

CHAPTER ONE

Waking up to the stomping sound of heavy boots had become all too familiar. Christiaan Brouwer squeezed his eyes shut, trying to ignore the incessant clanging as the guard tapped his metal-tipped baton on every cell door he passed. *Clang*. Christiaan turned his face to the wall to avoid the harsh lighting that would soon spring into life. He grunted as his back cracked from an uncomfortable night spent on the concrete slab of a bed.

In his three months in the prison, his discomfort had only grown—pain radiated from his neck down to his lower back. And if it wasn't his body keeping him awake at night, the guards often found a way to rouse the entire hallway.

The electric buzzing of the lights in the hallway meant it would be seconds until the single bulb in Christiaan's cell ended the comfortable darkness. He pulled his knees to his stomach and shivered. It was late May, the Polish nights were cold, and his cell was unheated. The guards had made it clear that the prisoners were fortunate they could even shut their windows. Christiaan had soon

found out it was indeed a privilege that could just as easily be taken away. A few days after their arrival, a prisoner upset one of the guards when he asked for a blanket. The guard had mocked him and said he hadn't experienced true winter yet. He removed the single small but precious window separating the prisoner from the outside elements. The man had survived the first night, but when a cold snap had temperatures dropping well below freezing point, he was found frozen to death in his cell the next morning. There had been no more complaints about the cell temperatures after that.

Christiaan reluctantly opened his eyes to the faint glow of the light bulb warming up. *Clang*. Less than five minutes to get ready for roll call. He swung his legs out of bed and grimaced as he reached for his shoes, placed neatly on the far side of his bed. An intense cramp shot through his left calf and he flung himself back on his bed, stretching to relieve the searing pain spreading through his leg. His eyes watered and he cursed inwardly. The cramps were new; food and water rations had steadily declined the past week, and he went to sleep every night thirsty and hungry. His strength was waning; he had likely lost at least a fifth of his weight since arriving in the prison four months ago. Or was it five? He couldn't remember.

The pain passed, and he stood in his prison uniform. He hadn't bothered undressing for bed; he needed every layer of clothing during the cold nights. There was movement in the hallway and he moved toward the cell door. He could hear the guards opening the doors of the other cells, and a few seconds later, his cell door swung open. An imposing guard wearing the dark green uniform of the SS motioned for Christiaan to step out. He did as instructed and glanced to his left, where he spotted his friend, Max. He gave him an almost imperceptible nod, relieved he appeared in relatively good shape. The guards opened the last cell door before the men were marched upstairs, toward the roll call area.

Christiaan followed the man in front of him, keeping his gaze firmly on the ground, making sure he didn't leave too much space

CROSSROADS OF GRANITE

between them. Moving too slowly was considered loitering, and Christiaan had seen men getting a severe beating for the offense. Christiaan was determined not to give the guards any excuse to administer the dreaded morning wake-up call.

The walk to the roll call area in the yard in the middle of the complex took five minutes as they made their way through the labyrinth of the prison. He could vividly remember his arrival from the Assen prison, in his home country of the Netherlands. The journey had been uncomfortable, and thirst had plagued them; a sign of things to come. Christiaan's group of fifty-five men had boarded a train in the middle of the night, and they had traveled east for two nights, making frequent stops on sidetracks as freight trains thundered past.

When they stepped off the train, they were escorted through the center of what turned out to be the city of Rawicz in Poland. Snow covered deserted streets, but Christiaan had spotted curious faces peering through the drawn curtains of the homes they passed. The walls of the prison appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the city. Christiaan had glanced back before entering, the snow already covering their footsteps. As the gate closed, he realized it would be his last glimpse of life on the outside.

They reached a short flight of uneven stairs, and he focused on making sure he didn't trip. Even though there was a handrail to his right, he didn't even consider using it. The guards enjoyed nothing more than to punish minor infractions. The image of the frail, older prisoner getting pulled out of line and forced to sprint up and down the stairs until he collapsed was fresh in his mind.

They reached the top of the stairs and entered the main hallway on the ground floor. Their cells were in the basement, isolating them from most of the regular prisoner population for all activities but roll call. Groups of men merged from side corridors to form a neat procession heading for the yard. Christiaan hardly had a chance to speak to the other men, but he knew they came from all corners of

Europe. Poles, Germans, Frenchmen, and even a few Americans were interned in Rawicz Prison. All had taken different paths to end up here as enemies of the Third Reich. And that was enough for the SS guards running the prison to treat them as subhuman. For the prisoners, it meant they were all in the same situation.

The temperature dropped sharply as they approached a large open door leading to the yard. Christiaan braced himself, pulling his thin sweater up to his chin to stay a bit warmer. Nearing the door, a familiar, sweet smell entered his nostrils. He peered past the men in front of him. A light drizzle had started to fall. With a heavy sigh, he stepped outside to see dark clouds looming overhead. The guards would be delighted to have a roll call in the rain.

Christiaan found his spot in the middle of the yard, lining up alongside the other Dutch men. He looked around as the last of the prisoners filed into the yard. The guards seemed nervous, their eyes shifting between the prisoners. Some held automatic rifles. The men that ruled Rawicz normally made do with batons. Given the condition most prisoners were in, that was more than enough to keep order. He glanced at Max, who looked worried. He gave Christiaan a quick shake of the head. *What's going on?*

They didn't have to wait long. The gate to the yard was closed, and but for a few suppressed coughs, it was silent for about a minute. The dark clouds were directly overhead, and thick drops of water were pelting down. Christiaan could feel the water seeping into his uniform and shivered involuntarily.

A side door opened, breaking the silence, and attracting the attention of all those in the yard. A thousand pairs of eyes shifted in the direction of a man wearing the gray-green uniform of an SS officer. Accompanied by a guard holding an umbrella over his head, he rushed to the small platform in front of the group of prisoners. Christiaan recognized *Hauptsturmführer* Anton Winkler. He swallowed hard. Winkler oversaw the prison but was seldom seen. From what Christiaan heard, the man preferred to leave the day-to-day running of the prison to his underlings while he lived in a villa on the

outskirts of town. For him to make an appearance in front of the entire prisoner population could only mean something was very wrong.

Winkler raised a microphone to his mouth. "Prisoners. I apologize for the inconvenience of having to stand out here in the discomfort of this weather." The metallic distortion of his voice did nothing to hide the insincerity of his words as he scowled at them. "Unfortunately, this is the most efficient way to resolve this situation." Winkler let the words hang in the air for a few seconds. Without exception, the prisoners lined up in front of the SS officer had their gazes fixed firmly on the ground. The rain intensified and a wind picked up, and Christiaan's teeth chattered.

"I've caught rumors of a group of prisoners planning an escape," Winkler continued, a hint of indignation in his voice. "I can't tolerate even the mention of this ridiculous plan." He snapped his fingers at the guards lining the walls, who pulled out their batons and took a step toward the prisoners. The guards looked confident and determined, some softly patting their batons on their free hands.

"I'll give anyone who knows anything about this escape thirty seconds to step forward," Winkler said as he glanced at his wristwatch. "I give you my word you'll be spared if you tell us the truth."

Nobody in the yard moved as the seconds ticked away to the sound of thick raindrops landing in puddles forming between the prisoners. Christiaan kept his head low but glanced around. He knew nothing about an escape, but he was excited to hear of the initiative. If what Winkler said was true, the men looking to break out of the prison weren't doing it without outside help. He sometimes overheard prisoners talking about the efforts of the Home Army taking the fight to the Nazis on the streets of the Polish cities. It gave him hope that perhaps one day, the men and women of the Home Army would storm the prison.

"Nobody, then?" Winkler's voice startled Christiaan back to the present. "That's a pity." With a flick of the wrist, he signaled to the guards. The uniformed men raised their batons and moved toward a

group prisoners on the far side of the yard. Other guards were standing a few meters back, their rifles aimed at the prisoners. Some of the prisoners took a step away from the armed perimeter, unsure of what to do. Unfortunately, this decision proved fatal. The guards rushed forward and grabbed the men who had tried to distance themselves. In less than sixty seconds, twenty men had been separated and badly beaten by the guards as they moved them to the front.

Winkler stood looking down from his elevated position. His facial expression hadn't changed, and he patiently waited for the guards to finish lining up the men. They stood facing the rest of the prisoners, every man accompanied by a guard standing close behind him. Even from a distance, Christiaan could see the pistols strapped to these guards' belts. When they were done, Winkler gave a curt nod and raised his microphone.

"Since no one came forward, I thought we should expedite our search for the perpetrators. I don't have all day. Each of the men in front of you is worth thirty seconds."

A sinking feeling overcame Christiaan as he listened to the warden's words. The energy in the yard changed. Some hadn't understood Winkler's words and looked around in confusion. Most, however, understood the words perfectly, and their faces had turned ashen. Only two looked unshaken, their faces etched with determination.

"This is your last chance to come forward and avoid unnecessary bloodshed," Winkler said, his eyes slowly scanning the crowd. "Otherwise, what happens next is on you."

The yard remained quiet.

"Very well, then. Let's proceed." Winkler waved at the guard standing behind the prisoner on the far left.

The guard's voice boomed across the yard as he started counting. "One. Two. Three." He sounded calm and composed, emphasizing each syllable, perfectly timing every second. Christiaan looked

around, hoping someone would end this madness by stepping forward. “Eight. Nine. Ten.”

There was no movement around the group, as no one even dared shuffle their feet. Christiaan’s eyes went to the condemned man, who had closed his eyes and stood shaking as the guard continued his count.

“Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two.”

Christiaan considered the possibility that Winkler was just carrying out a cruel exercise in prisoner discipline, that there were no rumors of an impending escape, and that the men at the front of the group would soon be released after this scare.

“Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Thirty.”

It was silent as the guard finished his count. He turned and looked to Winkler. Christiaan held his breath. Winkler nodded, and the guard unholstered his pistol. The sound of him cocking the hammer reverberated through the yard. Christiaan looked away, just before a single gunshot shattered the silence. A dull thud followed almost immediately as the condemned prisoner’s lifeless body unceremoniously hit the ground.

Without missing a beat, the next guard started counting. “Three. Four. Five.”

Christiaan’s stomach churned. He wanted to help these men, but his body screamed for him to stay put. The second guard finished his count, and as the next prisoner crashed to the ground, there was nothing he could do.

Another gunshot rang out in the front, but it hardly registered in Christiaan’s mind. The only way to survive this prison was to keep his head down. If there really were plans for an escape, surely the execution of twenty innocent men would only expedite them?

Ten minutes later, Christiaan passed through the large gate, back into the prison. He was soaked but hardly felt the cold. They had been forced to march past the bodies of the murdered prisoners, and Christiaan had felt a fury he didn’t know he possessed when he glimpsed the SS guards in charge of the execution. They stood at a

distance, casually chatting with each other while they smoked cigarettes. Some even grinned and pointed at the lifeless bodies strewn haphazardly in the yard. At that moment, Christiaan knew there was only one way he could ever get back at these men. He would survive and get his revenge one day, no matter what they threw at him.

CHAPTER TWO

The tall man placed his crutches next to the wooden bench. His dark brown hair was cropped short, and he sat down with a sigh.

“You feeling okay today, Flo? Do you still need those crutches?”

Floris Brouwer turned to his friend and smiled. “The nurse wouldn’t let me leave without them. I can do all right on my own.” He waved his hand at the stunning landscape. “They still come in handy when climbing the hills around this place, though. How are you doing? Did you get your check-up this morning?”

Anton’s hand automatically went to his left shoulder, a habit he had picked up since the incident, and shrugged. “I can’t really complain. The doctor said I should be ready for action soon enough. He asked me if I wanted to stay a bit longer, but I told him I would rather get back, make a difference, you know?”

Floris nodded. He knew exactly what his best friend was talking about. They had arrived in the hospital four months ago. He could still remember the day they were struck down in some Russian town whose name he couldn’t remember. The memory of the Russian tank lingered in his nightmares, and he could still recall the force of the

blast when it fired upon them from only fifty meters away. He looked at Anton, who sat on the bench next to him with his legs crossed, looking down on the city below. They had been overrun by Soviet soldiers, and when they had to abandon their position, Anton had been struck in the middle of the street. If Floris hadn't ignored orders and gone back for his downed friend, he was certain they wouldn't be sitting here together. Caught in the eye of the storm of the raging battle, Floris had searched frantically for a safe spot for his injured friend. When the shelling started, the air in the streets had filled with dust, and Floris had blindly wandered around with his friend slung over his shoulder.

"Shall we head back to the barracks via the *Wanderweg*?" Anton interrupted his thoughts, pointing toward a small trail running parallel to the hill and back to the Waffen-SS base. The trail Anton referred to offered spectacular views of the Austrian city of Graz and was often frequented by the locals on the weekends. It was slightly more strenuous than the regular path, but Floris agreed they could both use the exercise. Besides, it was a beautiful day, and he had nowhere else to be. He took his crutches and carried them under his arm, determined not to use them on the way back. *I'm strong enough for duty.*

The path was well trodden, and Floris found it easy to match Anton's moderate pace. He suspected his friend was moving a little slower for his benefit but accepted he would never be able to walk completely unhindered anymore. His mind wandered back to the eastern front.

When the orange-grayish dust cleared, Floris and Anton found themselves on the wrong side of town. There was heavy fighting all around, and it was only a matter of time before other soldiers would pass through their safe house. Soviet soldiers of the Red Army would be horrendous. His prayers were answered when fellow Waffen-SS soldiers came running by. They, however, were more concerned with saving themselves, and Floris was unable to keep up while carrying Anton. That's when he heard the crunching of debris behind him,

CROSSROADS OF GRANITE

and the Russian T-34 tank appear from nowhere. When the operator fired the deadly shell, Floris and Anton were forced to the ground.

The next thing he remembered was waking up in a dimly lit tent with doctors and nurses fussing over him. The pain had been excruciating, but they had to operate. He had passed out again, and the following weeks had been a blur as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Finally, he had woken up in a real bed, and the nurse told him he was in Graz, in the SS training hospital, to recover from a broken shoulder and, worse, a broken shinbone. She had made it clear his recovery would be long. Worse, he needed to understand he might never walk without support again.

From that moment, Floris decided he would do everything humanly possible to walk on his own again. Progress had been agonizingly slow. In Floris' darkest moments, when he wanted to tell the doctor he was ready to give up, Anton took him to one of the other wards. They found soldiers who had just come from the eastern front. A few of them had been struck blind, unsure if they would ever see again. Others lost hands and feet, with severed arms and legs. These men had no chance of ever walking again, never mind serving in the Waffen-SS. Floris owed it to them to recover and return to the front.

They reached the end of the path, the hospital barracks coming into view. They continued on the main road for the final two hundred meters and Floris caught up with Anton, who raised his eyebrows as his gaze fixed on the crutches still under his arm.

"I saw you didn't have to use those once on the path. I think that's a first, no?"

Floris had been so caught up in his thoughts that he'd forgotten about the crutches. He also realized they hadn't exchanged more than a few words on the half-hour hike. "I suppose I really don't need them anymore," he said, before a sharp pain shot through his calves and he did his best to suppress a grimace.

After getting to the barracks, they found a few of their

comrades lounging in the sunshine. It was a pleasant day in late May, with just enough warmth to be comfortable, provided there wasn't too much of a breeze. One of them, a Berliner who had been recovering from shrapnel damage in both his knees, waved them over. "You're both to report to the admin building right away."

Floris cocked his head. "Said who?"

"Some messenger came looking for you about an hour ago, just after you left. I told him you'd be back before noon, wouldn't miss lunch." He chuckled. "The boy said you should report to the administration before lunch. Sorry."

Floris' stomach growled, but he ignored it. Whatever they needed from him at administration, it meant something was about to happen. Would he finally return to the front?

Floris and Anton were directed to a small office in the back of the administration building. They had never been here before, and Floris felt a flutter of excitement in his stomach. He was in high spirits after completing the hike that morning. Even though it was only a short distance, hardly comparable to the march-filled days on the eastern front, he knew Hitler's armies were struggling in their battle with the Soviets. Experienced soldiers like him and Anton would be invaluable.

"He'll be with you in a moment—take a seat." The young clerk pointed at two simple wooden chairs before closing the door, leaving Floris and Anton on their own.

They sat down and Floris couldn't contain his excitement any longer. "We're going back, I'm sure of it, Anton. They must've waited for both of us to be strong enough to return to the unit."

"I'm not so sure, Flo," Anton said, but Floris interrupted him, waving his finger.

"No, it can't be a coincidence that they're calling us in here when

you just had your check-up this morning, and I've been walking around without crutches."

Anton looked hesitant, his eyes shifting between Floris' leg and face. "Do they know you're walking without your crutches yet? Wasn't this the first time now?"

"You wait. I'm sure they're sending us back." The door behind them swung open, and they turned to find the doctor treating Floris and a high-ranking Waffen-SS officer walk in. Floris and Anton shot to their feet and raised their right hands. "*Heil Hitler,*" they belted out in unison.

The officer returned their salute half-heartedly, mumbling the words as he indicated for them to sit down again. He had the rank of *Sturmbannführer*, a major, and he exuded all the confidence his rank required.

"Gentlemen, I'll get right to the point. Your recovery has taken quite some time, but we"—he signaled to the doctor alongside him—"have been impressed with your dedication in building up your strength. I've witnessed soldiers displaying less determination while recovering from lesser injuries. Especially you, Brouwer. You've not given up."

"Yes, sir." Floris inclined his head, barely concealing his delight at the officer's words.

The *Sturmbannführer* shuffled through some papers and placed them in front of Floris and Anton. "After consulting with *Herr Doktor*, I'm pleased to share you can return to active duty." A thin smile spread on his face. "You must be thrilled to leave this place."

Floris felt elated as he gripped the sides of the chair. He was returning to battle! He nodded enthusiastically and wanted to reach for the papers when the officer raised his hand.

"There is, however, one thing." His eyes shot to Floris' leg for a split second before picking up the papers and handing them to Floris and Anton. "Despite your incredible recovery, the medical staff has advised against frontline duty." Floris' heart sank as he took the paper from the *Sturmbannführer*. Were they assigning him behind

the lines, in charge of supplies? He clenched his teeth; he wanted to fight. *I've earned this!* He was about to protest when the officer continued. "That is why you've been assigned as guards in one of our camps."

Floris looked up, his eyes going between the doctor and the officer. "Camps, sir?" The doctor looked uncomfortable and averted his gaze. The officer nodded and pointed to the bottom of the paper Floris was holding.

"You're going to join the SS regiment of guards at one of the most important prisoner and labor camps of the Reich and see that everything runs smoothly. It's an honorable and important job."

For Floris, it felt the complete opposite as he scanned the page, the words dancing in front of his eyes. He hardly registered what he was looking at until he reached the bottom. *Konzentrationslager Mauthausen*—concentration camp Mauthausen.

The name meant nothing to him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Receiver Room was buzzing. Nora was used to people looking over her shoulder, but this morning was different. As soon as she walked in for her shift at eight, she knew today would not be just another day. When she entered the Receiver Room, she was slightly overwhelmed to find not the usual team of five operators, but another half-dozen men and women in officers' uniforms crowding around. Machines lining the walls and the area directly behind Nora's desk made the room feel cramped in normal conditions. Now, with the officers jostling for space as well, Nora felt herself flush. She forced herself to take control of the situation as she sat down at her workstation and placed her headset over her ears, muffling the voices of the officers behind her.

Nora's eyes went to her screen, where a horizontal line appeared, interrupted at regular intervals by little blips pointing downward and constantly refreshed. At the top of her screen was a series of numbers from "0" to "100" showing distances in miles. The little blips were airplanes, and the closer they appeared to the left, to the zero on her screen, the closer they were to her station of Bawdsey, on England's southeast coast. This morning, Nora watched her screen

filled with blips moving steadily to the right. These were the American bomber squadrons making their way across the North Sea, heading for targets in Germany. It had been like this for the past months, and Nora kept her eyes focused on the blips for ten minutes. When she was satisfied there were no unusual movements in her section, she removed her headset and turned to the woman next to her.

“Hey, Mary, what are the bigwigs doing down here?” She spoke in a low voice. “It’s the first time I’m seeing so much interest in our work. And they’re not asking us anything either?” Normally, whenever visitors appeared in the Receiver Room, they were guided by one of Nora’s commanding officers, who explained what the young women were doing. Outside this room, they weren’t to breathe a word of what went on inside.

Mary shrugged. “Don’t know, and I’ll tell you something else, I don’t really care. I don’t really fancy explaining what I’m doing here for the umpteenth time.” She pointed at her own screen. “Looks like the first American planes have reached the Dutch coast. I wonder where they’re going today.”

Nora glanced at her own screen again, making sure everything was still in order. All but a few of the blips had moved almost entirely to the right of her screen. Soon, they would disappear from range, and she would have to wait for them to return in a few hours. Even though that technically meant her work would be a bit easier, it also meant she had to be extra vigilant not to lose her concentration. When their own planes left for Europe, their paths were predictable and easy to track. She was more concerned about the planes heading in the other direction, toward Britain. The Nazis had started launching unmanned airplanes, called V-1s. Even though they flew a lot faster than the regular airplanes of the *Luftwaffe*, they were also more predictable, for they flew in straight lines and at a consistent speed. Nevertheless, as soon as Nora or one of the other women in the Receiver Room spotted one, they needed to act swiftly to give the pilots of the Royal Air Force a chance at intercepting them. Some of

the pilots involved had come down to Bawdsey to see how the women tracked the V-1s. One of the pilots had shared their approach in disabling the rocket planes. They would position their own planes just ahead of the V-1, then allow it to catch up and tip its wing to send it crashing into the sea.

She eyed her screen again, and just as she confirmed most of the American bombers had left range, she saw a blip appear slightly off the middle of her screen, indicating it was some 60 miles out. She frowned as she sat up straight and put her headset back on. Had she missed the plane in the crowd of bombers heading in the other direction? She scoffed; that would be reckless. Nora impatiently stared at the screen, waiting for the blip to move. There was something else that bothered her: the plane wasn't sending out the required IFF signal, which, in the case of the American and British planes, would mark it as a friendly craft on her screen.

Her screen refreshed and Nora let out a sigh. The blip had moved farther left. It was heading toward Britain, and still unidentified. Nora turned around in her chair, took off her headphones and walked over to her supervisor. Wing Officer Anna Lewis, standing near the group of visitors, was patiently explaining how they plotted enemy aircraft.

"Ma'am, sorry to bother you, but might I borrow you for a second?" Nora spoke politely but firmly. She didn't salute her superior officer; Lewis had made it clear to the women under her command that such formalities were not required in the Receiver Room, where time was often of the essence.

Lewis picked up on the polite urgency in Nora's tone and quickly excused herself from the group, following Nora to her screen. "Did something happen to the bombers?"

Nora shook her head, returned to her seat, and placed her headset over one of her ears. "No, ma'am, I tracked them all the way across the North Sea. It's this blip I'm concerned about." She pointed at her screen, where the plane had moved farther left, now some 45 miles from the English coast.

Lewis' eyes shot across Nora's screen, and without missing a beat, she said, "Where is its IFF designation? Was it part of the group heading out?"

Nora hesitated only for a second before replying. "No, ma'am, I would've picked up the abnormal signal."

"Are you sure?" Lewis' gaze shifted from the screen to Nora. "In between those hundreds of bombers heading out, it's possible to miss one with a malfunctioning IFF system. Did you see it turn around?"

"I did not see it turn around, ma'am." Nora spoke softly, slightly ashamed of missing the plane earlier. "It appeared on my screen at sixty miles out."

Lewis kept her eyes glued to the screen. When the screen refreshed, the plane had hardly moved, the blip between 40 and 45 miles out. Lewis frowned. "That's odd. Has it been moving this slowly all the time?"

The observation startled Nora. She had been so focused on fixing her mistake that she hadn't noticed the plane's airspeed was abnormally low. Feeling her cheeks flush, she caught herself before answering. "It does seem off." At this speed, she dismissed the threat of a V-1, then corrected herself; it could be a V-1 with a busted engine.

"Have you tried contacting them?" When Nora shook her head, Lewis pointed at her radio. "Try that now." Lewis looked worried, and Nora cursed herself for not thinking of that earlier. She turned to her radio and sent out a neutral message. "British mainland calling unidentified plane bearing two seven zero, at forty miles out, identify yourself."

Nora held her breath as she listened to the static crackle from her headphone. Her heart pounded in her chest as she kept her eyes fixed on her screen, praying the pilots heard her. After thirty seconds, Nora repeated the call. Again, there was no response. She turned to Lewis.

"Do you want me to instruct the AA crews on the coast to look out for the plane?" The antiaircraft guns were posted all along the coasts, and it wouldn't be the first time Nora relayed suspicious air

traffic to the men and women scanning the skies. The last time that they had shot down a number of V-1s on Nora's observations, they had celebrated the win with her in a pub in London when on leave together. Nora had great respect for the men and women manning the big guns, for they were prime targets for the Luftwaffe.

Lewis shook her head. "Hold off on that for one second. Something's wrong with this plane. Even though we can't identify them, they must know we can see them, or at least will when they reach the coast. Why would they risk it?" She rubbed her nose for a moment, her eyes distant as she weighed her next words. Then she turned to Nora. "We should intercept. Contact Newchurch and tell them to get eyes up there."

"Yes, ma'am." Nora changed radio frequency and was soon in contact with Royal Air Force Station Newchurch, located some 80 miles south. Lewis stood behind Nora as she spoke to Fighter Command. Nora kept her eyes on her screen and relayed the position of the plane. She thanked the dispatcher and turned to Lewis. "They're on their way, ma'am. I should have contact with them as soon as they're airborne."

For the first time that morning, Lewis looked a little shaken. "I pray we made the right decision, Brouwer. If this is a trap, we're sending those boys right into it."

Nora returned her focus to her screen. If the plane continued at the same speed, and the RAF planes were airborne within five minutes, they should be able to intercept it at least ten miles from the British shore. That left them enough time to shoot it down without any civilian casualties on the ground.

As she waited for the pilots to make contact, she considered her own journey to England. It had been less than half a year ago when she arrived in England by plane from Gibraltar. She had traveled across the continent from her home in Amsterdam to Gibraltar with three strangers. At least, that's what Katja, Arthur, and Lars started out as. Somehow, they hadn't been caught, despite several close brushes with the Nazi authorities. Upon arrival in England, Nora and

her friends were subjected to a long questioning by British intelligence, and for a while she wondered why she had been so determined to come to England in the first place. After the agents appeared satisfied with their reasons for coming to England they were moved to London. The friends were soon offered different assignments. Much to her delight, Katja was accepted to the Dutch merchant fleet. Arthur's limited medical background proved enough to earn him a spot in a London hospital. Lars signed up to join the small division of the Dutch Royal Air Force in England. They promised to stay in touch, but Nora knew the reality of the war meant that would be nigh impossible. Whatever happened to them, Nora prayed they would somehow meet again. She'd formed a strong bond with her fellow *Engelandvaarders*, England sailors.

Nora initially moved in with Lisa Abrahams, her brother-in-law Christiaan's girlfriend. After a few days, Lisa handed her an invitation to one of the RAF's London offices, telling her a mutual friend would like to talk to her. Startled and more than a little curious, she had reported to the offices to find a young man welcoming her. He introduced himself as Gareth and explained Lisa and Christiaan had smuggled him from Geneva back to London, and he owed them his life. He said Lisa had asked if there was anything Nora could do to contribute to the fight against the Nazis, and Gareth asked if Nora was interested in keeping the skies safe. Gareth had suggested she join the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, the WAAF. With her knowledge of German, she had quickly been assigned to radar operations, and that's how she ended up in the Receiver Room in Bawdsey.

There was static in her headphones, followed by a voice. "Big Ben, Firebirds Able and Baker on our way, ma'am. Please provide coordinates."

Nora relayed the position of the plane and waited. Soon two blips appeared on her screen, showing the RAF Tempest fighters at 60 miles out. The pilots on the other side of the connection were mostly silent, occasionally requesting confirmation they were still headed in the right direction. Nora was continuously plotting the course of the

unidentified plane, but it was easy; it continued following the same predictable course, never changing speed or altitude.

It took less than ten minutes for the Tempests to make visual contact. "It's a big one, ma'am. Looks like a bomber, but I can't quite make out the shape from this far away. We're closing in."

Lewis had sat next to Nora and also plugged in a headset. The two women looked at each other. Without saying a word, Nora knew they were both thinking the same thing. Were the Germans bold enough to send a large bomber across the Channel on its own, hoping they wouldn't detect it? It was madness. Nora leaned forward in her chair, the blips on her screen now almost overlapping. Soon, the three planes would merge to form one blip.

Her headphones crackled. "Umm, this is a bit odd, and I'm not entirely sure, but I think what we're seeing is one of—" The pilot's voice was abruptly cut off.

Nora frowned and checked her radio. It was functional, the dials showing her set was receiving signals. "What happened?" She switched her attention to her screen, which refreshed to show the two Tempests merge into the signal of the larger plane. Nora swallowed hard. She pressed the transmission button. "Firebirds Able, Baker, report. What do you see?"

Nora felt her neck burn. Without a radio connection, she was unable to make out what happened to their Tempests. Lewis let out a frustrated sigh but kept her face composed.

"Call them one more time. If there's no response, we inform the anti-aircraft stations and Fighter Command."

Nora did as she was told, even though she knew Fighter Command was aware of what was happening. They were on the same frequency and heard everything. After thirty seconds, there was still only static on the headset. Lewis pushed back her chair and stood.

"I'm calling Fighter Command; something is clearly wrong." Lewis moved across the room toward a telephone.

Nora stayed in her seat and felt her stomach turn. She worried

about the pilots of the Tempests that had been in her ears just minutes ago. What had happened? Had they been shot down by the unidentified plane? Even though she didn't want to consider the possibility, there was little other explanation for the sudden radio silence. She transmitted her request one more time as she eyed Lewis on the phone with Fighter Command. Her superior officer would instruct them to send out more Tempests, as well as have the anti-aircraft crews on the coast on full alert.

"Big Ben, this is Firebird Baker. Do you copy?"

Nora could hardly believe her ears as the unfamiliar voice of the Firebird wingman crackled through her headphones. She almost slammed her hand on the transmit button. "This is Big Ben; you're coming in loud and clear. What happened?"

The response was immediate. "Not sure, Big Ben, but sure happy to hear your voice. Seems like we lost the connection for a bit there. Requesting permission for a high-priority escort to Woodbridge."

For a moment, Nora had trouble processing the words. *Escort?* She looked up to find Lewis standing next to her, eyes questioning. She decided the pilot had priority. "Escort for what, Firebird Baker? Is Able operational?"

"Roger that. We've identified the other bird. It's one of our Lancasters, but it's pretty banged up, struggling to keep altitude. Their radio has been blown out, and I'm pretty sure so has their IFF. We've got visual contact with the crew, though."

Another voice came over the air. "Firebird Able, Baker, this is Fighter Command. Permission to escort and land at Woodbridge granted. Big Ben, please hand over to Woodbridge tower."

"Roger that, Fighter Command. Cheers, Big Ben, thanks for the ride."

Nora took off her headset and watched the blips disappear from her screen.

"Good job, Brouwer." Lewis' voice startled her as she turned to the wing officer. "You kept your composure in a rather stressful situation."

CROSSROADS OF GRANITE

Despite her frayed nerves, Nora smiled at her commanding officer's understated way of describing the situation. Nora felt she had lost control after her brief lapse in concentration. She didn't recall feeling more anxious than a few minutes ago, when they lost radio contact with the Tempests. But she wasn't going to tell Lewis that. "Thank you, ma'am. Permission to take a break?"

Lewis laughed out loud. "Yes, Brouwer, go get yourself a cuppa. You deserve it. I'll see you in half an hour."

Nora handed over control of her section to a new operator, and she quickly made her way toward the exit. She opened the door and breathed in the fresh sea air.