

*"The Poles do not need universities or secondary schools, the Polish territories are to be transformed into an intellectual desert."*

*Governor General Hans Frank*

## **Chapter 1**

*August 1942*

*Warsaw Ghetto*

"It's true! I swear it," Stefan Badner shouted.

"That's impossible!"

"You're lying!"

The cries of the living skeletons surrounding Anna grew into a cacophony that echoed in the warehouse filled with shocked refugees. Anna clutched her ears to block out the chaos, but it seeped into her soul.

Perspiration trickled down her cheeks. Quivering, she swiped

her jaws with her blouse sleeve. Her vision wavered. The odor of unwashed bodies made acid churn in her stomach. She shook her head to clear it.

"Quiet! Someone will hear us!" an old woman hissed.

"Dead? Every one of them? It's barbaric!" Jenka Kubec, one of Anna's elderly roommates, declared.

"We saw them," Stefan whispered. He rubbed his eyes and scratched his jaw through his black beard. In the flickering candlelight, Anna watched his nose redden as if he fought tears. Having known him most of her life, she never expected to see that.

He continued with a clipped voice. "Tomasz and I hid on the train taking the deportees to work camps. When we arrived at Treblinka, we hid in the woods and watched.

"The guards pulled a few of the passengers aside. They promised the rest a shower and herded them like cattle into huge buildings. Those that remained were beaten by the guards then put to work sorting the heaps of belongings left by the others. None escaped the showers! They were dead...all dead." His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat.

Tomasz, his face a pale mask, nodded. "We heard their screams, smelled the gas, the burning bodies."

*The truth. They're telling the truth.*

Shivers defied the heat in the closed room, raising the hair on every inch of Anna's body. How could anyone do this to her friends, her neighbors...her family?

Oh, God. The monsters had taken Papa a week ago; Grandmama and Mama had been among the first deportees. She recalled Papa's grim face as he'd been dragged to the transfer station. Had he known?

Doubt and pain wrapped around her, sucking the air from her lungs.

Were they dead? Suffering?

She closed her eyes. *Please protect them.*

Glancing at her little sister, she saw the anger, the fire, in Marta's dark eyes. At thirteen, she'd lived through the anguish of losing everyone she loved, except for Anna. They only had each other now.

Fists curled at her sides, Anna leaned closer to Marta and whispered, "I'll never let them take you from me."

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Anna rolled to her back and sighed. Every lump in her pallet stabbed her spine like tiny pebbles. Light from the guard tower poured through the window, steeping the room in eerie shadows.

She pulled her pillow up to block the rumbles coming from the other side of the partition that divided the room. How did Roza get any sleep beside Jenka, whose bomb-like snores rattled the walls?

*Throw something at him.* She reached for the shoe beside her bed, but temptation withered with the sound of Marta's rhythmic breathing. Her sister had finally fallen asleep.

*I won't be the one to wake her.*

"Papa," Marta whimpered, the sound dying on her lips. "Papa, don't leave." Her head thrashed against her pillow.

Anna's eyes filled. She swiped them with the back of her hand. Crying served no purpose. Tears wouldn't feed them. Tears wouldn't bring back their parents.

She rushed to her sister's side. "Marta, it's all right," she whispered, as she smoothed the hair from the girl's damp forehead. Marta breathed deep and sighed. She rolled to her stomach without waking.

Hot, stagnant air filled the tiny apartment. The promise of a breeze stirred the patchwork curtains and teased Anna's constricted lungs. Through the shadows, she drifted toward the window. Her toe snagged fabric. Lurching forward, she threw her arms out, grasping for anything to prevent a fall. She caught the windowsill. Peeling paint jammed into her palms.

She turned to see what had tripped her. A few feet away, Lenny Praski lay curled in a ball. His tiny body didn't stir. The boy could sleep through anything.

She dreaded telling Lenny what they'd learned tonight. She was sure to hear the words, "I told you so." For a ten-year-old, he spewed more cynicism than most old men.

*Watching your father's murder can have that effect.*

Tears stung her eyes again as she thought of Lenny's father, Papa's best friend. Konrad Praski was a good man. He didn't deserve to be executed for trying to feed his family.

A chuckle floated on the breeze. Anna cautiously approached the window and scanned the street below. Spotlights shifted, glinting on the barbed wire lining the ten-foot high brick fence that separated the ghetto from the rest of Warsaw. Rifles in hand, two guards paced near the gate, laughing and talking, looking like actors in a surreal prison play.

*Hell on earth.* Burning hatred sizzled through her, demanding revenge against the monsters who'd destroyed her life.

Her sister's whimpers pulled Anna back to reality. She sighed. What could she do against an army?

Movement in the street below drew her attention—trash blowing in the summer breeze. Then she noticed them, the wild people

dodging in and out of the shadows on a search for sustenance. The ghetto was full of these undocumented people, hiding wherever they could, prowling dark alleys, praying for one more day on this earth, one more day with their loved ones...and defying the Nazis with each breath.