. With her scissors, she cut a handful and divided them into three small bouquets. She wiped her hands on her apron, set her chin, and climbed the low hill at

the edge of the cabbage field. Teodor hadn't turned the land over last fall, hadn't done anything to it this year. He'd known they were leaving.

Before she arrived at the top of the rise, she turned to survey this place she'd called home since their marriage. It wasn't much, but enough. Enough to fill their bellies for the winter and enough to keep the driving rains and swirling snows off their heads. She'd planted roses along one side of the cottage and daises along the back. This year, she wouldn't see them bloom or smell their sweet scent.

She swallowed the rising tide of salty tears. *Nie*, she would be strong, like Mama. Teodor hadn't let her see his fear. Each day, he greeted her with a soft kiss and a gentle smile. Each night, their tears mingled, but with each morning came new resolve.

Once she had drawn in a deep breath and let it out little by little, she finished her trek to the place where Teodor had planted three small, white crosses. Where their children rested until Judgment Day.

A fresh mound of dirt marked the most recent grave.

She placed a bouquet in front of each cross. Her little ones. The children who would never laugh, never cry, never sing. So she did the laughing, the crying, and the singing for them.

Today she sat on the ground near them. The sun warmed her shoulders, and she pulled the black embroidered scarf from her head, the breeze on her face as if her little ones caressed her cheek. "I'll miss you, *moje miłości*. But you will never be far from my thoughts. I'll carry you with me always. Your father has promised we'll be back. If I can, I will be."

She kissed her fingertips and then touched each cross. "Beata, Szymon, Andrzej. Don't forget I love you and always will." Numbness overtook her.

A tune rose in her chest, one sung by generations of Polish women to their fussy infants. She had sung it to her younger siblings after Mama died. Now, one last time, she would sing it for



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her children. She cleared her throat. The lilting, rocking melody floated over the countryside.

*Go to sleep, my little doll  
Time for you to go to bed  
I'll be rocking you  
And you'll close your eyes.  
Luli luli luli luli luli luli lu,  
Luli luli luli luli, a ty oczka zmruż.*

A deep voice chimed in with hers. Teodor had come up behind her without making a noise, so she never heard him until he sang the lullaby with her. As they ended, his voice cracked and he dropped to the ground beside her.

She peered at him, his blue eyes glistening with unshed tears. The numbness fell away, and her own tears gathered. She stroked the side of his face and swallowed hard. "My grandmother always sang that song. Only once or twice through, and I'd fall asleep."

"One day, you'll sing it to our children and grandchildren." His own tears slid down his wind-burned cheeks.

"You don't have to wrap the truth in cotton. I wish I could take this pain from you." But she could only accomplish that by giving him a child.

And she had failed.

"Having you with me helps."

She cupped his cheek. "You always try to protect me, and I love you for it. But this, you can't shield me from. Trouble is coming." She shivered.

The jangle of a horse's harness broke the stillness of the moment. Old *Pan* Majewski sat on his ramshackle cart, whistling to his swayback mare as she plodded down the rutted road. His wagon bumped along. By the time they got to the train station in *Śpiewka*, they would all have backaches.

Teodor took her by the hand. "It's time."

From where she stood, she studied the doorway of her childhood home. *Tata*, *Helena*, and *Zygmunt* appeared, each carrying

a suitcase. Helena was only nine, Zygmunt but seven. Natia sighed. What would happen to them?

She squeezed Teodor's calloused fingers. "I'm ready." For the last time, she gazed on her children's graves. So small. So alone. The wind whipped her black wool skirt and cut through her embroidered blouse and vest. "Good-bye, my loves." The words caught on a sob. With every bit of strength she had, Natia turned her back on them, held her husband's hand, and they picked their way across the field.



Teodor, Natia, and her family sat in the back of the crude wagon, long ago having exhausted all conversation with their kind neighbor and each other. The kilometers rolled by, greening fields on either side of them, the vast plains stretching before them. For her entire life, Natia had lived in the same area, near the small village of Piosenka, worked the same land, worshipped in the same church. Family had always surrounded her.

Across from her, Zygmunt and Helena huddled close to *Tata*, their eyes large in their small faces. Each of them, including the children, wore a diamond-shaped yellow patch with a purple edge and a purple *P* in the middle. What fate did the Nazis reserve for ones so small? For each of them?

Natia's head bobbed as she fought off sleep. Teodor rubbed her aching back. "Go to sleep if you want. You need your rest, so you can heal."

She squared her shoulders to keep him from worrying. "*Nie*, I'm fine. This is an adventure, everything new and different. Our first ride on the train." She had to keep Zygmunt and Helena from becoming too frightened.

Zygmunt's green eyes, so much like her own, lit up. "I can't wait. We'll get to see the world. Or at least Poland. This is going to be fun." The breeze ruffled his fair hair, so opposite of hers.

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The naïveté of a young boy. Teodor whispered in Natia's ear, "I know your heart is breaking."

"Would you rather that I cried? That wouldn't make anything different. Poles are used to change. How many countries have we been part of in our lifetimes? It's another storm to weather, that's all." Her voice shook, just the tiniest of bits.

*Tata* gathered his younger children close to himself. "We'll be fine. All of us. God will take care of us. We'll rest and trust in him. And enjoy the train ride." He chuckled, the sound of his laugh as melodic as any song.

If they could remain together where she could watch over the children, her husband and father at her side, they would be fine. Still, she drew her shawl around herself as if it might protect her from the future. They had heard about the labor camps. The hard work. The disease. The death.

Farmer Majewski turned around but pointed ahead of them. "See that?"

A cluster of buildings rose from the undulating hills, silhouetted against the horizon. Most were sturdy brick. Several smokestacks rose from factories, dwarfing the buildings below them.

"There's Śpiewka. We should be there soon."

Helena bit her lip. She hadn't said two words since they'd left. Natia stretched across the cart and squeezed her sister's fragile hand. "Think how exciting this will be and how much you'll have to tell your friends when we go home."

"Will you stay with me?"

"I won't let go of you. I promise. And *Tata* will be with us too."

Zygmunt, every inch a boy, sat forward in the cart. "Look at that. What a huge town."

Teodor whistled. "It must be three times the size of ours. Maybe more."

"That's about right." Farmer Majewski nodded.

"Wow." Zygmunt widened his eyes until they almost popped from his head. "It's like a city."

*Tata* laughed again. “Nowhere near the size of Kraków or Warsaw.”

“I’ve never seen anything so big. Can we stay here?”

Natia relaxed against Teodor, who drew her close. “And miss out on riding on the train?”

“Never.”

“Sit down.” Natia caught Zygmunt by the hem of his brown tweed jacket and pulled him to the seat beside her, a light-colored curl falling over his eye. She pushed it back. “You’ll fall out of the cart and miss the entire adventure.”

Śpiewka filled up more of the horizon as they approached. Several other wagons shared the road with them. A horn sounded, and a green canvas-covered German transport truck whipped by. Then another came, and another, followed by a Nazi in a dark uniform on a motorcycle. All the while, Zygmunt knelt in the wagon bed and leaned over, taking in the sights.

Her palms damp, Natia held fast to her brother. They entered the town, crowded with homes, businesses, hotels, and taverns. The tang of vinegar and cabbage floated on the air. Before too long, *Pan* Majewski reined the horse to a halt in front of the red-brick train station.

Zygmunt scrambled from the cart first, hopping from foot to foot. Teodor climbed down and helped Natia and the rest of the family disembark. In keeping with her promise, Natia clung to Helena.

Teodor passed the farmer a few *złoty*. “*Dziękuję Ci* for taking us. We appreciate it.”

The farmer returned the money. “It’s the least I could do. Your family has done mine many kindnesses over the years.”

*Tata* clapped *Pan* Majewski on the back. “God go with you.”

“And with you.”

Natia kissed the man on his wrinkled, whiskery cheek. “God bless you.”

## WHEN THE HEART SINGS

“And you.” Within a heartbeat, *Pan* Majewski climbed into the seat and disappeared down the road.

Zygmunt skipped ahead of the group while Helena matched Natia’s steps as they made their way toward the tracks.

People crowded the tiny station and spilled onto the cobblestone street. The sweetness of ladies’ perfume mingled with the sourness of unwashed farmers. German soldiers patrolled the area with rifles over their shoulders and dogs straining on leashes.

“You there.” One with dark eyes and a downturned mouth hollered at them. “Papers.”

The group stopped and produced what the man demanded. Natia pressed against Teodor.

The Nazi stared at the triangular patch on their coats. “Get in the station. *Schnell, schnell*. There isn’t time to waste.”

A train whistle bellowed. Teodor jumped, and Natia sucked in a breath. He squeezed her shoulder.

“I’ve never seen so many people in one place at a time.” The chaos of voices filled her head. Women and children cried. Men shouted. Their captors yelled louder. *Schnell* was the only word she could decipher. *Hurry*.

To what? An uncertain fate?

“This is great.” Zygmunt attempted to wriggle through the crowd, but *Tata* caught him by the collar.

“You need to stay with us.”

Natia reached into her small bag and withdrew four squares of fabric. “I couldn’t sleep last night, so I made each of you a gift.” She presented her husband, father, and siblings with handkerchiefs embroidered around the edges, each with their initials in one corner.

Zygmunt stuffed his into his pocket. “I don’t see why I need a fancy handkerchief. I can use my sleeve.”

Natia tsked. “May our tears of sadness soon be turned to tears of joy.”

The others folded their gifts and tucked them away.

“*Dzięki, Natia.*” Helena sniffled.

The crowd surged forward. Every farmer and villager from fifty kilometers in each direction must be here. Their small group had no choice but to shuffle along. Their only other option was to be trampled.

The train hissed. Up ahead, the Nazis herded their prisoners into large, windowless boxcars. Natia’s heart slammed against her ribs. Her steps faltered.

Dear Lord, this couldn’t be.

They wouldn’t ride to the camp in a passenger car.

Instead, they would travel to their destiny crammed into a cattle car.

Like animals.