

# THE TAKEAWAY MEN

A NOVEL



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*Until we are all free, we are none of us free.*

—Emma Lazarus

# PROLOGUE AUGUST, 1942

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KIELCE, POLAND

WHEN THE TRUCK WITH THE painted Red Cross on its doors left Edyta Woff on the dirt road leading to her house, her neighborhood was already dark and quiet. Only the barking of a dog shattered the silence. The myriad silvery shining stars ignited the night sky like a pattern of delicate sequins and illuminated her path. Although she was exhausted and sweaty from her long day's work, and her nurse's uniform was damp and clung to her body, she could not help but reflect on the magnificence of God's creation. *But how was it possible, she pondered, that the barbaric Nazi destruction that was overrunning this corner of the earth—her town and her country—coexisted against the backdrop of God's masterpiece?*

Earlier that day, she had smuggled three toddlers out of the Kielce Ghetto and into the safety of the Convent of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The mother superior there had now sent her home with a small basket of bread, cheese, and apples for the two Jewish adults she was hiding in the attic of her father's house. She knew hiding Jews, especially in her own home, was a risky proposition and not within her comfort level. Her expertise was in rescuing small children, not grown-ups. But when

she was asked to smuggle two adults from the ghetto, one of whom she had known since childhood, she'd had no other choice. She knew full well that her decision was not without peril, particularly because her father, a Polish policeman, supported the Nazis in their hatred of Jews.

Despite her concerns, she convinced herself that this is what her late mother would have wanted her to do. Her mother had been a nurse, and Edyta's choice of a helping profession was no accident. Her mother had always been kind and caring, and had had a good relationship with her neighbors, including the Jewish doctor for whom she worked. Sometimes, as a small child, Edyta would accompany her mother to the office, which was located in the large stone house where the doctor and his family lived. She would fetch bandages and cups of water for the patients. As she got older, she became her mother's assistant, and was determined to become a nurse like her. The doctor had even offered to pay for her tuition at the nursing school in Radom when the time came.

Edyta had been infatuated with the doctor's son, Aron, ever since she could remember. He told her how he planned to become a physician too and go into practice with his father. As she got older, her crush on him grew. She had secretly dreamed of working beside him, and perhaps even marrying him one day.

But before Aron had an opportunity to apply to medical school, Jews were barred from higher education and from the professions. Hitler's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and the ensuing chaos dashed Edyta's dreams of attending nursing school. She was forced to stay home with her widowed father, who had taken to drinking excessively and spewing forth anti-Semitic vitriol.

As she approached her street, she saw her small two-story house with its slanted roof and brown weather-beaten shingles. She was grateful for the cover of night because she could walk home without neighbors asking intrusive questions.

"Thank you, Jesus," she murmured as she crossed herself. But

she was still nervous, thinking about her father. She became short of breath, and her heart started racing, as if she were being chased. The Jews had been in the attic for only a couple of days, and she was deathly afraid that her father would discover them.

*Calm down*, she thought to herself. *It is late; surely Tata is sleeping by now.* But as she got closer to the cottage, her fear intensified.

She opened the door gingerly, so as not to make a sound. As she looked around, she saw the telltale signs of a drinking binge—empty beer and liquor bottles were scattered on the floor and kitchen counter. And her father was awake. His eyes were glazed, and his clothes were disheveled. She could smell the honey and spices of the *Krupnik* on his breath. She could hear that he had been drinking for some time because he slurred his words as he screamed at her.

“Where have you been? What are you doing in your late mother’s uniform? Up to no good, I’m sure. You belong in the gutter with the *Zhids*. I will kill the Christ Killers—and you too—before you get me killed.”

He threw his drink at her, and the golden yellow liquid landed on her white uniform. The glass narrowly missed and shattered against the wall behind her, a shard lodging in her bare left leg. As it began to bleed, she ran upstairs to her room and locked the door.

While her father had been prone to angry outbursts in the past, he had never physically attacked her like this. *Was it the loss of her mother or the drink or the Nazi occupation that had turned him into a monster? Or had he always secretly hated the Jews, and Hitler’s invasion had just given him license to express it?*

One thing was certain. He was a policeman with a prejudice, a gun, and a temper. With the encouragement and approval of the Nazi government, he was in a position to potentially inflict great harm. She shuddered to think about the evil her father might do.

She now knew for sure that neither she, nor the two Jews hiding in the attic, were safe from her father’s wrath.