Hope in a Dark Night

Most nights, Father disappears into the parlor. Sometimes you can hear static. It must be a radio. He says things in a low voice, so I can't make out what he is saying. Then he comes out. But tonight was different. He motioned to my older brother, Jakub.

"Come," he said softly. "Get your coat."

Jakub obeyed. It was very cold outside tonight.

"Father, what are you doing?" I asked. I spoke quietly, for Zuzanna and Amelia were asleep.

"Go to your mother. She has something to tell you," Father replied.

Bewildered, I did as he said. "Mama, Father said to go to you."

"Yes, Lena," Mama said quietly. She was lying on the sofa. She had been sick for a long time. "Come close. We have a job to do. I would have done it myself, but for this sickness that's been hanging over me. We didn't wish to let you do this, Lena, but I'm afraid we must. Do you know why Father goes into the parlor most nights?"

"No, but I've been wondering."

"It is because he is trying to help the Jews escape the Nazis. The organization is called the Underground. I cannot tell you any more and you must vow to secrecy."

"Oh, yes," I said, "I won't tell."
“Now, a telephone wire runs over the railroad tracks about half a mile down the road. Do you remember where?”

I nodded, recalling the place.

“Good. Now listen well. You are going to take these pliers and snipe the thick, black wire,” Mama handed me a pair of pliers. “You will climb up on the railroad car that will be sitting there and cut the wire. Make sure it’s a good cut through the whole wire, and let no one see you. That is very important.”

“Yes, Mama. But why?”

“Just do as I say.”

Father and Jakub were waiting by the door. I slipped on my coat.

“Where are you and Jakub going?” I asked Father in a whisper.

“Railroad tra—”

Father interrupted Jakub. “Never mind, Lena. Just do what Mama told you. Now listen, my children: Do not let anyone see you. If they do, it could mean the worst...” Father’s voice trailed off.

“Don’t worry, Father,” Jakub said, trying to be brave.

I didn’t say anything. I was too scared. And I had a million questions buzzing in my head.

Outside, it was cold. The wind seemed to bite through everything.

Even my woolen hat and mittens that Mama had made.
Father looked at me. "Lena, I'm sorry you have to do this. But no one else can, and I need Jakub to help me. My sweet daughter, can you do it? You must hurry. There is no time to waste. If you do not accomplish this within the hour, it may be too late."

"Too late for what?" I whispered.

"To stop the Nazis from getting their message."

"What message?"

"We do not know. We just know it is important. We are kept safe by not knowing."

"How?"

"Lena, do it for Poland." Father hugged me tight and then he and Jakub started walking.

I started walking in the opposite direction, my mind trying to process everything that had been said:

*I cannot tell you any more.*

*You must vow to secrecy.*

*There is no time to waste.*

*For the Nazis to get their message.*

*We are kept safe by not knowing.*

*For Poland.*

*What did Father and Mama and Jakub mean?* I wondered as I walked, fingering the pliers, which were sticking out of my coat pocket.
The wind whipped at my skirts, swirling them around. I was cold and worried. This was no game. This was life or death. I tried not to think about that. It made me feel sick.

Since the telephone wire and the train were about half a mile down the road, it took me a while to reach them—also considering the fact that I was bitterly cold. But upon reaching them, I looked around, cautiously. Seeing nothing that aroused my suspicion, I slowly climbed up the cold train, glancing at the wire that crossed over it at a diagonal angle. Finally, I was able to pull myself up on the roof of the train.

Then my heart nearly stopped. A car was rumbling down the road. Its huge headlights sent out streams of yellow light on the road before it. I laid down flat on the roof, my heart pounding in my chest. I hardly dared to breathe. The car stopped. I heard gruff voices mumbling and a car door open.

Then a man with a thick German accent spoke in Polish: “Search this train for Jews.”

“Yes, sir,” a few other men replied.

Flashlights turned on. I pressed myself as close as I could to the roof of the train.

How could this happen to me—Lena Zielińska? I thought. I should be at home, asleep in my bed! But instead, I’m trapped on the roof of a train that Nazi soldiers are searching! Then another thought came to me. I had
to clip the wire very soon. Father said I must do it within the hour, and I had already spent a good while walking here.

I could hear banging and rustling as the Nazi soldiers searched the train. Someone was just about to check this boxcar. Would they see me up here? The noises were getting louder.

More headlights. Another car was rumbling up the road. The man in charge barked some more orders: "This car must be searched!" The soldiers headed towards the car. The man and woman in the car were made to stand outside it.

This was my chance. I had to do it now. The Nazis had their backs to me. And time was running fast. Trying to swallow the sickening feeling that weighed over me, I slowly stood up, trying to blend in with the shadows. I reached up, and quickly opened the pliers. *Clip, clip, clip.* The wire was cut. It swung and hit the roof of the train, and stayed there. I had to move quickly. Trying to remain as silent as possible, I slipped down the train to the ground. *Ouch.* I fell to the ground, cringing at the sound it made. *Hide now!* my mind screamed.

"Go see what that is," I heard the German man say.

Overcome with fear, it was all I could do to roll into a ditch by the railroad tracks. I could hear the footsteps of the Nazi soldiers. I just knew he would see me.

**BOOM!**
“What was that?” the German leader cried. “You people, get in your car and leave. This is official Nazi business. Go.” The car with the man and the women drove off.

“Forget it here. There’s nothing. Some animals are just messing around, no doubt. Get in the car, men.” The Nazi soldiers drove off.

I let out a deep sigh. They were gone. Had I really survived? Had I actually fulfilled the mission? But there the telephone wire was— cut in half—proof of what I had accomplished!

Breathing heavily and listening to my heart beating wildly, I got to my feet. The Nazis were gone. There were only tire marks on the road. I—Lena Zieliński—had completed what I set out to do. Maybe somebody had been saved from the Nazis on account of what I had done. I lifted my head up and gazed into the night sky. In that moment, I knew that the truth would triumph.

Later that night, when Father and Jakub stole into the house at an unheard of hour of the night, with smiles on their faces, I knew that they had succeeded too.

“What did you do tonight?” I asked Father as he hugged me.

“Lena, no questions tonight. The Underground is not a place where questions can have answers.”

“Did it have something to do with railroad tracks and an explosion?”
Father smiled at me. "The Nazis cannot transport any soldiers on this railroad line..." he whispered happily.

I smiled back. And even though he was smiling, I saw a look of fear in Father's face. This war was not over. Evil was still hammering down on us with an iron fist. "Hope," I thought. "There is still hope."