

Chapter Two



June 18-June 19, 1942

from Kellinghusen, Schleswig-Holstein to Munich, Germany

Erika Hofer hunched in the rail car disguised as her own grandmother. She must find Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The coal-burning passenger train huffed and puffed from northwest Germany's lowlands past farms and forested hills to Bavaria's highlands and finally its capital, Munich. If God helped her, Dietrich would be there.

The young woman's heart pounded beneath her old-style dress. She had not told Mother her plans to escape lest she be forced to betray her to the *Gestapo*. Father was gone. But before he departed, he had removed two small scraps of paper hidden inside the earpiece tubes of his glasses and unrolled them. "You will both need this now and for the days ahead."

Erika smoothed out her paper. It held numbers and abbreviated words in tiny, cramped writing. When she peered closely it said, *Directions to Uncle Dietrich*. Father had sketched a map on a napkin before wadding it up and burning it. She and Mother committed their rolled paper contents to memory and

did the same, watching the scraps flame and burn to ash. Uncle Dietrich mattered too much to let carelessness jeopardize him.

Aboard the rocking train, Erika pulled up her dress's long sleeve to check her watch. The Munich Express was on time but stopped at so many dairies, it should be called a milk run. Should she have contacted Dietrich before coming? No, but every beat of her heart prayed he would be there. A lost country-bumpkin grandmother could raise suspicion wandering in downtown Munich. His information was cunningly hidden disguised as an embroidered flower on her dress's cuffs.

The locomotive slowed and belched less smoke as it passed more farms. Cows grazed in fenced fields near fog-draped hollows along the Elbe River. It lurched to a halt in a village of picturesque homes and shops where one lone church steeple pierced the sky. A *Gestapo* agent leaned against the railroad station wall with his arms crossed, eyeing every traveler leaving the train.

Erika shuddered. Thank God this wasn't her stop. Passenger tickets were punched on departure. The train had barely resumed speed when a police inspector entered her car.

The man swayed in the aisle, clutching the seats before and behind the young woman sitting a row in front of Erika.

She wore a colorful scarf wound around her head, and her long purple skirt trailed into the aisle. Soft snores drifted back. The young woman couldn't have been more than a teenager. Erika scrutinized her smooth face and gaping mouth. Her head dropped against the red fabric-covered seat.

"*Fräulein?*" The inspector raised his voice. "Documents, *bitte.*" He pushed the young woman's shoulder lightly—and then more forcefully.

Why didn't he move on? Or return to check on the young woman later in the journey? He shook her shoulder again, demanding documents until her eyes startled open. Frightened.

"Asleep or not, *Fräulein*, I need your documents."

"*Ach!*" She sat up and plunged her hand into a voluminous

pocket. She dug into a second and third pocket before extracting folded, wrinkled papers she thrust forward. "H-here, sir."

The inspector took them but shook his head.

"You're mistaken, *Fräulein*. These are wrong. Look again."

Frantic, she searched more pockets and produced a half-eaten sandwich and two coins.

"That's all?" He scowled and tipped his hat lower over his forehead. His terrifying eyes glared down at the girl.

"No, you don't need train money. Just your *kennkarte*—your identity paper." When he pushed her hand away, she shook worse.

"You don't have it?"

"*Nein*." Her lips quivered. "At home."

"You can't travel without it." His face became stone. He reached over her head and pulled the yellow cord strung above the windows. The engine braked and screeched, sending ashes and cinders swirling. The train glided toward the border sign for Schleswig-Holstein. The guard hut came into view, and the iron horse stilled.

The policeman took the young woman's arm. "Come. You must get off here."

She jerked, trying to get away. "No, please. I only travel a little farther, *Herr Inspektor*."

Passengers craned their necks to gawk.

When the policeman gripped her arm again and pulled her to her feet, she grabbed a stained cloth bag next to her but it fell from her fingers.

He snatched, peered inside, and thrust it into her arms with a look of distaste.

"Come along. We don't let vagabonds or criminals ride our train. You will talk to the Order Police. They handle your kind and will find out what you're up to."

"Nothing. I promise."

When she entered the aisle, she was barefoot. Her tears flowed. "Please. I'm going home to my child!" She shoved the

man's chest like a terrified mouse leaps to scratch the face of the cat cornering it.

"You she-devil," he screeched. "You want to be arrested?" His slap left a handprint on her face. She would have fallen except he half-supported half-dragged her to the car's stairs. She stumbled onto the platform and into the hands of the waiting guard.

Erika trembled. As the train's wheels turned, the guard dragged the kicking and flailing young woman inside the hut. Erika pressed her face to the window to see more, but they sped past.

Father in heaven. Help that unfortunate. And help me!

Reentering the aisle, the inspector wiped his face with a large hanky. With that girl's seat empty, Erika was next.

"Terrible." He shook his head. "We have at least one criminal each day. I hope it didn't upset you, *Großmutter*. So foolish. They can't get away with it." He gave a weak smile. "Your Identity Card, please."

"How sad and troubling for you." Erika pitched her voice higher to make it squeak. "You must get tired."

"Exhausted. It makes a man old before his time. Two more years and I retire."

"So young? Still, I understand." She clucked her tongue in sympathy and opened her leather wallet. She removed her *kennkarte* and didn't have to pretend to shake with age as she handed it to him—her hands were trembling sufficiently.

Erika Hofer, born in Kellinghusen, Schleswig-Holstein, July, 1867. She favored her grandmother greatly. Thankfully, it was a typical poor government photo.

"My cousin was born near there," the man said. "She loves the area."

"Yes, it's very beautiful."

"So she says." He returned the card. "Thank you, Frau Hofer. Everything is in order. Enjoy your trip."

As he moved on, Erika released the breath she'd held. She pressed her hand to her stomach, and let her head drop back.

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Her disguise had worked—she'd drawn charcoal streaks on her forehead and covered them with cosmetics to look much older. She'd dusted flour through her hair to whiten it though only a little peaked out from under her flowered *babushka* scarf above the dowdy dress. The empty bags and baskets she carried suggested she was a granny eager to shop in Bavaria's capital.

Dietrich and the brethren would return the card to her grandmother immediately.

Praise You, Jesus, that Großmutter and I share the same name. Thank you that she is a wise believer who loves me and doesn't ask questions.

At dawn, the train chugged into Munich's main station. Stiff from the long ride, Erika had no trouble appearing as tired and bent as a granny should. Stooped over her bags and baskets, she hovered behind a large family descending the railcar steps as if she belonged to them. She sighed as she left the station without incident, despite passing many *Gestapo* and other policemen posted around Old Town.

Remembering Father's instructions, she followed signs to *Marienplatz*, across the wide fitted-stone pavement, admiring imposing buildings and the soaring towers of the famous *Frauenkirche*. Soon she reached *Viktualien* Market, where the tantalizing smells of colorful fruits, sausages, and herring made her mouth water. Food must come later. First, Dietrich.

Two blocks farther, she blinked as she recognized a young man standing outside a bakery. His bicycle basket was filled with fresh loaves of crusty bread. They smelled so good her stomach clenched. He had been a seminary student accompanying Dietrich when they came to celebrate her seventeenth birthday. Was it really three years ago? Germany and the entire world had changed since then.

Erika passed street vendors to track the young man's every

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move. He turned into an alley, parked his bike, and offered his hand with a smile. “Welcome back! I hope you had a good trip. Give me your baskets.”

“How did you—?”

“Never mind.” He gave a quick embrace and whispered in her ear before releasing her. “Lower your bundles and greet me. I’m Fritz. Do you remember?”

“I wasn’t sure of your name, but yes, I’m glad to see you.”

“I love seeing who God brings our way and when. Sometimes no one. Other times, treasure—like you.” He tied her baskets to his bike, and they walked arm in arm.

“You’ve come to see Dietrich, of course.”

“Yes. Is he here?”

“You’re in luck—he is. Have you eaten? Have this bread.” Fritz handed her a small loaf from his basket.

“*Danke*. I’m weak with hunger, and this smells wonderful.” She broke off a piece of crust and ate as they walked. “Mmmm. Delicious.”

Fritz pointed toward a massive building. “He lives in a dormer at the top. He only came home yesterday. It’s good I spotted you.”

“Gracious, it is. I prayed hard!”

“It’s tricky getting up there. His garret space is hidden—only accessible by using folding stairs in the ceiling. Dietrich rarely goes out. We can’t reach him by doorbell, but he expects me at this time on the days he’s in town.”

“Goodness. I’m even more thankful you found me.”

He flashed a smile. “More than you know. He’ll be happy to see you.”

They crossed one last street and faced the magnificent edifice of the central *Stadtsparkasse* Bank.

Erika tilted her head to take in all four floors, both towers and ornamental arches. “Dietrich has impressive taste. How I wish Mother and my grandmother could see this.”

“Ha ha. The Lord has excellent taste, and Dietrich is His

guest. There's no better place to house a priceless man of God than in the city's oldest, richest bank."

"As long as he's safe." Her eyes measured the sprawling expanse. "It looks like a palace."

"It was at one time. An armed security officer guards the entrance."

The tall, burly man in uniform stood at full attention.

Erika quaked. "How do we get past him?"

"A friend down the block runs a cleaning service and will equip us." Fritz pushed his bicycle forward whistling a cheery tune.

Erika stayed quiet but her heart prayed, *Lord, help!*

Minutes later, they approached the uniformed guard without the bicycle dressed as two janitorial workers. Fritz carried two buckets and brooms while Erika balanced mops and a stack of cleaning cloths. Fritz doffed his cap to the guard. "How are you, Heinrich?"

"*Ach*, overworked as usual. If you're here again so soon, you must be overworked also."

"Yes. Always." Fritz shrugged. "But extra work means extra pay. Today my grandmother has come to help."

The man's gaze darted to her face, and he tipped his cap. "Welcome, *Großmutter*. You claim this rascal?"

"*Ja*, if you're pleased with him and he behaves. Otherwise, maybe no."

"Ha. Well, he's a good lad most days. You can be proud." The guard turned and swung the barred door open. "Don't work too hard."

"We won't. Thank you."

They trudged up the stone stairs, darted inside the maintenance room, and after making sure the area was clear, locked the door and lowered the folding stairs to Dietrich's hiding place.

Fritz folded the stairs back into place as soon as they climbed

them and rapped three short knocks on Dietrich's door. "Special delivery," he said, and stepped aside.

It took only seconds for Uncle Dietrich to recognize Erika.

"May God be praised. You're a sight for sore eyes!"

His welcoming arms comforted almost as well as Father's. Tears stung her eyes.

"How wonderful you've come! But seeing you here tells me all is not well. Come in, both of you." He stepped back. His eyes surveyed her from head to toe. "Why are you dressed like your grandmother?"

"Because I need to be her on this trip." She laughed but more tears followed. "Do you not know of Father's death or that Mother was ordered to Berlin?"

"What?" His horror-stricken face gave full answer as he reached out. "Dear girl. That's terrible. Please stop and go slowly. When did this happen?" He handed her his handkerchief. "Start with your dear father. I worried when no word came recently."

"Ja." Teeth chattering and her body shaking, Erika's breath came in short gasps. "When the order came for him to join the *Wehrmacht*, he told them he was a d-doctor, not a s-soldier. He'd never held a gun—didn't know how to fight or want to—but they wouldn't listen. They said placing a doctor with the troops would raise morale."

"And they did that?"

Erika gripped one hand with the other but the tremors didn't stop.

"Father told them he could care for people in local towns and still serve soldiers in military outposts, but they were determined. Two weeks ago, he was killed in combat tending wounded soldiers."

"Oh, Erika, how terrible." He reached for her hands. "Such a tragic waste. If they had been wise and saved his life, he could have given years of excellent medical service. They're desperate because they're losing." He clucked his tongue. "When tyrants

rule, they make stupid decisions. But all their orders and regulations can't birth a new *Reich*—only God can do that.”

Her sobs lessened. “How I wish God's kingdom would come.”

“Yes. Sometimes it seems overdue. And your dear mother? She's gone to them?”

“Yes.” She lowered her eyes. “It still doesn't seem real. Days after Father's death, the War Office ordered her to report to Nazi Headquarters in Berlin or assemble munitions in a factory. That work is brutal, and Mother is not strong. She hoped if she went to Berlin, perhaps *Günther's* father would get her reassigned. He's a brother in faith, but it's hard to trust him these days.”

“I've heard reports, and I'm sorry. We must pray for him. It's hard to resist strong pressure.”

Erika raised her eyes in a fierce glance. “Yet you do!”

“We can't compare. I've had years to deepen my convictions. I have a fiancée but no family to support.”

“But you wouldn't waver.”

“Erika, none of us knows until the time comes.”

“I agree,” Fritz said. “I'm seeing weak men stand strong and strong men weak. It's impossible until we face such moments.”

“You're gaining wisdom and growing old fast, Fritz.” Dietrich clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You'll be getting gray hair soon.”

“I hope not.” Fritz brushed his fingers through his hair, alarm wrinkling his face. “I hope not.”

“Well, perhaps not right away.” Dietrich smiled.

“I understand what you're saying.” Erika managed a watery smile. “Mother's orders said instructions were coming assigning me to Berlin, too, but I came here before those arrived. I didn't even tell Mother my plans, so she'd be innocent of involvement.”

Standing next to Dietrich, Fritz's face grew darker. Empathy shown from his eyes. “I'm so sorry. That's terrible news. I know

how I'd feel if those were my parents. My father died from illness, but the loss is the same."

Dietrich waved them to his small table. "Rest both of you. I only have water and a little cheese, but I share that willingly."

"I have fresh bread to go with it." Fritz's face brightened. He uncovered his fragrant loaves beneath clean dusting cloths and presented them with a flourish.

"*Danke!*" Dietrich laughed. "I thought I smelled something wonderful. My mouth is watering."

Erika raised her gaze. "I-I wanted to work with you in the underground seminary, but since it's closed—help me know what's next."

Dietrich sliced the bread and arranged cheese pieces on a plate. "We're not sure. We're waiting on the Lord to hear next steps, but you know recent reports are not good."

"I do."

Fritz leaned forward. "There's even worse news this morning. Hitler boasts he will crush all opposing him and names you, Dietrich, as someone he will capture soon and hang."

Uncle Dietrich took a deep breath and filled a water pitcher for the table. "Ah, well. He's said that for some time. His noose is tightening, but he can only do what God allows." He studied Erika. "I'm concerned about your mother. How is she coping? How is her mental and spiritual strength?"

"She's crushed but doing the best she can. I've had no word since she's gone to Berlin. I hear there are other believers in that same office. I'm praying they connect."

"I'll join you." When Dietrich glanced at her hand, she covered her naked ring finger.

"Wait. What does your *Günther* say about all this?"

"My *Günther*?" Erika shuddered. "Nothing these days."

"I thought you two were engaged—or had a committed relationship from that summer you both helped host our kids' camps."

"We did." Her shoulders slumped. "I don't understand him

now. He's required to take *Wehrmacht* training in university. You know he loves to succeed. Each promotion makes him eager for more. He's playing a dangerous game but thinks he can benefit from Nazi training without compromising himself."

"That's impossible." Dietrich wiped his brow. "Men like Hitler long to own prize specimens like *Günther*. Can his father help him see how serious it is?"

"He could, except he's not seeing clearly himself. *Günther* Senior troubles me more than his son." Erika twisted her hands. "He was hired part time as a *Wehrmacht* recruiter and agreed because of his low village clerk income, but now he's accepted full time. We were shocked when he served the papers ordering Father to active service and brought us the news of his death."

"I'm sure." Dietrich bowed his head. "Father in heaven, our world is going mad. We must strengthen each other in these terrible times." He paled. "I'm shocked by your news. Now I know why I haven't heard from your father either. His death is a dreadful loss to us." He took Erika's hand. "He was my dear friend and confidant. We won't find his kind again."

"Thank you. He treasured your friendship."

"His death doesn't seem real. If only they'd identified the wrong man and Dr. Erik Hofer would walk in here brimming with life like always."

Her eyes filled. "I'd give anything for that. When he left, he hoped to search for my brother, Klaus. We don't know if he had that chance."

"Klaus is still missing?"

"Yes. There's been no word."

"When I pray for him, I sense he's alive somewhere but in hard circumstances."

She clasped her hands. "I hope you're right. That's what Father said too. But with things in chaos, we can't be sure of anything."

"I'll keep praying for *Günther*, and Klaus, reassignment for

your mother, and the Lord's clear words for you." He tapped his chest. "Tell me what's most inside your heart."

She sighed. "I'd wanted to help with the seminary but also loved working with Father in our clinic and learning. I delayed too long, and they closed it."

"It's good you weren't there when they did. You might be in prison."

"Father agreed. After his death, I thought of running our clinic alone, but I haven't earned my full license, so the government won't allow me. I know this, though." She tossed her head. "I won't do anything to help the *Führer* in Berlin or anywhere else. I'll die first."

"Erika, that's the point." Dietrich laughed softly. "I see the fire in your eyes. Many of us may die, but I don't believe that's your destiny. We must get you out of Munich."

"Out? Why?" She lifted a foot and smacked it down so hard, it sounded like a gun firing.

"Shhh," Fritz cautioned. "No noise."

"I'm sorry." She lowered her voice. "I can teach Bible classes and encourage small groups. Don't tell me it's dangerous. Father would want me to help. I will stand to help show the world that German believers oppose Hitler's evil."

Dietrich's eyes blazed. "While that's true, we each must hear our instructions from the Lord. Here in Munich, our days are numbered. Stay a day or two for rest and fellowship but not longer. Before Hitler only wished to close us down. Now he will exterminate all who disagree with him. There's no point in you being sacrificed. You can accomplish wonderful things beyond Germany's borders."

She reared back. "But this is my country and people. Mother is here."

"For now. The truth is, she's not safe. Neither are you. We must find a safe way for you to leave."

Erika scrunched her eyelids shut. "It's impossible to leave Germany these days. And where would I go?"

“The Lord will show us. And yes, it’s impossible under most circumstances, but there are ways.”

She rose from the table to stand full height. “Do you think I’m afraid? Is that it? I’m a Hofer. I’m more afraid of not obeying our Lord.”

“Well said. I expect no less. Keep that determination. You will need it in coming days.” Dietrich also stood. His gaze did not waver.

Her resistance faded. “Forgive me. My whole purpose has been to find you. Now that I have, you won’t let me stay.”

“But for good reason. You understand what I’m saying, don’t you?”

Fritz tiptoed to the window and peered out the curtain.

Erika joined him. “Those pedestrians milling around the paved courtyard are like ants on an ant hill. They probably think their lives have purpose and direction, and yet—” She dropped her hand. “How strange that life can appear to continue on the same as before, when these days nothing is the same at all.

“You’re right. But I fear far worse days are coming.” Dietrich motioned to the table. “*Bitte*.”

Fritz sighed. “Frankly, everything is in crisis. We must clothe ourselves in God’s spirit, but staying peaceful is hard.” His eyes questioned her. “When you last heard from Klaus, did he give any clues where he was stationed?”

“Nothing.” Her shoulders sagged. “Only rumors and fears. It nearly killed our parents. Now that I’m safely here, I wish I could send Mother word so she does not fret about me too.”

Dietrich flinched. “That’s risky. There would be a postmark, and—”

“I’m sorry. I mean by our brothers and in code. Before the war, our family agreed on code words for sharing information without others suspecting—though we hoped we’d never need to use it.”

“You were smart.” Dietrich’s brow furrowed. “I wish all families had emergency plans.”

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“Father knew the importance.” She jumped up again, flinging her arms around him. “Uncle Dietrich! You’re a guiding star to our family and all Christians here. You must save yourself and not let them destroy you!”

“Erika, please—”

“No, listen. Let me stay. I’ll fight harder with Father gone. Let me take his place. Even if our bodies fall, we must do everything to stop Hitler from making Germany a godless place.”

“I hear you, but martyrdom is not your calling.” His pained look melted her. “I believe our Lord wants you to live His plans for you to bring your earthly and heavenly fathers credit.”

Her eyes misted. “Is there such a place on this planet?”

“Possibly. Your Father regretted not immigrating to the United States years ago when warning signs first appeared and others in your family left.”

She twisted her handkerchief in her fingers. “We had that same conversation. He said one relative in particular had accomplished good things for America. Johann Hofer should be around Father’s age, and Father believed he might be on America’s West Coast.” She rubbed stiffness from her neck. “I wish I had listened and paid better attention. But how could I find him among so many strangers there? And even if my heart could survive it, how could I leave Germany?”

His eyebrows quirked. “Staying here is too dangerous. Hitler and his henchmen are setting many traps. Any day now, one may snap shut on me. It’s a miracle we’ve stayed free this long. My love for your parents is the reason I cannot let you stay.”

“Cannot?” She gave a painful cry.

“Yes. If you did not hear me before, hear me now. Please consider.” Dietrich raised his palm and counted points on his fingers. “You are well-qualified. We need witnesses to show the world that Christians here oppose Hitler and his unspeakable evil. True light must increase until it swallows this darkness.”

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“But surely the world already knows.” She glanced up hopefully. “This madness must end soon, don’t you think?”

He sighed. “Not soon enough.” He draped an arm around Fritz’s shoulder. “Can you take Erika to your mother tonight and bring her again tomorrow morning to finalize travel?”

Erika stared. *He’s serious. This plan is going forward.*

“Yes,” Fritz answered. “Mother will like that.”

“Good. As much as I’m happy to see you, it’s wise to go before dark. Prepare your clothing please, Erika.” He pointed to one muddy spot on her dress skirt. “Wrinkle your dress a little more, so it looks like you’ve been working. Slosh sudsy water in your buckets and add dirt from this houseplant in case anyone stops you.” He donated some dirt from a pot.

“I can do that.” She plunged her hands in the bucket and warmed to her task.

Fritz did the same. “Yes, this will work fine. Mother and I know how to play the role. May God also guard you, Dietrich.” Fritz rested a hand on his mentor’s shoulder. “You know I’m prepared to stay and fight too.”

“I do. We’ll pray to discern what God has for each one of us.”

After Fritz and Erika prepared their clothing, they descended the folding stairs, unlocked the maintenance room door, and after making sure no one was nearby, hauled their cleaning paraphernalia down all four flights of stairs. They fit in well and drew no attention.

Erika followed Fritz across the stone pavement to exchange the cleaning items for his bicycle and her baskets and luggage. Then they hurried to Fritz’s mother’s home.

Lord, You’re arranging my steps differently than I expected. After only these few hours in Munich, my life is upside down. If You’re truly closing this door but opening another, please make me sure. And help me survive it.