Marcin Dudziński

Against the Brother

Synopsis, Bio & Excerpts

Marcin Dudziński

About the author

Marcin Dudziński is a lawyer, manager, writer, and sports enthusiast. He has worked in television, taught law, and helped organise international sporting events, including UEFA Euro 2012. For many years, he managed event operations at the National Stadium in Warsaw. The Profanum trilogy marks his literary debut.

Against a Brother
Marcin Dudziński

Crime

In Częstochowa, the renowned Polish city famous for the sanctuary of the Black Madonna, heavy rain has been falling for days. Darkness hangs over the streets like a shroud. The city is ruled by two brothers: Bishop Stanisław Walter and Police Commissioner Jerzy Walter.

Bound by blood and power, the brothers have long worked in tandem. Their positions gave them access to everything that mattered, and yet, to many, Jerzy remained the silent witness to his brother's transgressions.

Now, their fates are caught in the fallout of a murky financial deal, a tangle of lies, and the determination of a courageous lawmaker named Alicja, who refuses to look the other way.

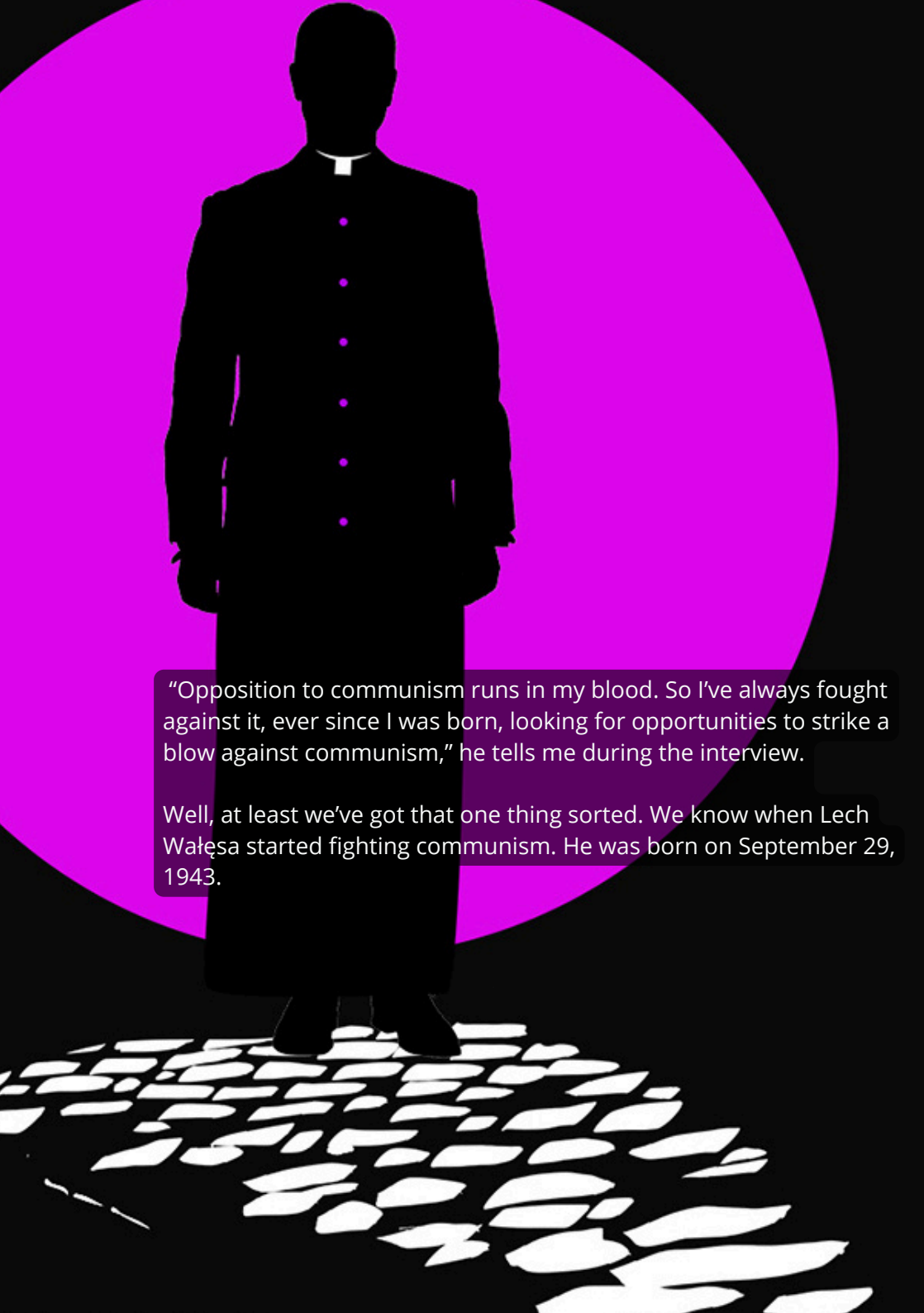
Each brother will be forced to make an impossible choice. When the reckoning comes, will they turn on one another — or protect the bond that has always held them together?

July 2019
400 pages

3.7/ 33 ratings/ 5 reviews
6.9/ 159 ratings/ 67 reviews

It was one of the most intriguing crime debuts of the year!
Adam Szaja, smakksiazki.pl

- The events are shown separately, from the perspective of two brothers.
- The action takes place in Częstochowa — Poland's most famous Marian shrine, home to the renowned Jasna Góra Monastery.
- A dark, oppressive atmosphere, with the action unfolding in torrents of pouring rain — rain that plays a role of its own in the story.
- It is popular literature that poses the most fundamental questions about morality.



“Opposition to communism runs in my blood. So I’ve always fought against it, ever since I was born, looking for opportunities to strike a blow against communism,” he tells me during the interview.

Well, at least we’ve got that one thing sorted. We know when Lech Wałęsa started fighting communism. He was born on September 29, 1943.

Against the Brother
Synopsis by Filip Sporczyk

The book begins with a violent scene in the Prologue. Alicja Drylska, a lawyer, escapes from a wrecked Skoda Octavia driven by police chief Jerzy Walter and hides from Julian, who is chasing her and shooting at her. Alicja is pregnant with her partner Henrik's child and is running to protect herself and to bring to an end a plan of revenge on her tormentor. The book, structurally interweaving the present, the events immediately preceding the Prologue, and the past, reveals the motives of the conflict.

The atmosphere of the novel is strongly defined by recurring motifs of greyness, darkness, and an unending, ominous downpour that shapes both the appearance of the city and the emotional state of its inhabitants. The city of Częstochowa, where the action takes place, is portrayed as a place steeped in a constant, oppressive gloom. The relentless rain had fallen for more than a month without pause, making the days darker and the nights strangely brighter, thus somehow homogenizing darkness and light into an indistinguishable mass of greyness.

The main driving force of the plot is the brotherly conflict between Jerzy Walter, the local police chief, and Stanisław Walter, the bishop. Bishop Stanisław Walter is a manipulator who uses his position in the Church to arrange lucrative deals, such as taking over the Sobiński property, a manor house long thought to have been bequeathed to the Church. He also exploits and abuses women, paying them for sex in the sacristy of the cathedral. His hatred of women and need for dominance stems from childhood trauma, which he shares with his brother.

Police chief Jerzy Walter learns of his brother's misdeeds from an anonymous message. Driven by guilt over the loss of the love of his life, Zuzanna (Alicja's mother), years ago, and having learned of the identity of Alicja (employed by the Curia as a lawyer at Stanisław's request) as her daughter, Jerzy decides to intervene and orders telephone and office surveillance on his brother and Alicja.

The conflict escalates when Alicja meets Wiktor Maleńkow, the great-grandson of the Sobińskis, who possesses documents invalidating the Curia's takeover of the manor house. Stanisław confiscates these documents and orders his henchman, Julian, to get rid of Maleńkow. Julian attacks Maleńkow with a knife on the parish grounds, but Sister Miriam, a nun, scares him off.

When Alicja learns of the attack on Maleńkow, she becomes suspicious of the Bishop. She meets with Stanisław in the sacristy, where he blackmails and threatens her. In a climactic moment, Stanisław, with the help of Julian, rapes Alicja. Alicja regains her will to fight only days later. She calls the bishop, informing him that she is pregnant and that she will reveal the rape and the assault on Maleńkow. Stanisław, frightened by the consequences, orders Julian to kidnap Alicja and announces that he will deal with her himself.

In the course of his investigation, Jerzy Walter confirms that Julian is none other than Jakub Drylski, Alicja's brother, who disappeared in 1989 after an accident in which their parents died. Julian was kidnapped and held in a basement against his will for years. After he managed to free himself, Stanisław Walter took him in. The bishop is unaware of Julian's true identity.

Henrik Lund, Alicja's partner, concerned about her strange behaviour (after the rape), arrives in Poland from Sweden, where he lives. Julian waits for Alicja in her apartment, but she escapes (and the events of the Prologue ensue). When Henrik arrives at her place, Bishop Walter surprises him and drugs him with chloroform, kidnapping him and leaving him tied up in the apartment. Meanwhile, Jerzy Walter reads Stanisław's threats against Alicja in the transcripts from the surveillance device. He rescues Alicja from Julian's chase, but their car hits a tree. Alicja escapes by bus to her friends: Mariusz and Ewa. Julian pursues Alicja, and in the Gils' apartment, he shoots Mariusz, wounding him, before Mariusz in turn wounds Julian and scares him off.

Alicja contacts her friend Aguero, who equips her with a weapon. She then calls the bishop, agreeing to an exchange: herself for Henrik. The bishop, taking the wounded Julian, goes to the meeting place under a railway overpass.

Jerzy Walter, along with his deputy Marczuk, confronts Stanisław. Stanisław, with Henrik in the trunk, defends himself, explaining his childhood trauma. Jerzy learns that the Bishop hired Alicja in an attempt to get close to Jerzy and reestablish their brotherly relation. Jerzy and Marczuk order Henrik to be freed from the trunk, and Julian pulls him out, aiming a gun at the man. When Henrik tries freeing himself by pushing away the pistol, Julian drops him with a blow to the head. In a climactic moment, as Alicja arrives on the scene with Aguero and sees the unfolding events, she shoots Julian, killing him outright.

With the story's climax and its resolution, the weather suddenly turns for the better and the atmosphere clears—an event rich in symbolism. From that moment, a profound change comes over Częstochowa. The raindrops falling to the ground grow fewer and fewer until, at last, the rain ceases entirely. As the sun breaks through, the mood shifts, symbolizing relief and purification. The oppressive, ominous air gives way to calm and sunlight, reflecting the hopeful resolution of Alicja's and Jerzy's personal ordeals.

Stanisław Walter is arrested. Alicja and Henrik leave for Sweden. Alicja informs Maleńkow that his documents have been recovered and he has a chance to regain the Sobiński manor house. Julian's body is "taken care of", presumably hidden somewhere so it won't be found. The events of the confrontation would only be known to the few people that took part in it. Jerzy Walter meets with his brother in jail. The bishop threatens him that his problems from the past will soon return.

Filip Sporczyk is a translator of popular Polish literature into English and vice versa. His work includes Katarzyna Bonda's Sasza Załuska crime series, Blanka Lipińska's 365 Days, and YA, fantasy, and horror titles, including Ali Hazelwood's The Love Hypothesis, nominated for the Empik Bestseller Award in 2022. Based in Warsaw, he enjoys science fiction, board games, and time in nature with his wife, young son, and two pugs.

Against the Brother
Sample translation by Filip Sporczyk

Prologue

Now
Saturday, 8 November 2014

A bullet isn't much bigger than a raindrop, thought Alicja Drylska, her mind reeling as she scrambled out of the wrecked car.
The world before her was a blur, washed in grey and streaked with light. It looked no different from the rain streaming down the shattered windscreen.

She thought that, despite the late hour, it wasn't truly dark. The city was steeped in that muddy twilight peculiar to Częstochowa—where sparse neon signs and the odd streetlamp mixed with the relentless downpour into something earthy, dull. Here, rain could brighten any night and darken every day. And tonight, she longed for the opposite. Now, of all times, she needed to disappear. She wanted the world to go pitch-black. But everything around her remained grey—grey sky, grey streets. Grey faces of people battered by weeks of foul weather. The city's colour palette had been drained, blurred by the endless rain.

Alicja wasn't running from the grey. She was running from something far more tangible—and far more dangerous.
When she bolted from her car on Zana Street, she was running from death.

For the last minute and twenty-six seconds, her life had been spinning out of control. Everything had happened too fast. She was sprinting down the middle of the road wearing only a tracksuit tunic and ankle boots. She thought about pulling up her hood, but a second later realised it wouldn't stop what she was really trying to escape. A hood couldn't block a bullet.

Alicja was terrified—like a child shoved into the tunnel of horrors at a funfair. She wanted to scream, to shout for help, but she knew it would be useless. Her voice wouldn't carry through the roar of the rain. If it could, someone would already have heard the muffled gunshots, the pop of the bursting tyre, the crack of pierced metal. But none of those

sounds could break through the storm's relentless drumming. The rain had ruled over Częstochowa for more than a month now—pounding, heavy, and menacing.

One minute and twenty-six seconds earlier, Alicja had seen Julian. From her flat on the first floor of a small block, she'd seen the face she despised—the one she feared. Then she saw the rest of him, the gun aimed straight at her, and she ran. She bolted with nothing but her phone in the pocket of her tunic. Her shopping was still on the kitchen counter, her autumn coat draped neatly over a chair.

She ducked the first bullet as she burst into the corridor. The shot shattered the mirror in the hall. The second round, fired on the stairwell, missed her back by millimetres. Julian's aim was off—but only just.
Fear coursed through her, but her mind was racing, sharp. She stayed close to the wall as she ran downstairs, keeping one floor's lead on her pursuer. If she hugged the wall, she reasoned, he'd lose sight of her.

Before pushing through the main door, she considered two escape routes. Left, towards the courtyard—but in this weather, the playground there would be deserted. She needed people now. Anyone. So she turned right, towards the car park. Someone had to be there.

And there was. Out of nowhere, a car swerved onto the pavement, tyres screaming, blocking her way.
A black Skoda Octavia. *I know that car*, she thought.
The passenger door hung open. An invitation. Someone wanted her to get in.

A man leaned out, grabbed her arm, and yanked her inside.

Then she understood why the car had seemed familiar.
Jerzy Walter, the city's chief of police, slammed his foot on the accelerator, still holding her wrist in a vice-like grip. The doors clanged shut under the force of sudden motion. She was trapped.
Thirty-two seconds later, she was free again—if you could call it freedom to be running for your life.

This time Julian didn't miss.
A shot blew out one of the tyres. The Skoda jerked violently. Walter fought the steering wheel, but the car fishtailed like a small boat in a storm. He wrestled not with the road, but with the vehicle itself. When it became clear they'd hit the tree, Alicja shut her eyes. Unlike the rest of Częstochowa, she heard the terrible crack of impact.

A moment later, she lifted her eyelids. Jerzy Walter's head was slumped against the window. He was semi-conscious, muttering, his eyes unfocused. Some part of him seemed to remember why he was there, but the rest hadn't caught up. He'd hit his head on the door, hard. He fixed her with a wavering stare and mumbled something.

Alicja shoved the door open and ran towards Pułaskiego Street.
There have to be people there! Someone, anyone! she thought, panicked.

She watched the raindrops burst beneath her feet with every step. She noticed them—every single one. Each droplet was unique, a tiny, transparent world of its own. At this instant, the rain seemed to fall from above and below, and she focused on each drop so she wouldn't see the grey they all made together.

Julian fired twice more.
He was chasing her—she felt it. She didn't look back, but she knew he was closing in. She'd lost count of the shots. She was afraid the next one would find her.

When she reached Pułaski Street, her mind pieced together a new scene, a desperate sequence she'd do anything to make real.
Across the road, a bus was approaching. Only a few dozen metres separated her from the stop. If she could make it, she'd be safe. Four lanes and a grassy divider stood between her and the bus. She waved frantically, hoping the driver of the old Ikarus would see her in the downpour. The grass was slick, treacherous; she leapt across it in two strides, convinced they might be her last. Somehow she kept her balance and made it to the far side. The street was empty. The nearest headlights glimmered faintly in the distance.

The bus stopped. The driver opened only the front door.

Alicja jumped inside. The bus pulled away almost immediately. No one got off, and Julian's thin silhouette never separated clearly enough from the greyness for the driver to notice him.

She collapsed into a seat on the right, breathing hard.
Her eyes met the driver's in the rear-view mirror. He was staring at her as if she were mad—soaked through, gasping for air, her makeup running down her cheeks in thin streaks. Her wet hair clung to her head, making her look much younger—like a runaway teenager.

Yes, she was running. To save herself. But not only herself.

She placed a trembling hand on her stomach, just below her navel, and stroked it gently with her thumb. She was running to protect her child—to finish what she'd started the day before.

If you ever plan revenge again, girl, plan it better next time! she screamed silently, and for a heartbeat it felt louder than the heavy thrum of the engine.

The book introduces two important characters: Jerzy Walter and Stanisław Walter.

Jerzy is the chief of police and the brother of Bishop Stanisław. When he receives an anonymous tip about the bishop's crimes, he decides to investigate his own brother.

The bishop wants to take over some real property for the Church by any means possible—including blackmail and manipulation. All goes well until circumstances change and a pivotal character appears.

Chapter 3 (fragments)

Alicja

"*Myenya zavod*... my name is Wiktor Maleńkow."
Every syllable carried a clear Eastern accent, coloured with a kind of awkward hesitation. He looked at Alicja with an uncertain expression, as if asking whether that was enough, or if he should go on.

"How can I help you?" she prompted gently, encouraging him to continue.

"I came... came from Wierszyna. *Eto takaya*... it's village in Siberia, near Irkutsk," he said, almost tripping over the words. Then he immediately reached into his briefcase. Only then did Alicja take in his appearance. Everything he wore seemed to belong to another era. He looked as if he'd put on his great-grandfather's suit—something found in a dusty attic. He even smelled that way. His once-white shirt had long since turned the colour of old custard.

Maleńkow wiped the tabletop with the sleeve of his faded black jacket, carefully drew a stack of papers from the frayed briefcase, and spread them neatly before her.

A red warning light flickered in Alicja's mind—glowing bright enough to catch her attention, though not yet draining her energy.

The mysterious visitor arranged the papers with meticulous care, layering them so that the heading of each page peeped out from beneath the previous one.

"I am great-grandson of Sobiński family," he said, meeting her eyes again—and suddenly the red light in her mind flared with full intensity.

Those three words hit her like a power surge, flooding the grid, blacking out the entire neighbourhood. In that instant, Maleńkow had switched on every light in the Jurajska shopping mall and boiled every kettle in her apartment block. She didn't need any more information to grasp why he was there.

There was only one matter lately that had truly preoccupied Bishop Stanisław Walter: the property on Zbierskiego Street.

When surveyors had discovered a pre-war will in the crumbling manor, Alicja had done everything the law required of her. The testament, written by Józef Sobiński, was brief but left no room for ambiguity. If no rightful heir could be found, the land and the manor upon it were to pass into the hands of the Roman Catholic Church and become part of the assets of the Archdiocese of Częstochowa.

And now, four days before the court's decision was to become final, this Maleńkow shows up, laying on her desk documents that nullified the ruling on inheritance.

Alicja realised at once: this unassuming stranger had just undone her months of work. More importantly, he had shattered the carefully laid plans of Bishop Stanisław Walter.

[...]

Before leaving, Maleńkow had handed her all his documents—every single one of them, and all originals. She was too stunned to object. Her mind was already racing ahead to the moment she would have to share this revelation with Stanisław Walter.

In her short but intense career, Alicja had worked with politicians, business owners, athletes, even petty criminals. In the early days she'd felt the faint tremor of nerves before meetings. But that hadn't lasted long.

Soon, her colleagues and friends began joking that she was like a bloodhound on the prowl—always prepared, always confident, never wavering. She knew exactly what she wanted to say, chose her words with care, and had a perfect instinct for which topics to avoid.

Fearless. Daring. Sometimes too daring.

At Waryński & Partners, her co-workers half-jokingly called her *Xena*, comparing her to the warrior princess from the old TV series. The nickname amused her, though she knew perfectly well it carried more teasing than admiration.

Yet before every meeting with the bishop, she still felt uneasy. She would never have admitted it aloud, but Alicja was afraid of Stanisław Walter. He had a peculiar gift—a way of disarming her completely. Every visit with him felt like being strapped into a straitjacket and ordered to find a way out.

She checked with his secretary. Walter was between appointments. Using the pretext of an urgent matter, she walked straight into his office.

The first thing that unsettled her wasn't the room itself. The décor was plain—a panorama of Częstochowa on the grey-blue wall, a heavy desk, several chairs in matching style. Nothing stood out.

What froze her for a second was the presence of someone she hadn't expected—someone who always made her skin crawl.

Julian.

The moment she saw him, she stopped dead. It was only for a heartbeat, but Walter noticed. He always noticed such things. He collected them, savoured them.

Julian's presence threw her off balance, but she forced herself to speak immediately.

"Your Excellency, I think we have a problem. I've just met with the heir to the Sobiński estate," she said in one quick breath.

A flicker of irritation crossed the bishop's face. He didn't look away, but his eyes narrowed for a moment and the muscles in his cheeks tightened. His jaw clenched briefly. Then silence fell—thick and heavy, broken only by the sound of Alicja's quickening heartbeat.

“Who is this man?” Walter asked after a pause, his voice calm but edged with interest.

She summarised the meeting as concisely as she could.

“And you say, my dear, that he presented you with all the evidence?” the bishop asked when she finished. “Are those the papers you’re holding in your hand?”

“Yes, these.” She stepped forward and handed him the bundle of documents.

He leafed through them quickly, then stood up, crossed the room, and locked them in the safe.

Turning back to the stunned lawyer, he asked one more question.

“And you’re also telling me this information was sent to Siberia by our dear parish priest Ryszard?”

“Yes… yes, that’s right,” she stammered, still not quite comprehending what had just happened.

The bishop settled comfortably behind his desk, glancing toward Julian—who, as always, stared fixedly at one point on the floor. But Walter knew he was listening. Julian always listened. He’d already absorbed every detail that mattered. He already knew the bishop’s next words.

“We won’t concern ourselves with this Mr Maleńkow,” the bishop said.

And just like that, he fastened the straitjacket around her again.

Alicja managed only four words:
“But… that’s not right…”

“My dear,” Walter interrupted, his tone harder now, “we will not concern ourselves with Mr Maleńkow.”

Though he sat calmly before her, Alicja could *feel* him tightening the sleeves behind her back — pulling them taut, knotting them firmly.

The bishop decides to take matters in his own hands and orders his right hand man Julian to “deal with” Maleńkow.

Jerzy Walter, the bishop's brother, continues his investigation and learns of Stanisław's many crimes.

Alicja suspects that the bishop ordered the attack on Maleńkow. Julian turns out to be Alicja's long-lost brother who was abducted after a fatal car crash that killed their parents. Kept in captivity for years, he finally kills his abductor. He is changed by the trauma, mentally scarred for life. After his ordeal, he is taken in by the bishop.

Chapter 10 (fragments)

Stanisław

Fools! Bishop Walter thought. *Damned fools!*

[...]

One thing, however, remained unchanged—and for that, Walter was deeply grateful.
Częstochowa had always been the city of the Black Madonna. Everyone here loved her, though each in their own way. Whether that love came from faith, fear, or financial interest made no difference to him. Every motive suited the bishop equally well. He cherished them all, because each one served his purpose. The Black Madonna had always been kind to him—and he, in turn, was the mind behind all her operations in this city.

That comparison pleased him the most. When he turned a map of the old province upside down, he could see it—the unmistakable shape of a human brain. The province itself no longer existed, but in its place stood a vast archdiocese, and he was the one who truly controlled it.

His gaze shifted to another of his favourite maps. It showed the territory under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan curia. The area matched the boundaries of the defunct province almost exactly. He had lost nothing. If anything, he'd gained.

The lost and nostalgic now turned only to the Black Madonna for comfort—which meant, ultimately, they turned to *him*. The young and ambitious, those hungry for recognition, couldn't rise without the Queen of Poland. They couldn't rise without *him*. Over eight hundred thousand souls existed only through his will.

Fools!

Walter glanced at the papers on his desk. Not everything concerning the Zbierskiego Street investment was going as planned. He'd sensed from the start it might prove troublesome.

But in truth, he wasn't worried. The bishop valued struggle above all else. He loved the fight—not the outcome, not the victory, but the process itself. Sometimes he even forgot what goal it was meant to serve. Walter found pleasure in the small skirmishes scattered along his path.

A knock sounded at the door. He wasn't expecting anyone. On a Saturday evening, he rarely received visitors—certainly not at home.

He rose from his bed, slid his feet into slippers, and moved slowly towards the door.

[...]

When he opened it, Julian stood there—soaked to the skin, looking as if he'd just walked out of a lake. The hood of his jacket was pulled up, but it didn't hide the wet strands of his hair, normally wavy, now plastered straight against his forehead and ears.

Walter stepped aside and let him in. The hallway light was dim, and the bishop didn't notice it at first—but once the door closed, something caught his eye.

Julian's hands were almost black. Mud caked the skin between his fingers and clung beneath his nails.

Something had gone wrong. The boy must have punished himself already. *Poor child.*

Julian must have come straight here from Maleńkow's place. He hadn't even gone to his own room—the one Walter had given him when he first moved into the cathedral residence.

He took three steps down the short corridor and stopped. He didn't move. Didn't remove his hood. Walter approached and gently pushed it back.

That boy always looked as if seeing the world caused him pain. But this time it wasn't just weariness—it was suffering. Every glance seemed to sting his eyes, as if shards of ice were striking his corneas.

This isn't good, Walter thought, rubbing the corner of his mouth.

“What’s happened, child? What brings you here?” he asked in a calm, steady voice, trying to infuse the words with as much warmth as he could summon.

Julian hesitated. Then he lifted his head and looked directly at the bishop. Walter was the only person before whom he ever raised his head. The only one he could look in the eye.

“It didn’t work,” he said quickly and lowered his gaze again.

“What didn’t work? Do you mean the matter of the man you were supposed to deal with?” Walter prompted gently.

The boy inhaled sharply and forced out a few words, each separated by a measured pause. He sounded mechanical, unnatural—but the message was clear.

“He’s alive. He’s hurt. I had to run. It didn’t work.”

[…]

Julian left soon after, and Walter continued his monologue—this time silently, in thought.

Once again he felt the deep satisfaction that came from perpetual conflict. Not for a second did he dwell on Julian’s failed task. What thrilled him was the knowledge that the battle was still going on.

He thought of how pitiful those people were who cared only about results. How small and desperate city councillors Kulesza and Franczak seemed, pouring all their energy into anticipating an ending. They didn’t know how to enjoy the path itself.

He thought of how he *loved* those moments when he saw fear flicker in Chancellor Maj’s eyes—that silent, constant question: would the bishop reveal what he knew? The compromising truth?

Would he tell that Maj had been with a woman? Would he say that the chancellor, too, had used his position for pleasure? Had he told anyone already? What use might Walter make of that knowledge?

Every one of those questions was written on Maj’s face, pressed against his lips—but never spoken. He was too afraid to ask.

Walter adored that game. He revelled in the certainty that he was more patient than the hot-headed councillors, more cunning than Maj. He didn’t wait for the goal—he loved the path leading toward it.

Chapter 12 (fragments)

Alicja

Alicja was slowly growing accustomed to the straitjacket she knew so well.

“What exactly do you mean, Bishop?”

It was the most foolish question imaginable, yet the only one that came to her mind.

“Exactly what you’ve just heard,” Walter replied evenly. “You’ll drop this matter and move on to other cases. Two days from now, when the court ruling becomes final, you’ll forget about it. You won’t return to it again.”

Courage, sharp and reckless, rose within Alicja.

“And if I don’t?” she asked, her voice unexpectedly firm.

[…]

Her words hadn’t faded yet when she heard the faint click of a key being turned in a lock behind her. Instinctively, she looked over her shoulder. Julian stood by the door. He must have been in the adjoining room all along. He locked the exit door and was now walking towards her. The entrance to the adjoining room was wide open. He must have come from there. Must have been there all the time.

Alicja turned to him, feeling out of control. The following sequence of motions looked rehearsed. She opened her mouth to say something. Anything. Nothing came to mind. Her brain was too sluggish to suggest anything coherent. Meanwhile, Julian dipped a hand in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled rag. He shot out his hand and rammed it in her open mouth. Then he slapped her. Hard. Hard enough to stagger her.

When she straightened up again, it was already too late.

The bishop and Julian twisted her arms, tied her up. Turned her around and shoved her over the table. Julian’s hand on the back of her neck pressed her to the tabletop.

What followed was something straight out of a nightmare. Everything that unfolded throughout the next couple of minutes was too unbelievable to be anything else than a terrible dream.

Later, the could faintly recall them pulling down her pants. Tearing away her underwear. Spreading her legs.

She felt something she should never have experienced.

And she remembered the words of the bishop.

“I know you. I know you well. I haven’t decided on that little swap only for you to cause me trouble. I haven’t pulled strings at the firm to put you on this case for this. To work for the curia. I know you very well. And I wanted this to happen. It was my clever little plan, you see.”

She heard him wiping the drool from his lips then. Felt his strong grip on her hips. Knew that the smell of his cologne would stay with her for the rest of her life. Waited until he was finished. And he went all the way to the end.

All the time she could see Julian out of the corner of her eyes. He just stood there. Watching.

There was just one thing she focused on throughout the ordeal. She would have given anything to time travel, go back to the moment when she sat in the car, listening to the radio. Watching the rain on the windscreen. She wanted nothing more than to go into the downpour now and soak through. Dance in the rain, stick her tongue out and catch the droplets with her mouth. Nothing else, nothing more.

And then everything went dark, pooling into a sticky black ooze where she sluggishly tried to surface. She couldn’t remember anything else, aside from this darkness, as she walked towards the exit, taking the same corridor that she remembered thinking was strangely magical before. She saw nothing except the black abyss as she headed to the car. Or while driving home and lying down. She didn’t catch the moment of falling asleep. It was like passing from one darkness into another, like she’d been doing everything with her eyes closed.

The blackness would encompass everything and take over her world for the next days, becoming more than a friend. Alicja retreated into it, hiding in a place without light, where she could be unseen. Where she couldn’t see herself.

When she left the sacristy, she passed a black Skoda Octavia parked in the courtyard. Her mind didn't register it. She walked straight past, moving as if in a trance, barely aware. If it stood in her way, she'd walked right over the bonnet. She reached her Opel, opened the door, and sat behind the wheel.

Jerzy Walter learns that the bishop is behind the attack on Maleńkow.

Alicja threatens the bishop that she'll inform the police about the rape. Stanisław sends Julian to kidnap her. The events of the Prologue take place.

The bishop drives to Alicja's apartment but doesn't find her. Who he does find is Henrik, her partner. He manages to incapacitate him with chlorophorm and dumps him in the trunk of his car. In an attempt to save Henrik, exchange him for herself, Alicja arranges a meeting with the bishop. A standoff ensues, in which the chief of police, Jerzy, arrests his brother Stanisław, and Julian tries to kill Henrik.

Chapter 15 (fragments)

When she pulled the trigger, she felt nothing. There was no doubt, no hesitation, no regret. No thought of consequences. No self-assessment. There was neither pressure nor an overwhelming sense of necessity.

In truth, Alicja barely remembered the moments that followed after she picked up the gun from the centre console and stepped out of the car. What lingered in her memory was what she felt beforehand: the shock when Henrik fell to the ground, motionless; the fear and focus as she watched Julian take aim at Jerzy Walter; and the rapid instinct that made her act so fast that Aguero, sitting beside her, never had a chance to react.

Now, standing still with the gun still outstretched, awareness slowly returned. But in the middle of it all, there had been complete emptiness—a void lasting several seconds, during which she had aimed at her brother and pulled the trigger. She had no idea how she'd managed such precision.

[...]

She drew a deep, trembling breath, pressing herself closer, and for the first time in a long while, thought that perhaps everything really would be all right. Even if the darkness returned, she would find a way to face it. She thought that more than anything she wanted to leave this city. And that she'd do it on Monday, just as she had planned.

Co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage as part of a targeted grant under the name Polish Canon.

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
Republic of Poland

Book Institute ©Poland

WYDAWNICTWO CZARNA OWCA