

CHAPTER 1

Monday, August 28, 1939

Late in the afternoon, a procession of three black carriages paraded through the streets of Stanislawow, Poland, bound for the little chapel by the army camp on the southern edge of the city. Each was drawn by two horses and driven by a soldier in dress uniform.

In the first carriage rode the youngest of the Buczak daughters – eight-year-old Lucia, who bounced giddily up and down on the seat, and 14-year-old Alexandra, who kept ordering her sister to stop embarrassing them. Across from the girls sat their maternal grandmother, a soured Ukrainian widow would not allow herself to smile, even on a happy occasion such as this.

In the second carriage rode the Buczak parents – Florian and Maria – and, on Maria's lap, the orphaned toddler Ryszard, son of her late sister. Maria, at least, was smiling, for she was determined to make the best of the occasion. Florian, however, was still grumbling about the disobedience of their oldest daughter.

The oldest daughter, Danuta, rode alone in the third carriage, perched like a princess on the red leather seat. Dressed in a long white gown of silk and lace and clutching a bouquet of white rosebuds, she was sure she had never in her 16 years looked more beautiful.

It did not occur to her to wonder how her fiancé, Lt. Rudolf Gasior, had secured use of the army's ceremonial carriages when everyone at the camp was preparing for deployment. She knew only that she loved the attention that the procession was attracting. Everyone in the streets and on the sidewalks seemed to be gloomy or tense, but then they

would look up and see the young bride and break into smiles. Some waved. Some called out that she looked lovely. Others wished her good luck. Trying to maintain a regal air, Danuta acknowledged the greetings with a slight nod or wave of the hand, but sometimes girlish giggles would overcome her and she would hide her face in embarrassment behind the rosebud bouquet.

Glancing up after one such bout, she saw the procession was approaching the Cathedral of the Holy Resurrection. This was her family's church, where she had been baptized and attended Mass every Sunday. Until that morning it was also where she had planned to be wed. As the procession passed the cathedral, well-wishers on the sidewalk observed no change in Danuta's beatific smile. Only the carriage driver heard her mutter, "May you burn in hell, Monsignor Kiedrowska."

That morning, a light rain had been falling as Danuta and Rudolf hurried along the same route to the cathedral, carrying the marriage license issued only minutes before at City Hall. Rudolf tried to hold his umbrella over Danuta's head, but she kept darting out from under it to pass slower-moving pedestrians. It was all he could do to keep up with her. When they reached the cathedral, she dashed ahead up the steps and went in immediately, leaving him behind to close up the umbrella and brush the rain drops from his khaki field jacket and cap.

Inside, he found her standing halfway up the center aisle of the nave, forlornly surveying the cavernous space. There was no one else about.

"I wanted ours to be like the wedding of the mayor's daughter," she said when he joined her. "Every seat was going to be filled. The aisle was going to be lined with flowers.

There were going to be so many candles it would be as bright as a sunny day in here.”

Rudolf slipped an arm around her waist and gave her a squeeze.

“It would have been lovely,” he said. “But we can no longer wait until October.

Who knows where I’ll be then?”

“We can hope it will all be over by then and you’ll be back home.”

“Perhaps it will be. Maybe the Germans are just bluffing. But we dare not take the chance. We have to get married today.”

“I know,” she said, heaving a sigh.

She pulled away and walked slowly toward the altar. He followed, their footsteps on the stone floor echoing throughout the chamber.

“We’re not going to get many people here on such short notice,” she called back over her shoulder. “It will feel like an empty tomb.”

“Maybe we should have the wedding in the side chapel,” he offered.

“Let’s see what Monsignor Kiedrowska says. He’ll probably be back in his study this time of day.” She led Rudolf to a door beside the altar and down a long hallway.

The door to the study was open and light poured out into the hall. Danuta and Rudolf peered in and saw the white-haired priest in his black cassock, sitting in the brown leather chair behind his massive wooden desk, his head bowed and eyes closed. Thinking they might be interrupting a prayer, they waited silently in the doorway. Danuta’s eyes swept over the room’s red velvet curtains and oriental rugs, before settling on the silver-plated tea service on the credenza behind the desk. Just then, the old man grunted and his head bobbed, and she realized he was asleep. Casting an amused glance at Rudolf, she rapped loudly on the doorframe and called out, “Monsignor Kiedrowska, you have visitors.”

The priest jerked back in his chair, shook his head and stared blankly at the girl.

“Danuta?”

“Yes, Father. And you remember Rudolf Gasior, my fiancé?”

Monsignor Kiedrowska’s gaze shifted to the soldier. “Of course,” he said after a moment. “Haven’t I’ve seen you at Mass with the Buczak family?”

“Yes, a few times, Father,” Rudolf answered.

“Good.”

“May we have a moment?” Danuta asked.

The priest motioned for them to sit in the two straight-backed wooden chairs before his desk.

“I wasn’t expecting you. Is it time to start your Pre-Cana counseling already?”

“We were to begin next week,” she replied. “But everything has changed now. That’s why we’re here.”

The priest nodded, indicating she should go on.

“We’d planned to be married on the third Saturday in October, but that may no longer be possible. All the units at the army camp were put on alert yesterday. Rudolf expects to be sent west any day now.”

“Yes, I’ve been reading the newspapers and listening to the radio. I can understand your concern,” the priest assured her.

Encouraged, she went straight to the point. “We want to have the wedding today.”

The priest rocked back in his chair, clasped his hands together under his chin, and pursed his lips, but said nothing.

“We have the marriage license,” she continued, quickly unfolding the document and

laying it out before him on the desk. “And we have letters of permission from Rudolf’s commanding officer and my parents.”

She omitted the fact that she had argued with her parents for hours on Sunday and gained their signatures only after threatening to elope.

The priest picked up a pair of eyeglasses from the desktop and held them close to confirm that the paper on his desk was, indeed, a wedding license. One line caught the priest’s attention and he placed a finger on it.

“Lieutenant, I see by this that you were born in 1911.”

“Yes sir.”

“That makes you ...” The priest paused.

“I’m 28, sir.”

“Thank you.” Seemingly satisfied, the priest slowly folded the temple arms of the glasses and placed them carefully back on his desk.

Danuta bit her lip. Rudolf reached across, latched onto her hand and squeezed it gently.

“I can understand, my children, why you would feel a sense of urgency in this troubling time,” the priest finally said. “I remember young people like yourselves coming to me with similar requests before the Great War. But my answer to them at that terrible time was the same one I give to you now. The Church has rules that do not waver. You cannot be married until you complete the Pre-Cana.”

Rudolf leaned forward in his chair. “But Father, that takes six weeks,” he said.

The priest shrugged. “Perhaps given the circumstance we can cut the time in half.”

Rudolf chuckled and threw up his hands. “It wouldn’t matter if it took only six days.

I can't guarantee I'll have that much time."

"Then you'll have to wait until you return."

"What if we have the wedding today and *promise* to go through the Pre-Cana when Rudolf comes back?" Danuta ventured.

The priest shook his head. "That would defeat the purpose. The counseling helps you understand all that marriage entails. What if in the course of the Pre-Cana you realize that this marriage is not right for you after all? Then it would be too late."

"But we know we love each other," she protested. "And it's not like we're rushing into this. We've known each other since I was a little girl."

At that, the priest chuckled. "My child, to my eyes you're still a little girl."

Danuta gritted her teeth to hold in the words she wanted to spout back at him: And to my eyes, you're just a hard-hearted old man. To remain calm, she reminded herself that she could win any argument if she were persistent enough. After all, she had worn down her parents just yesterday.

"What if one of the other ... *younger* priests marries us?" she proposed.

"The rules of the church are the same for all priests."

"I just thought another priest might be more flexible, more understanding of our situation."

The monsignor's face reddened and he slammed his hand down on the desk. "I fully understand that you are impatient. But I will not surrender the laws of the church to the whims of a child. Or to the earthly impulses of a man. This is my parish, and no priest here will marry you without my blessing."

Danuta sank back in her chair and looked to Rudolf, hoping he might offer some

new argument. Only a weak smile and a shrug met her eyes.

“Have you nothing to say?” she demanded.

“I think Monsignor Kiedrowska has made his point clear,” Rudolf replied.

“But” Danuta swallowed and blinked, realizing that she, too, had no other plea to change the priest’s mind. It was hopeless. Tears of frustration began pooling up. She struggled to hold them back. When she realized she couldn’t, she abruptly stood. “Good day, Monsignor Kiedrowska.” Before either the priest or Rudolf could react, she marched out the door.

Rudolf found her a minute later standing on the front steps of the cathedral, her cheeks streaked with tears and raindrops. He opened the umbrella and held it over her.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“We could have a civil service at City Hall.”

She shook her head. “My parents would never agree to a wedding outside the church.”

“Then we could go to the chapel by the army camp. I’m told the young priest there is more sympathetic to the needs of soldiers.”

The suggestion only further disheartened her. She had never been inside the little chapel, but she knew from passing it that the building was a humble nutshell without so much as a single stained-glass window.

“A wedding there would be so dismal,” she muttered.

“Perhaps. But it might be that or no wedding at all.”

Danuta thought it over. For as long as she could remember, for longer than she had known Rudolf, she had dreamed of a wedding at the cathedral with hundreds of people

filling the pews, flowers lining the aisles, gold candelabra on the altar, and three priests officiating. She didn't want to give up that dream.

“Remember, we can still use the ceremonial carriages from the camp,” he said.

To her surprise, she found herself smiling as she imagined the grand parade through the city. Princess Danuta, on the way to her wedding. That would be nice.

She looked up at the sky and noticed the rain had stopped. A good sign. She looked at Rudolf and nodded.

The young priest at the chapel asked only to see the license and letters of permission. With those spread out before him on the battered pine table that served as his desk, he checked his schedule and told the couple to come back at 4:30 for the service.

Danuta had to hurry home to be ready in time. But she made one more stop on the way – at the Urszulanki School from which she'd graduated that summer, a year early, by taking extra classes. At the school office, she scribbled a note, handed it to a nun, and asked that it be delivered to her best friend Maryska Ozonok, still in class.

A beam of sunlight poked through the overcast sky as the carriages turned onto Sapieszynki Street. Another good sign. Danuta told herself it was a good day for a wedding despite that lingering cloud of war that her father kept talking about.

Up ahead was the main gate to the army camp. And across from it, the chapel.

Danuta saw a small gathering there on the sidewalk. She had hoped for more, but maybe some people had already gone inside. As the carriages drew closer, she could see Rudolf. He wore the dress uniform of a lieutenant in the artillery – a dark olive jacket and black pants trimmed with red piping. Beside him stood his parents, who had come up 10

kilometers by train from their village of Chryplin. Beside them stood Captain Wajda, Rudolf's commanding officer. Gathered behind them were a few of her mother's friends from the neighborhood. And waiting on the chapel steps were her friends Maryska, Stasia and Wanda, still in the light blue blouses and skirts of their school uniforms. Accompanying them were two boys from the school next door. The girls waved and, Danuta shrieked happily and held the bouquet aloft like a victory cup.

The procession halted in front of the chapel and Rudolf strode over to Danuta's carriage to help her climb down. She noticed that he was now wearing his riding boots, which pleased her enormously. With his boots on, he stood eye-to-eye with her. Rudolf told her she looked beautiful. She told him he looked more handsome than ever.

Before they could say anything else, Danuta's classmates swarmed around her, forcing Rudolf to step aside.

Stasia fingered Danuta's dress. "It really is silk! Your mother must have spent a fortune on this fabric," she said.

Wanda said she could not believe the way Danuta's hair was done up. "You must have spent hours in rollers to make all those curls."

"Mother's hairdresser did it this afternoon," Danuta explained.

Maryska appraised her from lace headdress to satin slippers, then nodded. "Perhaps you'll let me borrow your dress if ever I get married," she said.

Danuta laughed and replied that she had no doubt Maryska, dark and sensuous as a gypsy, could marry whenever she wanted to. "All the boys hover around you like butterflies over a flower," she said.

Maryska's smile faded and she looked away.

Danuta didn't notice, however, because her attention was drawn now to the two boys. They remained a few steps back, shyly awaiting her acknowledgement.

"Thank you for coming, Jozef, and you, too, Tomasz," she said softly.

Both boys struggled to force congratulations from their mouths. Jozef lived only a block from her home and had been a childhood playmate. Tomasz still had a crush on Danuta – or so Stasia and Wanda said – and she could not help but feel a little sorry for him. When she was 14 she flirted with him briefly and even allowed him to kiss her twice – no, three times – in the narrow alley separating their schools. Was Tomasz's heart breaking today? It was flattering to think so. For the past year, though, her heart had belonged to Rudolf. No schoolboy could possibly compete with a man in an army uniform.

Danuta turned, expecting to find a jealous Rudolf looking on. But he had gone off somewhere. In his place, she instead found Lt. Anton Mazur, Rudolf's best friend since their days together at the officer's academy. Beside him stood Julia, his elegantly slender, raven-haired wife. One Sunday afternoon in June, Rudolf had taken her to meet the Mazurs at their cottage on the other side of the army camp.

Smiling broadly, Anton now embraced the bride and said, "You look like a young Marlene Dietrich in that dress."

Danuta blushed.

Julia chimed in, "I don't know that I would have recognized you. To me, you'll always be that little girl in the school uniform."

Danuta's smile froze as she instantly recalled why, after that first meeting, she had refused Rudolf's suggestions that they again visit the Mazurs.

Coolly accepting the woman's embrace, Danuta said, "I wasn't wearing my school

uniform that day when Rudolf brought me out to meet you.”

“You weren’t? Somehow that’s the impression of you that lingers in my mind.”

Anton interceded. “Julia, you probably don’t remember because you were still pregnant and not feeling well that day.”

Taking her cue from Anton, Danuta asked about the baby, a boy born later in June.

“He’s doing very well,” Julia answered. “We left him with the woman next door so we could come to your wedding.”

Seeking to further ease the tension, Danuta added, “What I remember from that Sunday afternoon was how very taken I was with your home and garden. You have a beautiful cottage. I told Rudolf afterwards that I hope he can find a place for us that’s just as nice.”

Julia thanked her for the compliment.

“Where is Rudolf, anyway?” Anton asked a moment later.

Danuta glanced about and spotted him 20 meters away, crouched down in the small patch of grass before the chapel and playing with her nephew Ryszard. She pointed at him.

“Is that your Aunt Eugenia’s son?” Julia asked.

“Yes.”

“What a shame. Rudolf was devastated when she died. And so was I. You know, she and I became very close when Rudolph was seeing her. The four of us spent a lot of time together. And I still stayed in touch with her, even after she stopped seeing Rudolf and married Michael.”

Anton looped an arm around his wife. “Please, Julia, this is not the time to bring that up.”

“I suppose not,” his wife conceded. “But still it makes me sad to see Rudolf with that little boy. That could be his son. Instead, the boy’s an orphan, his father dead before he was born and his mother soon after. Tuberculosis is such a terrible disease.”

“Julia, please,” Anton repeated. “I’m sure Danuta has other people she needs to greet. We’ll go say hello to Rudolf.”

Julia relented, but as her husband led her away, she called back to Danuta, “Do come to see us soon. I want us to be close friends, too, just like Eugenia and me.”

Staring after them, Danuta recalled the other thing she’d said to Rudolf later on that Sunday afternoon. She did hope he’d find a home for them as nice as the Mazurs’ cottage, just one not too close to them.

Rudolf rejoined her a minute later. “Shall we go in?” she asked. It was nearly 4:30.

Rudolf shook his head. The priest was marrying someone else now and they would have to wait for him to finish, he said. Several soldiers, facing the prospect of their own mortality, had decided at the last minute that it was time to get married.

An awkward silence fell over the couple and Danuta was relieved when her mother’s friends gathered to admire her dress and exclaim how pretty she looked. She barely noticed when Rudolf slipped away to join to his captain, who stood now with Anton Mazur and her father. They were probably talking about military preparations again. But she didn’t mind, as long as she remained the focus of everyone else’s attention.

It was almost 5 o’clock before the chapel door finally opened and a skinny private emerged with a robust young woman clutching his arm. Wanda elbowed Danuta and whispered in her ear, “He’ll need a promotion just so he can afford to feed her.” Danuta did not laugh, though, because her attention was drawn to the priest, who appeared in the

doorway and beckoned them to enter.

As Danuta began to move, a hand grasped her arm and held her back. She turned to see it belonged to her father.

“You go ahead,” Florian Buczak told Rudolf. “I’ll escort Danuta in once everyone is in place.”

The bridegroom hesitated, but did as ordered. The rest of the small crowd followed him inside.

Her father waited until they were alone on the sidewalk and then directed his daughter to look across the street. She followed his gaze to the gates of army camp, where cannons, caissons and supply wagons stood in line just inside.

“Yes, I saw them when I was here this morning,” she said impatiently. “Now, let’s go. Everyone will be waiting.”

She turned once more toward the chapel door, but once again her father stopped her.

“They can wait a little longer,” he said. “You need to think about this: Tomorrow or the next day, those cannons will be transported west, to somewhere closer to Germany. All of the soldiers from the camp, including Rudolf, will go with them. And if the Germans invade – and I’m almost certain that they will – Rudolf will almost certainly be in the thick of the battle. He could be wounded. He could be killed.”

Danuta shook her head.

Her father fell silent for a moment. Slowly, he asked, “Are you really sure you want to do this now?”

Danuta tightened her grip on the bouquet and nodded.

“You can always wait until he returns,” Father added.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she shot back. “We settled this argument yesterday and I’m not going to change my mind now. It would be so embarrassing.”

Danuta started walking toward the chapel door, but realized she couldn’t go in quite yet because she could feel the flush of anger on her face. She needed to calm down so she could walk up the aisle as a serene and happy bride. “I am Princess Danuta, named for the heroine of Mother’s favorite story,” she reminded herself. “And I shall look like a princess.” She took several deep breaths to try to calm herself and walked over to the corner of the building. All the while, though, she was aware of Father glaring after her.

Despite what he had said, she could not believe that Rudolf might be killed or even that there might be a war. Wars were things that happened in distant times and places, such as 20 years ago when her father fought in the Great War and against the Bolsheviks. And even if the Germans did invade Poland, they would probably come nowhere near Stanislawow, which was safely tucked far away in the southeast corner of the country. The Polish army would stop them. Poland had one of the largest and strongest armies in the world. She knew this because she’d heard Rudolf say it many times. And while Rudolf might end up in a battle, she was certain that no harm would come to him.

Nothing bad like that ever happened to anyone she really cared about. After all, hadn’t her father fought in two wars and come away with hardly a scratch? He’d even been captured by the Bolsheviks, but escaped. Rudolf said it was a story told often in the barracks at the Stanislawow army camp. Her father was a hero for it; Rudolf had told her that, too, although she already knew it. No, if there was a war and Rudolf fought in it, he’d probably come home a hero, too. And she could be a hero’s wife, if only she got to marry him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father standing by the edge of the street.

Didn't he realize that all she wanted was a man like him? She was so proud to be his daughter. Her father was a man that everyone admired. A war hero and still in the army as a captain in the reserves. And now he was an important man with the railroad, superintendent of a passenger train that traveled all around Poland and into other parts of Europe. His railway uniform was nearly as impressive as the uniform he wore when he went to the army camp. It had shoulder boards with gold insignia embroidered on them and brass buttons on the jacket. She loved the way he looked in it. Sometimes she would go down to the station when his train came in just so she could bask in the attention that he drew as they walked home together. She told herself that uniforms made the man, and that the man made the woman. Her mother was admired for having a man like her father. Danuta wanted to be admired in the same way.

She looked once more at the cannons lined up across the road. Father was probably right. Tomorrow or the next day they probably would be shipped to someplace far away, and Rudolf would go with them. What if she did as her parents wanted and postponed the wedding until his return? It might turn out all right. That way she could still hope for the wedding she really wanted.

Yet, just thinking this made her anxious. She realized now that she wasn't frightened by the possibility of Rudolf being killed. Rather it was that he might be gone a long time and have second thoughts. Her father had been away from home during the wars. It was during the war against the Bolsheviks that he had met her Ukrainian mother. What if Rudolf met someone else while he was away at this war? There were lots of pretty women who might ensnare a handsome lieutenant. What if he fell in love with someone else? Someone prettier? Someone closer to his own age? He'd certainly been told often enough that Danuta

was too young for him. Her own parents had told him that. And Danuta suspected that Julia Mazur had told him that, too. Julia was a threat. Danuta had decided that during their first meeting. Rudolf spoke too admiringly of her. Perhaps he harbored secret longing for his best friend's wife. If Julia did not steal Rudolf away from her, she might at least persuade him to find another: a prettier, more mature woman – a woman more like Julia. That's what really frightened Danuta whenever she considered postponing the wedding: She would be leaving an opening for someone else to claim his heart.

No, she couldn't take that chance. Rudolf was inside, waiting for her at the altar. It really was now or maybe never. She chose now.

The chapel door opened and Danuta's sister Alexandra poked her head out. She looked questioningly first to Father and then to Danuta. "Mother wants to know what's keeping you," she called out. "Everyone is waiting."

Danuta locked eyes with her father. His glare had not softened. It didn't matter. Her mind was made up. She turned and marched toward the chapel door. By the time she reached it, Father was at her side. This time he did not try to stop her.

She was conscious only of the eyes of the audience, trained on her like spotlights, as she stood before the priest at the altar with Rudolf at her side. She was on stage now, acting out the play she'd written and rewritten a hundred times in her mind. It was the most rehearsed moment of her life and she knew her role well. Yet, for all of her preparation, she could not keep her arms and legs from trembling. She had not anticipated that and it made her even more nervous. The room suddenly felt stiflingly hot and she could barely breathe. Beads of perspiration bubbled up on her temples and trickled down her cheeks. She feared

she might faint. To steady herself, she locked her knees and tightened her grip on the bouquet, as if it were a lifeline that could keep her from falling. In doing so, she became a shop window mannequin, rigid and oblivious to everything happening around her. So when the time came, she did not hear the priest's question or notice his nod and she had to be prompted several times before she finally realized she must speak. It took all of her strength to force a whispered "I do" from her throat. Next thing she knew, Rudolf was pressing his lips lightly against hers. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on his kiss, but all she could think of was how envious Stasia, Wanda and Maryska must be at this moment.

After the ceremony, the newlyweds climbed into the carriage, waved goodbye to the small gathering on the steps, and set off for the center of the city, where a photographer waited in a studio to take their wedding portrait. For the first few blocks, they sat as awkwardly as strangers squeezed together on a streetcar.

Finally, Rudolf broke the silence by taking Danuta's hand and declaring, "Well, we've done it."

"Yes, we have," she agreed. But she never doubted that they would. The day's events had only reconfirmed that she could get anything if she wanted it badly enough. There was no obstacle or objection she could not overcome through determination and perseverance.

Rudolf slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him on the red leather seat. "How does it feel to be Mrs. Gasior?" he asked.

"It will take some time to get used to it," Danuta answered, even though she had practiced saying the name to herself many times over the past several months. "The only Mrs. Gasior I know is your mother, so if someone calls me that, I'll think they must be

talking to her.”

“Well, I won’t call you that, then. I’ll call you sweetheart or my dear. Or what was that French term that you taught me – my little cabbage?”

“*Mon petit chou*. That would be nice.”

“Yes, then I’ll call you that.” He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips, catching her by surprise.

When she didn’t immediately respond, he pulled away and looked at her questioningly.

“The driver,” she whispered. “And all these people,” she added, her eyes darting to the crowded sidewalks.

Rudolf laughed. “It’s all right. We’re married. We can kiss in public now, any time we like.”

Until a few minutes before at the chapel, they had never kissed in public. Only in the park, shielded by trees or darkness. She found herself wondering if his kisses could be as sweet when they weren’t flavored with secrecy. There was only one way to find out. She leaned forward and pressed her mouth to his. Yes, this was deliciously exciting in a new and different way. Emboldened, she flicked the tip of her tongue over his lips. He moaned softly, pressed her back against the carriage seat and drove his tongue into her mouth. She responded by locking her arms about his shoulders. In their rising passion, both forgot about the driver and the pedestrians. They were still kissing a few minutes later when the carriage halted on a side street, a block from the city hall. They separated, looked around and found themselves parked in front of a haberdashery shop.

“Is this it?” the driver asked.

“Yes,” Rudolf confirmed. “It’s just upstairs.”

The bearded young photographer had stayed late at Rudolf’s request and was eager to begin. Danuta wouldn’t take her place in front of the camera, however, until she had checked her face in a mirror on the studio wall and fixed her lipstick and makeup. Commandeering a handkerchief from Rudolf, she also wiped the red smudges off his mouth and cheeks. These repairs completed, she allowed the photographer to perch them side-by-side on a wooden bench before a gray curtain.

Following his instructions, they turned their shoulders half toward each other. She held the bridal bouquet squarely between them with the top of the flowers just a few centimeters below their chins, and both of them stared off into space just to the right of the large plate camera. Looking through the viewfinder, the photographer decided that something was not quite right. Retrieving the cushion off his wooden desk chair, he handed it to Rudolf and told him to sit on it. Danuta winced, knowing how sensitive Rudolf could be about his height. But to her relief he did as ordered without protest. Stepping back, the photographer framed the couple with his hands, peered through his fingers at them for a moment and then, with a satisfied nod, returned to his place behind the camera.

“Don’t look so sullen,” he called out while adjusting the lens. “You just got married. You should be deliriously happy.”

Danuta giggled, which, in turn, caused Rudolf to laugh.

“Splendid,” the photographer exclaimed. “Now move your cheeks closer together. Stop right there. Splendid. Keep smiling. Hold it. Hold it.” A flash bulb popped. Ten minutes and half a dozen flashes later, the photographer proclaimed the job done.

The carriage driver was still waiting for them when Danuta and Rudolf emerged

from the studio. Rudolf told the driver that their next destination was the Buczak home. Mother had invited a few of the wedding guests to the house for supper.

As the carriage resumed the journey north across the city, Danuta sat back on the leather coach seat to savor the benefits of being an army officer's wife. Would they always have a carriage and driver at their disposal like this? Probably not, at least not while Rudolf was a mere lieutenant, she realized. But she was also sure that her husband would rise quickly through the ranks and that maybe by the time he was a colonel such perquisites would be his, and thus hers, all of the time. That would be wonderful. And in the meantime, the army would arrange for them to have nice houses to live in, perhaps starting with a lovely little cottage like that of Anton and Julia Mazur.

The carriage passed the wooded park where she and Rudolf had met surreptitiously many times before they finally confessed to her parents that they were seeing each other. It was only a few blocks from her house, but offered a safe rendezvous after dark.

Looking ahead, Danuta saw two girls walking in the direction of the house and recognized them immediately – Stasia and Wanda. They were an inseparable pair, like she was with Maryska. Together, the four christened themselves the Troublemakers Club of Urszulanki School. But whereas Stasia and Wanda were wholly consumed by jokes and pranks, other interests – namely boys and romance – readily diverted Danuta and Maryska. So the gang of four often divided two and two, going their separate ways. In the months since Danuta's early graduation, however, she had rarely spent time with any of her friends. She had become fully occupied by Rudolf and the wedding arrangements, while they still had school and homework. She missed them, though, particularly Maryska.

As the carriage overtook the girls, Rudolf told the driver to stop and offered them a

ride. They eagerly climbed in, sitting on the bench facing the newlyweds.

“This is really elegant,” Stasia said, stroking the red leather seat. Then, casting a glance over her shoulder, she haughtily called out to the driver, “To the chateau, my good man.”

“Certainly, mademoiselle,” the soldier responded, causing the girls to giggle.

“Where’s Maryska?” Danuta asked.

“She isn’t coming,” Wanda answered. “She said she already had other plans for this evening.”

“What plans? Why couldn’t she change them?”

Wanda shrugged. “She wouldn’t say.” Then, exchanging glances with Stasia, she added, “We think she’s got a new boyfriend she’s not telling us about.”

Impossible, Danuta thought. Maybe she wouldn’t tell Stasia and Wanda, but Maryska wouldn’t have a boyfriend without telling her. They shared all of their secrets. Why, Maryska knew about Danuta’s designs on Rudolf almost as soon as Danuta herself did. She even helped Danuta write that first letter to him. No, Maryska was her best friend, closer to her than either Stasia or Wanda. If Maryska were seeing someone secretly, she would have confided in her. At least, she better have.

Danuta revealed none of these thoughts to Stasia and Wanda, however. All she did was huff and declare, “Well, he’d better be as handsome as Rudolf if she’s going to pick him over my wedding party.” With that she looped an arm through her husband’s.

The Buczak family home was a spacious one-story, with walls of white plaster and a roof of red tile, on a street with other large and similarly constructed houses on the northern

edge of the city. Only a few years earlier this area had been farmland. Now, it was the neighborhood of Stanislawow's newly emerging middle class – successful merchants and managers in business and government.

When the wedding party arrived, delicious aromas of cooked sausages, roasted chickens, and fresh baked breads and cake were wafting out of the windows to greet them. Rudolf lingered behind to give instructions to the driver, while Danuta and her friends raced inside to investigate. They found the parlor sofa and chairs pushed against the walls to make space for an extra table, extending out from the dining room. The men – her father and Rudolf's, plus Captain Wajda – were squeezed into a corner, sipping vodka and looking on. Meanwhile, the women – Danuta's mother and Rudolf's, plus Danuta's grandmother – moved about the tables, setting out plates, glasses and cutlery.

A moment later, Stefania Goralski, a short, chubby woman who was her mother's best friend, emerged from the kitchen carrying bowls of steamed cabbages and beets. Stefania had stayed behind at the house with her daughter Helena to cook while the wedding was underway. Seeing Danuta in her wedding dress for the first time, she quickly set the bowls down, clapped her hands to her cheeks and exclaimed, "Oh my! Who could have guessed that the little ragamuffin who used to play in the dirt with my Helena could grow up to be such a beautiful bride?" Danuta beamed.

While her mother and grandmother carried the remaining platters of food in from the kitchen, the others took their seats around the tables. Danuta and Rudolf were assigned places in the center, where the two tables joined. Father poured a glass of vodka for Rudolf, but when Danuta held out her wine glass, he shook his head. Florian Buczak had never permitted his daughters to drink wine or any other alcoholic beverage. Danuta persisted,

however, continuing to hold out her glass and declaring loudly that if she was old enough to be married, she was old enough to have a glass of wine. Rudolf's parents and captain laughed. Father relented with a resigned shrug and filled her glass half full.

Mother and Grandmother made sure everyone else was served before they settled into their places at the end of the table, closest to the kitchen door. At that point, her father stood, raised his glass and offered a half-hearted toast to the health and happiness of the newlyweds. "Health and happiness," the others repeated, and everyone drank, including Danuta.

If Florian Buczak's offering was unenthusiastic, the toast from Rudolf's father was wholly deflating. "May the coming trials not harm the bond formed here today," he said, holding up his glass. This time, the others drank silently.

Rudolf's captain salvaged the moment, though, by quickly offering his own toast, "To one of the most gallant officers I know and his lovely bride." That brought smiles back to everyone's faces.

As the others dug into their food, Danuta merely nibbled. Try as she might to revel in this wedding supper, she found herself thinking about the grand reception that might have been: dinner for 100 in the gilded ballroom at the hotel across from the city hall, while a chamber orchestra played music for dancing. There hadn't been time to hire even a single musician to play for them this evening. And even if there had been, where in her family's crowded dining room could a musician have found space to perform?

Rudolf squeezed her hand and asked if she was happy.

"Yes, very happy," she replied and in saying so, she felt her mood lifting again.

"It's just that I became sad for a moment thinking about the reception we'd planned for the

hotel.”

Now, Rudolf grinned devilishly and leaned close to whisper in her ear. “Forget the ballroom and think of the honeymoon suite upstairs. We’ve still got that to look forward to and we can have more fun alone than we can in a room full of people.”

His hand released hers, landed on her thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze.

It was all she could do to keep from gasping aloud. Without looking down, she firmly brushed his hand aside.

She knew her husband had reserved the suite for them and they would go there as soon as the supper was over. But in all of her rushing around, she’d not really thought much about that in the past 24 hours. She hadn’t even had time yet to pack a suitcase for the night. Her thoughts turned to what she would need to bring. First and most important would be the nightgown. If only she’d had time to buy a new one for the occasion. But what sort of nightgown would Rudolf like? A glance in his direction told her exactly what he would want her to wear. Out of embarrassment she had to look away. In doing so, she crossed gazes with her mother and was further embarrassed by the realization that her parents, grandmother and Rudolf’s parents were all aware of what she would be doing later tonight with her husband. She took a big gulp of wine in the hope that it would give her courage, or at least make her stop caring what everyone else at the table might be thinking.

Through the open windows came the sound of a horse’s hooves clattering up the street and stopping outside, which brought all conversation at the table to a halt. This was followed by the crunch of boots on the gravel path leading around the side of the house to the door, and, a moment later, by a loud knock. Danuta’s youngest sister Lucja popped up before anyone else could move and raced to the foyer. When she came back into the room,

she announced that a soldier was waiting outside with a message for Rudolf and his captain.

Silence filled the dining room while everyone waited for the two officers to return. When they did, Rudolf met Danuta's worried gaze with an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, but we have new orders," he announced. "We have to go back to the camp now."

Groans poured out from around the table.

"The Germans – have they attacked?" Danuta's father asked with a voice of alarm.

Captain Wajda answered. "No, not yet, at least. But the mobilization timetable has been speeded up. We're to board the train in the morning."

Looking to her husband, Danuta asked hopefully, "Will you be able to come back later tonight?"

He shook his head. "But I'll try to get away in the morning to see you before we board the train."

While his captain waited at the door, Rudolf moved to his parents, shook his father's hand and hugged his mother. He did the same with Danuta's parents. Then he came to Danuta's place at the table. She rose to meet him and took his face in her hands to give him a long and tender kiss. "I love you," he whispered. Then he broke free from her grasp and followed his captain out the door.

Their departure brought an immediate end to the celebration. When all of the guests were gone, Danuta retired to the bedroom she shared with Alexandra, leaving her mother and grandmother to clean up.

She sank down onto the bed she had not expected to sleep in this night, unpinned the lace veil from the back of her hair and let it drop to the floor beside her unpacked suitcase.

Her eyes fell to the ring Rudolf had given her only hours earlier. She twisted it slowly around her finger, wondering if she ever would grow accustomed to wearing it.

The door opened and Alexandra entered the room. "I'm sorry," the younger girl said softly.

"Why should you be sorry?"

"Because Rudolf had to go, and you don't get to have a honeymoon."

Danuta wasn't sure what she felt. Certainly, she was disappointed, but not bitterly so. More troubling was the sense that she might be losing control of her life. For the past several months, she had focused on nothing but plans for the wedding. Her indomitable will had made it happen. She had overcome her parents' objections and a myriad of other obstacles. She had been unstoppable because she wanted it so badly. But in the past 24 hours, she'd also had to discard parts of her dream because of the will of others far away in Warsaw and even Berlin. The next part of her life plan had her living with her husband in a cottage by the army camp and raising babies there. Now, she wondered if those distant people in Warsaw and Berlin would change that, too.

They had no right. She didn't know them and they didn't know her. But already they were intruding, because they were now foremost in her mind on this, her wedding night, when her husband should have been the sole focus of her attention. He was gone because of them and she was alone.

Well, not quite alone. There was Alexandra, standing in front of her, still waiting for a response.

"It's all right," Danuta finally replied. "We'll have our honeymoon later. I got all that I really wanted today."