

CHAPTER I

APRIL 2015

Jordana counted the rings while she waited for Hedy Bohm to answer the phone.

“Hello.” A dignified voice finally answered.

Jordana smiled as she always did when she heard the slightly accented voice of the elderly survivor. She could picture Hedy—her short gray hair perfectly in place, a colorful shawl draped elegantly over her shoulders, her eyes folding at the corners like a fan when she smiled.

“Hi, Hedy. It’s Jordana. How are you?”

“Jordana!” Hedy replied with warmth and enthusiasm. “It’s wonderful to hear from you!” Jordana could almost hear the smile in Hedy’s voice.

Jordana thought back to how she had met this woman

in Auschwitz during the March of the Living trip three years earlier. After Jordana's return to Canada, she had been determined to do more to honor the Holocaust and those who had suffered through it. Her goal was to keep the memory of those who perished alive for future generations. That was why she had arranged for Hedy to speak to students and faculty at the University of Guelph, where Jordana was now attending university. Hedy was a witness to this history who could personally connect with young people.

"How is school?" Hedy asked.

"It's fine. I'm busy. But I'm really excited that you're going to be speaking on campus." Jordana had just started her first year of studies at the university. Her major was psychology, and her dream was to work with troubled children, at least that's what the plan had been. Everything was being sidelined these days by her involvement in Holocaust activities.

"I'm happy I can make it," Hedy continued.

"I know we're going to have a huge turnout, maybe the biggest we've ever had." Jordana hoped that was true. She wanted the whole campus to hear what she already knew: how this remarkable woman had survived in the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp. She wanted more young people to hear Hedy's story and see her quiet strength and dignity, the qualities that she admired so much in this woman.

They discussed the final details of Hedy's visit to Guelph. As the conversation was winding down, Jordana

asked, “What else is going on in your life? How’s Vicky?” Jordana always asked about Hedy’s daughter.

“Everyone is fine. Oh, you might be interested to know something. I am going to be taking a trip.”

“Going somewhere warm?” Jordana asked. “You deserve that.”

“No, not that kind of a trip. I’m going to Germany.”

Jordana was instantly curious. Why would Hedy want to go to Germany? It was the scene of the crime, to put it mildly. “Really? I would think that you would never want to set foot in that country.”

“I never thought I would. It’s a place that is filled with dreadful memories for me. And I never wanted to expose myself to those memories again. But an opportunity has come up and it’s something that I think I must do. Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Oskar Groening?”

The name was vaguely familiar. Jordana had read something—perhaps in the newspaper—about him.

“I call him a man,” Hedy continued. “But I’m not sure he qualifies for the title. He was once known as the Book-keeper of Auschwitz.”

Hedy began to fill Jordana in on Groening’s background. As a young man, he had volunteered for the SS, the most powerful Nazi organization in the Third Reich, charged with the responsibility for implementing the Final Solution, Hitler’s plan to rid the world of all Jews. Groening had been assigned to work in Auschwitz in the

administrative department. He also worked on the ramp, the platform where trains arrived, carrying Jewish prisoners. His job there was to collect the money and valuables from the luggage of those who had arrived, most of whom were sent immediately to the gas chambers. The money and items that Groening collected would be sent to Berlin to fortify the Nazi war effort. Once Groening had collected the valuables, he and others cleared the ramp of the remaining luggage, thereby ensuring that the next trainload of Jewish prisoners would not see the abandoned belongings of those who had gone before them.

“When we arrived, we never suspected anything was wrong, because he had cleared away the evidence,” Hedy continued. “It was all part of the plan to make sure we were unsuspecting victims.”

Jordana shuddered. It was all so cruel—and so well thought out!

Hedy continued, “He is probably one of the last Nazi war criminals who will ever be brought to trial. He is ninety-four, and, from what I understand, he is quite ill and frail. A group of survivors from Toronto and other cities around the world have been asked to go to his trial and give our testimonies. We will tell our stories about what happened to us when we arrived in Auschwitz during the time that he was stationed there.”

“Who else is going?” Jordana asked.

“Vicky is coming with me,” Hedy replied. “The organizers think we may need some moral support from family members when we give our testimonies. But there will be other survivors as well: Bill Glied and Max Eisen from Toronto, and many from other places.”

Jordana knew both of the men. Bill was one of the survivors who had accompanied her March of the Living group. Max had not been on Jordana’s trip, but she had heard him speak at another Holocaust event in Toronto.

“Do you actually remember seeing Groening in Auschwitz?”

“It was the last thing on our minds to try to remember faces. Besides, I wouldn’t recognize him seventy years later. We have been asked to be at the trial to verify the truth about what went on in that place. And the world will be watching to see if Groening can be held accountable after so many years.”

Hedy told Jordana that Groening had spoken in a British BBC interview some years earlier, saying that the world must not deny that the Holocaust happened—that he knew what went on and had seen it all.

“He said that?” Jordana asked. “I mean, he actually spoke out against the deniers?” Jordana knew there were still people in the world who refused to acknowledge that millions of Jews had been killed in the most horrible of ways during that time. These deniers were a dangerous group, comprised of racists and haters.

“Yes,” Hedy replied. “Apparently his family has actually turned against him for speaking up. His children won’t speak to him.”

“How do you feel about that? I mean, does it make a difference that he’s supporting the fact that the Holocaust happened, and yet he’s the one being brought to trial?”

There was a pause on the line before Hedy replied. “I feel badly that his family has abandoned him, especially now when he is doing the right thing. But putting him on trial is also right. The German justice system has neglected the crimes of so many Nazi war criminals. Justice should have been done to this man and others fifty years ago or more. There is no statute of limitations on the crimes that were committed in Auschwitz. And he was part of that.”

The conversation with Hedy stayed with Jordana. She went home that evening and decided to watch the trial of Adolf Eichmann on YouTube. She wasn’t sure what compelled her to do this, except that she knew Eichmann was another notorious Nazi. During the war, he had headed the section for Jewish affairs for the Gestapo, the secret police force of Nazi Germany. His job had been to coordinate the deportation of Jews from across Europe to the death camps. He kept the trains full and moving. At the end of the war, he managed to escape Europe and fled to Argentina. It wasn’t until 1960 that he was found and arrested and sent to Jerusalem to stand trial. For his role in planning and coordinating the death of millions, he was found guilty and hanged.

Jordana wanted to see for herself what this evil man looked and sounded like at his trial. She gasped out loud as she watched on her computer screen. She was mesmerized. It was real life, but it played out like something you would see in a movie. She couldn't believe her ears when the prosecutor asked Eichmann, "Would you do it again?" and he replied, "I would." He was a monster, but he had been real.

By the time she finished watching, Jordana's head was spinning. One thought was beginning to take form in her mind. She wanted to go to the trial of Oskar Groening in Germany. She wanted to be there with Hedy and the others, and to observe the trial of a man who had contributed to so much death. If she was really committed to working for justice in the world, then this trial was a perfect opportunity for her to observe justice in the making. There was so much she believed she could learn from being in the German courtroom. How many other chances would there be to experience a history-making trial and to confront a Nazi perpetrator face to face? It would be a unique opportunity for someone of her generation. She would be a witness to history in the making.

The very next day, Jordana called Hedy back. "Hedy, this may sound crazy to you," Jordana said. "I want to go to Germany with you."