

Prologue

*February 1945
Flossenbürg, Germany*

Overhead, there was no sky. Or rather, it was unlike any sky Maria had glimpsed before. Unvarnished gray, almost white. If the sun ever existed, it had long since fled, leaving rays void of color and cheer in its wake.

The road ahead stretched long and straight. At its end, a great brown building squatted, bricks and roof providing the vista's only color. Everything else . . . white. Endless white. Snow on the ground. Billowing smoke. Swirling flakes raining down.

What those papery flakes represented, what they had once been, Maria couldn't bear to think of.

Nein, she must keep to her purpose. Any deviation would be fatal to her sluggish mind, her leaden feet.

"Dietrich." The word whispered from her half-frozen lips. "Dietrich."

Just keep thinking of him. That would keep her warm.

It had started as a girlish game of hers, running his name over and over in her mind, turning each syllable, toying with the letters, as she went about her daily duties.

Now it was the cord that kept her body upright, her limbs moving, and her numb fingers clenched around the handle of the heavy suitcase. With each step, the case jostled against her shin.

"Dietrich . . ."

Just a few more steps.

"Dietrich . . ."

Finally she reached the half-moon-shaped entrance. A guard—weathered face etched with severe lines, black SS cap straight upon his close-shaven hair—looked her over as if she were an apparition. To him, she probably

was. A fraülein of only twenty, approaching the gates of a concentration camp on foot. Only she didn't feel twenty. The weight of these past months, years, had bestowed upon her the mind of a woman three times that.

"*Guten Morgen, Fraülein.*" He gave a stiff nod, his shoulders broom-handle straight.

Oh, honestly. They weren't in a ballroom, for pity's sake. It was cold enough to turn water into icicles in seconds. Her fingers had become claws around the case's handle. Her hair was in tangles, her nose redder than the armband wrapping the man's right bicep.

Still, she needed something from this man. And it was better to smile than to make enemies. Hadn't the Tegel months shown her that?

"*Guten Morgen, Herr Officer.* I'm here about a prisoner."

His gaze sharpened into even grimmer lines. Undoubtedly, this specimen of SS training had at one time been some mutter's little boy, some sister's playmate. Given the girl fits of exasperation, as Max had in their childhood days. Brought a whole new meaning to the word *dummkopf*, yet done it all so charmingly that she could only throw her hands up . . . then laugh and ply him with *kuchen*.

She'd have to appeal to that, the little boy hidden beneath the skull and crossbones insignia.

"You've got to help me." It was all too easy to weave desperation through the fabric of her words. Desperation, something Germany—mighty, Führer-led Germany—did not condone, yet its people made bedfellows with. "I've walked seven kilometers here, and I'll have to return on foot. Please, Herr Officer. I need answers. The man I'm searching for . . . he's my fiancé."

Success. He'd softened somewhat, perhaps at the memory of his own sweetheart. Of happier days when love was a thing to rejoice in, laughter an everyday sound.

"*Ja.* You have a name?"

She nodded. "Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

"Wait here." He moved, as if to turn. Then snapped a glance over his shoulder. "Come inside." A stiff motion with his black-gloved hand. "You look cold."

Forcing her feet to move was accomplished only by sheer willpower. They made their way inside a large and dark room. A fire—color and warmth at last—lit a large stone hearth.

"You . . . um . . . can warm yourself over there. I'd offer *kaffee*, but we're low at present."

The warmth beckoned, and she crossed the floor, her boots leaving a watery trail in their wake. She crouched in front of the flames, much the

same way the family dog had during long winter nights at Pätzig. For what seemed like an hour, she sat there. Finally, blessed warmth returned to her hands, and she pried them from around the leather handles. Though the tingling and burning that ensued made tears prick her eyes, at least she wasn't frostbitten.

The presence of warmth made another of her needs starkly apparent. When had she last eaten? Her hollow stomach—where had the rosy-cheeked girl who devoured plateful after plateful of strudel, gone?—gurgled in protest.

Yet this need of hers, so weak and human, could wait. It was Dietrich—not theologian Dietrich, or brilliant Dietrich, nor even Tegel Dietrich, but the Dietrich she loved with full and startling intensity—who mattered most at this moment.

She sensed someone watching her and turned. The guard stood beside the cluttered desk, one hand resting on its top, looking at her, not with detachment, but with something else altogether in his eyes. It couldn't be pity. Not from a member of Hitler's trained, lauded, and equipped forces. Not from a man who viewed death as often as a scullery maid saw dirty dishes. Yet . . . yes, there was pity in those veiled eyes.

Somehow she managed to force her legs to stand.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry, Fraülein. I have no record of anyone by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

"Are you sure?" Where else could they have taken him? They gave her no word in Berlin, no one knew here. How could one man simply disappear, even in the chaos engulfing war-torn Germany?

"I checked. Our records are meticulous." He stiffened, as if challenging her, a red-nosed, disheveled fraülein, to question him. Then, softening again, added, "I'm sorry your journey has been wasted. These days . . . it is easy to misplace people."

The hours of walking, the cold, the frustration bordering on despair, boiled within her like a kettle left on the stove much too long. "I didn't misplace him." She spat out the words, quick bursts of rage, before regret could worm its way in. "Your kind took him. An innocent man and the best that ever breathed air." Snatching up the suitcase, she spun on her heel, strode from the building and down the road, before the man could follow and arrest her for unpatriotic talk. They seemed to be arresting everyone these days for the slightest offense—Hans, Rüdiger, Klaus.

Dietrich.

The road ahead seemed to mock her, each step one that must be fought

for, triumphed over, before she could reach shelter. Frigid air bit through her threadbare coat, slashed across her thin stockings. Tears, those renegade signs of weakness, flooded her eyes and sped down her cheeks. She swiped them away with an impatient hand. Nobody cried anymore. There was just too much sorrow and not enough time.

She slipped her numb fingers into the pocket of her coat, fingertips brushing a folded piece of paper. One of Dietrich's letters to her. Its words echoed in her mind:

The thought that you are concerned would be my only concern. The thought that you're waiting with me, lovingly and patiently, is my daily consolation. All will come right at the time appointed by God. Join me in looking forward to that time. . . .

"I'm trying, Dietrich. I'm trying to believe that there *will* be a time. That one day we'll again sit in Grossmutter's parlor, and you'll play the piano, and we'll be happy. Happy not because there's anything in particular to be glad about, but because we're together. That's all that matters. We'll be together."

There. Think of that. Though she hadn't succeeded at the camp, the war would soon be over. This horrible, godforsaken war that had claimed the lives of one too many good men. But the memory of Dietrich and his words rose in her thoughts again: "*Nein, Maria. Nothing is ever godforsaken. He is in everything . . . In the giving and taking of life. In all of our moments, even this one.*"

She kept talking aloud, if only to keep her senses alert.

"*Ja*, Dietrich. You're right. You always are, you know. It still amazes me that you chose me, the silly girl who couldn't understand theology, who coaxed you into playing American music. I'm not that girl anymore, you know. How can I still be? After all these years have brought, I've changed, you've changed. But know this. Wherever you are . . ."

The exertion of her pace, the cold scraping her lungs stole her last words. But as she trudged down the endless road, the suitcase heavier than ever, the sky above gray and lifeless and empty, she let them fill her heart.

I love you.

Chapter One

May 31, 1942
Sigtuna, Sweden

A dictatorship is like a snake. If you step on its tail, it will bite you.
The words played through Dietrich Bonhoeffer's mind as the taxi trundled through the streets of the ancient Swedish royal city. He stared out the sun-streaked window, his reflection an overlay. Nausea churned through him. But it was no longer due to yesterday's turbulent flight from Berlin to Stockholm. Nein, he'd recovered from that quickly enough.

The sensation of being observed, followed, occasioned a queasiness of an entirely different nature. One not easily shaken away.

The cramped taxi interior was rife with stale cigars and desperation—the former belonging to the profusely sweating driver, the latter his own, albeit concealed.

He'd worked too hard over the past few days for some hitch to prevent this meeting from going off according to plan.

The taxi jolted to a halt in front of the Nordic Ecumenical Institute. Dietrich paid the driver—who barely nodded—grasped his suitcase with one hand, and opened the taxi door with the other. Afternoon sunlight warmed his face, the air pure and fresh.

With practiced calm, he scanned his surroundings, taking in the several-story, stone building, the manicured lawn, and wide steps leading to the front door. Had he been followed? Or was the sensation of a spider crawling up his neck due to pent-up nervous energy? A figure ambled around the back of the building, wearing a worn cap and carrying a toolbox.

Only a handyman.

Not the Gestapo.

Dietrich strode toward the door, black oxfords crunching on the gravel. He climbed the steps and gave a firm rap to the tarnished gold door knocker.

Would Bishop Bell still be here? Or would the hour trip from Stockholm to Sigtuna to see the Bishop of Chichester have been undertaken for nothing?

A fresh-faced maidservant opened the door.

“Yes?”

“A visitor here to see Bishop Bell and Harry Johansson, if I may.” Dietrich shifted the suitcase in his palm, posture erect, conscious of the clipped syllables that marked him as bearing an accent from the Führer’s country.

There were few reasons for a German not in uniform to be visiting neutral Sweden. The last thing he needed was undue attention.

“Follow me please.” The girl opened the door, motioning him down a narrow, dimly lit hall. Thankfully, she hadn’t inquired his identity.

Though the papers within his suitcase didn’t weigh much more than a loaf of bread, the knowledge of their existence made the case seem lined with lead.

The girl opened a door, revealing a room paneled in wood and cluttered with bookshelves and a well-used oaken desk. But what drew Dietrich’s attention was the gray-haired gentleman sitting, large hands loose between his knees, in a wing chair near the window. The conversation between him and the lanky blond man sitting on the edge of the desk drew to an abrupt halt. Both gazes swung in Dietrich’s direction. Bell’s eyes widened in shock.

“Hello, George.” Dietrich smiled. He hadn’t seen his friend since the spring of 1939. Much had changed in his life—and in Germany—in the interim.

“Dietrich!” Bishop Bell rose to his feet. He opened his mouth, as if to exclaim over the unexpectedness of his arrival, but Dietrich spoke up first.

“You haven’t changed a bit.” Though nearing sixty, Bell looked in robust health, the space of years adding a few lines around the eyes, a few inches to his girth, but little else. Pressing on, Dietrich continued. “And this must be Mr. Johansson. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, at your service.” He held out his hand to the Swede, and the man shook it heartily.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir.” Johansson’s smile was equal parts congenial and curious.

After a few minutes of pleasantries, Johansson left the room, leaving Dietrich and Bell alone. The second the door clicked, Bell’s facade changed into stark astonishment.

“Whatever are you doing here? I heard you were in Norway on your way to the front lines.” He sank down heavily into his chair.

“You mean what other reason would I have for being in Sweden, now of all times?” Dietrich took an unoccupied seat, placing his suitcase beside it.

In another time and place, he'd have relaxed in the comfortable easy chair, stretched out his long legs, and settled in. Not today. The pressure of what he'd come to relay made him sit stiff and straight. "It's a long story. In short, I'm officially employed by the Abwehr."

"You work for Germany's Military Intelligence?" Bell leaned forward, gaze darting to and fro, as if unable to grasp the weight of Dietrich's words.

"In a word, *ja*, I do." There wasn't much time. Someday after the war, when he and Bell could meet again, he'd explain everything. Right now, he need only hit the high points. "My brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, is at the heart of my involvement. And the conspiracy." It was only a word.

But a weighted one. Laden with so many implications . . . so many lives.

On instinct, he scanned the room, checking for telephones that could be tapped, open windows where anyone could overhear.

Under the Malicious Practices Act, communication with England or any enemy government wasn't only dangerous. It was treason. Punishable by execution.

A treason he committed with all his might and main.

Heart pounding, he leaned forward, voice cut to a whisper. "It's not just a conspiracy. There are plans . . . plans in place for the overthrow of the German government and the assassination of Adolf Hitler."

Bell's sharp intake of air sliced the atmosphere like the whistle of a bullet. "It's true then," he breathed.

"Never more so," Dietrich said. "And we need you, George. I traveled from Berlin with the express purpose of meeting with you to ask—beg—you on behalf of my friends in Germany to aid us in getting word of our plans to the British government. When—if—the coup succeeds, those involved want to know that Britain will be willing to negotiate peace. With your contacts in the House of Lords, you can speak to Anthony Eden. As foreign secretary under Churchill, Eden can help us, if only he can be convinced." Dietrich's words came faster now, rushing out of him. "Hans and General Oster believe that many more officers under Hitler could be convinced to join us if they could be certain we had the support of the British government. In the way of gaining such support, you could do a great deal for us."

Bell pressed a hand against his lined forehead. "Of course. Of course. I'll do my utmost. But the secret memorandum you sent to me last year . . . none of them took it very seriously. They reject the idea that anti-Nazi forces in Germany could have any effect, except after complete military defeat."

"Field Marshals von Bock and von Kluge don't agree. They're determined,

along with General Beck and General Oster and others, to see the government overthrown after Hitler's assassination. Until that event takes place, we cannot gain much headway."

"Field Marshals von Bock and von Kluge," Bell murmured, as if committing the names to memory. He nodded. "Give me all the names and information you can, Dietrich. I'll use it to the best of my abilities. You know as well as I that Churchill is vehemently opposed to any discussion of peace. He wants the war won, and at all costs. After these long years of fighting, the lines between Germans and Nazis have become blurred. Almost to the point of being indistinguishable. And can you blame them? London has been ruthlessly bombed . . . hundreds of civilians killed. They've endured great losses dealt by the hands of Hitler and his generals. It's little wonder they're cautious at the idea of this 'resistance.'"

Dietrich stood and paced toward the window, staring out but seeing little of the vista of blue sky and sunlight. Instead, the faces of the hunted and defenseless rose before him, an endless line of specters who would forever haunt him. Those Germany had ordered euthanized because they believed their state of health decreed them unworthy of life.

And the Jews. God's chosen ones. No matter he stood in a room in neutral Sweden, he could not ignore the fact that, by order of the Führer, millions of them were being systematically murdered, crammed into railcars like cattle shipped to the slaughterhouse. Women. Children.

Souls.

He swung back around, facing Bell. A swirl of dust motes floated in the sunlight, the rays landing on Bell's thinning gray hair. His friend would aid their cause, get the truth to those at the top. But would he succeed at convincing them?

"Only a few know of my involvement," he said quietly. "Many believe because I'm part of the Abwehr that I've deflected, turned away from standing with the Confessing Church." He swallowed. "Germany has sinned, George. We must all pay the price of bringing the nation to repentance. Christ calls us to suffer on behalf of others. My suffering involves putting aside qualms of conscience. I lie. I create falsified memorandums to disguise the true nature of my journeys."

"And participating in plans that involve murder?" Bell met Dietrich's gaze. There was no censure in the man's eyes. Only a demand for honesty.

Dietrich nodded. He would not allow himself to squirm beneath such talk, however uncomfortable it made him. "Perhaps that, too, is part of Germany's punishment. That we are forced to resort to such means." He resumed his seat, drawing out his suitcase to gather papers for Bell to take

with him. “We’ve gone too far for any other course of action. It must be done.”

His brother Klaus’s words resurfaced, their refrain an eerie cadence in his ears, as Dietrich prepared to expound on details of the conspiracy, relaying things that, if known, could lead to deadly consequences as fast as the time it took for a Gestapo finger to squeeze the trigger.

If you step on its tail, it will bite you.

