

CHAPTER ONE

Nora hardly recognized the figure hunched on the bed. Drawing ragged breaths, Floris Brouwer lowered his eyes as she closed the door of the musty cell. A single light bulb hung off-center, occasionally flickering. Nora shivered as she took a step closer.

“Hey, it’s me.” She spoke in a low voice and set down a plate with crusty bread, a sliver of margarine, and a cup of weak tea. “You should eat something.”

The man on the bed’s composure changed, and he looked up. Floris silently acknowledged her with bloodshot, tired eyes. He swung his legs out of bed, his bare feet touching down on the cold concrete floor, took two steps, and greedily lunged for the hunk of bread.

Nora sat and watched her husband chew furiously while she rubbed her thighs and inhaled deeply from the opposite bed. Four months of captivity in this Amsterdam basement had reduced the strong, healthy Nazi police officer to a pitiful heap of a human. His face was gaunt, making him look ten years older than the twenty-seven he was. His ragged clothes were dirty and hung loosely around

his thin frame. Nora shook her head. *He brought this on himself. But has the punishment fit the crime?*

Floris took a large gulp of tea before setting the cup down with a clang. He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and turned to Nora. "Why are you here? I haven't seen you in weeks." His voice was raspy, like that of someone who'd spent a lifetime smoking. "Have you come to gloat at my situation?" He spread his arms, shirtsleeves flapping. "Well, this is it, Nora. You've got me caged like an animal."

Nora frowned and shook her head. "It's not like that, Floris. I'm here to bring you news." She swallowed hard and forced herself to meet his cold eyes. She steeled herself, opened her mouth, but he spoke before she could.

"What could you possibly tell me that would change my situation? News about more victories of your resistance?" He scoffed. "Please, I get enough of that from those idiots you have guarding me. They seem to have no purpose in their lives but to fill my head with their incessant babbling and lies." Nora narrowed her eyes as Floris sat next to her. "But sure, Nora, tell me your news."

"You don't get it, do you, Flo?" He grimaced at her use of his nickname. "Four months down here, and you haven't changed a bit. More and more people are fed up with the occupation. They're done seeing their neighbors hauled off to God knows where on made-up charges, losing their jobs and going hungry." She paused for a moment, meeting her husband's eyes in the vain hope that she would find something resembling understanding. Instead, the resentment had only grown, his eyes reduced to thin slits glowering in the semidarkness.

"But most of all, they're done with people turning their backs on their country. People who will turn in their neighbors for a few Guilders or Reichmarks. People who help Nazis. People like you, Floris." Her voice trembled, and she cleared her throat. "You're a policeman. You're supposed to protect us from criminals. Instead, you've become one."

Floris didn't immediately respond. The buzzing of the light

above their heads seemed to grow more intense in the silence of the cramped room. Floris began wringing his hands before he stood, took a step, and towered over her.

“Criminal? That’s rich coming from you!” He jabbed his finger at her face, a vein on his forehead throbbing as he raised his voice. “I’ve listened to the wild stories of your guards.” He thrust his thumb up at the ceiling. “They’re rather proud of their acts of sabotage. Those Jews you insist on hiding will betray you at some point. Just you wait, Nora.”

Nora opened her mouth but struggled to respond. She had never felt more detached from him; those four months *had* changed her husband. “You’ve gone completely delusional,” she whispered.

He didn’t react. “I’m not keeping a police officer locked in a cell. You realize once this place is found, and it will be, you and everybody involved here will be punished?” Floris sat down on the bed again, eyeing her challengingly, his chest heaving.

Nora stood and straightened her back. She clasped her hands together and looked down at Floris. “You know why I really came down here? I wanted to see if you’d come to your senses. When I leave this room, it will be the last time you see me.” He raised his eyebrows, and Nora continued at pace. “I hoped I could go back up there and tell them they’re making a mistake. That you’re not the evil Nazi, that there is still a trace of the man I fell in love with.” She looked him in the eyes and saw confusion. She wavered for a moment as she felt her stomach churn. “That there was another option.”

“Another option?”

“You’re going to die. Tomorrow morning.”

Floris stared at the wall opposite, processing her words. Nora stood silently near the door, confident the guard on the other side would open it well before Floris could do anything. But as she looked at him, the idea of him assaulting her seemed distant at best. The news had floored him, his face growing paler by the second. Nora

pitied him. She cleared her throat. "I'm leaving now, Floris. Farewell. I hope you find peace."

He nodded absently, his eyes fixed on the wall opposite. Nora knocked on the door and turned back one more time. Gone was the confident, brash police officer who'd made it his mission to hunt down every single Amsterdam Jew in the past years. As the guard's key clicked into the lock, Floris looked up.

"If I am to die tomorrow, could you do me one last favor?"

Nora stopped in her tracks. She had expected him to get angry, plead for his life, or attack her, but not this. "What is it?"

"Could you bring me some fresh clothes? I don't want to meet my maker dressed in these rags."

The door swung open, revealing a burly guard. Nora considered Floris' request for a moment. *There's no harm.* "I can do that. I'll leave them with the men upstairs."

In a rare display of grace, Floris bowed his head. "Thank you."

"Farewell, Floris." She stepped out of the cell without looking back, her eyes stinging as the door shut behind her.

CHAPTER TWO

The lake glistened in late-afternoon sunshine, but the man hurrying across the small bridge paid little attention to the stunning scenery. Christiaan Brouwer rarely missed the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of Lake Geneva, but today there was no time. The summons from the consulate had been clear.

He felt a tingle of excitement as he swung open the door, startling the young man behind the desk.

“Christiaan, you’re here quicker than I expected.” The man stood from his seat. “Can I get you some water? You look winded.”

“I’m fine, thanks. The call sounded urgent.” Christiaan sat on the creaking chair, thankful for the breeze coming in through the window behind him. “Do you know what this is all about, Willem?”

The man shook his head. “Jean arrived in the morning and has been in his office ever since. He only came out to grab a coffee and asked me to call you.”

“He’s here?” Christiaan’s excitement shot up another notch. He hadn’t seen Jean Weidner since arriving as a refugee from the Netherlands with his girlfriend, Lisa, more than four months ago. Weidner had orchestrated their escape through Belgium and France

and finally into Switzerland. From their first night in Antwerp, he and Lisa had been on the escape route set up by Weidner. Christiaan owed his—and Lisa’s—life to the man who sat in the office beyond the simple door to Willem’s left.

“Christiaan!” A strong voice boomed through the room. Christiaan looked up as a tall, wiry man moved confidently toward him. He quickly stood and shook Weidner’s outstretched hand, tightening his grip to match the other man’s firm handshake. “It’s great to see you again, and thank you for coming so quickly.”

They stepped into the sparsely furnished office, and Weidner waved him to a chair near the window. Outside the fifth-story window, the weathered copper-green roof of the church opposite glistened in the sun. It reminded him of the grand Tuschinski theatre in Amsterdam sporting similarly colored twin copper domes. The thought of home passed as he sat and turned to find Weidner studying him with interest.

At thirty, Jean Weidner was only seven years older than Christiaan, but he could easily pass for another ten. His dark hair was brushed back expertly, exposing a receding hairline, emphasizing his pale face. The dark rings around his eyes showed a man who worked too much. The eyes, however, shone, betraying the youthful energy befitting a man who spent every waking moment thinking of ways to outsmart the Nazis across Europe.

“How are you and Lisa doing?” Weidner asked. “I hear you’ve both done great work welcoming the newcomers.”

“We both know what it feels like to arrive here and know nobody. It’s been thankful work.”

Jean nodded. “And they will keep coming. I’ve just returned from Paris, and our safe houses are full of people waiting to make the journey south.” He shook his head. “We’re struggling to get them papers quickly enough. You know how it is.”

“I think we were lucky. Unfortunately, life in the occupied countries is getting worse, and the streams of people trying to escape are only growing.”

“And we’re only seeing the ones who succeed,” Jean said, the usual glimmer in his eyes fading momentarily. “There are plenty of people who don’t make it. They end up going in the other direction, to the camps in the east.”

A silence passed as Weidner’s heavy words filled the room. Christiaan knew the Gestapo had stepped up its efforts to hunt down people in hiding in France. He looked to Weidner, who also had a considerable bounty on his head. Despite that, the man was always on the move, maintaining his escape routes and connections across multiple countries. The threat of capture or betrayal was always looming, but it hardly appeared to affect him. Christiaan suspected it only drove Weidner on harder; every successful escape provided more motivation to continue.

“You must wonder why you were asked to come to the consulate at such short notice.”

“I didn’t expect to find you here,” Christiaan said. In truth, he had been terrified that something terrible had happened back home. To Nora, the sister-in-law he cared for deeply. He’d been forced to leave her behind as he fled the Netherlands with Lisa. Even though Nora’s abusive husband, Christiaan’s brother Floris, had been missing for months, Nora’s resistance activities were high risk. As soon as Willem told him he was meeting with Weidner, he knew it was something else.

“You described helping those people coming to Geneva as thankful work. Is that also how Lisa sees it?”

Christiaan frowned. “You’d have to ask her, but to be honest, we’re both just grateful to live in freedom and do our bit for the people arriving.” He shifted in his seat, fumbling with his hands, and looked away.

“But? It sounds like there’s something else.” Weidner sat patiently on the other side of the desk, leaning back in his chair. His eyes sparkled with interest, and Christiaan felt his confidence grow. *I’ve asked to speak with him for months, I should grab this chance.*

“When I was in Amsterdam, I felt like I was making a real differ-

ence. I was hiding people, making sure they received their food coupons. I was sabotaging the occupation, fighting the Nazis. When Lisa was no longer safe, and my brother learned about my involvement in the resistance, it made sense to leave. We were both in danger.” Weidner listened without interrupting, and Christiaan felt a sliver of doubt about speaking the next words. *Out with it, Chris. You need to tell him, or nothing will change.* He took a deep breath. “Yet, these past months, something has been gnawing at me. I keep thinking of the people back home. My friends in the resistance. Nora. I’ve abandoned them.” Sharing the feelings that had gradually been building in his mind felt oddly liberating, and he continued. “They risk their lives every day while I’m hiding here. I feel like I could, and should, be doing more.”

Weidner didn’t immediately respond. Instead, he stood and moved to the other side of the desk, sitting down next to Christiaan. “Your feelings are perfectly understandable. I can’t say I’ve never felt the same.”

“How? You’re the reason so many people make it to safety. Despite the Gestapo’s bounty, you travel across Europe to make sure your network of safe houses remains operational. I don’t know of anyone more involved in the resistance.”

“But I didn’t start out like that. I also fled my home at the start of the war, leaving my friends and family behind. I struggled with the same feelings as you, Christiaan. You worry about those closest to you, and you feel like you’re betraying your comrades in Amsterdam.” Christiaan nodded, and Weidner continued. “And after a while, you convince yourself every bad thing that happens back home is your fault. You tell yourself if only you had still been around, you would be able to stop it. It’s the guilt that consumes you. But only if you let it.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m proud to be a part of your organization, but I’m all the way at the end of the line. By the time these people arrive in Geneva, it’s about getting them on their feet, to show them where they can buy their groceries. At best, I help them find a job.”

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Weidner moved from his chair and sat on the edge of the narrow wooden desk. “I understand what you’re saying. Most people arriving are happy to find a safe place to hide. But you’re different. I noticed it from the moment you arrived. And listening to you just now confirmed what I suspected. You want to do more. You need to.” He looked thoughtful, and Christiaan held his breath. “Willem says you’ve been asking about operations for weeks now. I’m sure that’s why he suggested I meet with you today. And you know the risks. You’ve made the journey across Europe before, you know what it’s like.”

Christiaan felt his throat go dry. “Do you want me to return home?”

“No, I don’t want you to go back.” Weidner raised his hands and shook his head.

Christiaan lowered his head in disappointment. *Then what?*

“I want you to head farther south.”

CHAPTER THREE

Floris woke to the familiar creaking of the stairs. The cell was pitch dark, but he sat up in his bed wide awake. Soft, patient footsteps came his way. Whoever was coming down the stairs had made it into the small hallway.

This is it. They were coming for him. Nora's promise didn't materialize. She hadn't shown up with his clothes. He was going to die in these rags, after all. *Treacherous bitch.* His temples throbbed as a bout of rage built up. Even after he'd caught her at the crèche, he'd still allowed her to save the child she was carrying. And look where it brought him. Now she wouldn't even let him die with dignity.

Floris listened to the footsteps and recognized the gait of Andre. It was then that he realized there was only one person on the other side. Without another thought, he jumped off the bed and crossed to the door. *I might have a chance, after all.* He held his breath as the guard put the key into the lock and turned. *Even if I'm wrong, it doesn't matter. I'm dead either way.*

The door slowly opened, and a small stream of light entered the cell. The marginally fresher air from the hallway crept in, a cool and welcome touch on his cheek. Then he heard the breathing of the man

on the other side of the door, closer than expected. For a second, Floris hesitated, but the grunt of surprise sprung him into action. Without another thought, he burst through the opening. Andre had taken a few steps from the door. Floris felt the blood rush from his face. The hand at Andre's side held a gun. All of Floris' experience as a police officer took over in that moment. Seizing the initiative, he threw himself at the other man, not giving him any time to lift the weapon.

They hit the dusty concrete floor with a dull thud. Andre took the brunt of the impact and looked up at Floris with groggy eyes. The impact had knocked the gun from his hand and it slid a few meters down the hallway. Floris did the only thing he could do. Ignoring the other man's hands, he launched a flurry of punches to his face. His fists connected with Andre's nose, and Floris felt an odd sensation as the guard's face quickly turned into a bloody mess. He felt energized as his punches increased in velocity, then caught himself when Andre's hands fell limply to the sides of his body. He looked at the bloodied face—Andre's eyes had rolled into the back of their sockets. Only the soft, ragged breathing confirmed he was still alive.

Floris stood and picked up the weapon from the floor. Inspecting the gun, he was relieved to find it loaded. The basement was deathly quiet, and he let out a long sigh. He looked at the unconscious man on the ground and wondered whether Andre would've had the guts to shoot him in the basement. He smiled wryly; he would never know. *Time to get out of here.*

He stalked toward the stairs and strengthened his grip on the gun, lifting it to eye level and keeping it aimed at the open door at their top. As he ascended the stairs, the steps creaked, sounding much louder here than in his cell. He grimaced as he forced himself to keep moving. *No sense in slowing down now. They're expecting us upstairs.*

His heart was in his throat, and he forced himself to take deep breaths as he continued climbing. A shadow crossed the faint light in

the hallway above as Floris stood halfway up. He instinctively held his breath, loosely rested his finger on the trigger, and waited.

It didn't take long. The shadow increased in size, and then transformed into a large man in the doorway atop. It was the other guard, Peter. The man was a giant, and there was no way Floris would beat him in a fight. The guard's confident and relaxed expression changed instantly as he looked into the barrel of Floris' gun. His eyes went wide with fear and surprise. He opened his mouth to shout, but the words never had the chance to form.

Floris expertly adjusted his aim and squeezed the trigger twice. The explosion of the gun was deafening in the confined space, and Floris had to control himself to keep from dropping the gun as his ears protested. The sweet scent of gunpowder drifted up his nostrils as a high-pitched ringing overwhelmed all other sounds. He looked up to see Peter was—amazingly—still on his feet, clutching his stomach. His hands were red with blood pouring from two rapidly growing spots. Despite that, the big guard appeared determined to block Floris' only exit. Grunting in pain, Peter reached for the door.

Floris cursed. *He's going to lock me in.* He rushed up the stairs as the guard grabbed the door and, with an immense effort, prepared to slam it shut. As the door swung, Floris knew there was only one way he would make it out of the basement alive. He pulled the trigger twice in quick succession, aiming at the spot where he estimated Peter would be. The sound of the gunshots was as loud as before, but Floris kept squeezing the trigger until the gun clicked empty.

The bullets had torn through the door with ease, the impact at such a short distance leaving large, splintered holes. Through the ringing in his ears Floris tried to catch any sounds coming from the other side. He heard nothing. He pushed the door and managed to open it far enough to squeeze through before encountering resistance. Holding his now useless gun in front of him, he stepped into the hallway. The sight that greeted him turned his stomach.

Sprawled on the floor, head leaning against the door, was Peter. His shirt was soaked in blood, a pool forming on the ground near his

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groin. His eyes were fixed in surprise, and Floris was about to say something when he noticed the bullet wounds in his neck. Floris shook his head. Two of his rapid-fire bullets had found their mark. Peter would no longer pose a problem.

The ringing in his ears subsided, and the silence of the house washed over him. He looked at the gun in his hands. He'd never killed anyone before, and apart from the relief of being freed from his captors, it gave him no pleasure. He stepped over Peter's body and headed for the front door. Through the small window he could make out it was still dark outside. To his relief, the door handle turned and gave way as he swung the door open.

The cool summer night air drifted in, instantly clearing the fog in his head. He was outside for the first time in four months and took a deep breath of fresh air. He quickly shut the door, leaving his former captors behind. Stepping into the street, he heard the gentle sloshing of water in the canal opposite. The water was dark, but the sound calmed him. He crossed the street, and as he moved from the house, he casually tossed the gun into the canal.