

PART 1

THE ONCOMING STORM

All the great things are simple,
and many can be expressed in
A single word: Freedom, justice,
Honour, duty, mercy, hope.

Winston Churchill

CHAPTER 11

June 3, 1944 – Evening. R.A.F. Airfield, Bardney, Lincolnshire, England.

Flight Lieutenant Steven Kane

The mess hall party was winding down as Flight Lieutenant Steven Kane stepped from the warmth of the mess into the cool air that smelled of wet grass. He cupped his whisky in one hand, the other holding a half-smoked cigarette.

The drizzle had settled into a fine, persistent veil that glistened on lamps along the dispersal track. Beyond the yellow wash of light, the airfield opened like a flat expanse, pooling with reflections. Tyre-marks shone like black ropes spooling across the tarmac. Somewhere a windsock hung limp, then twitched with a whisper of breeze.

From the open mess windows behind him, the last bars of a dance tune faded to be replaced by the soft clink of glasses and a laugh cut short. Then the next song blared out, rattling the windows.

Ahead on the tarmac, the silhouettes of Lancasters rested, skulking like vultures with their wings spread in preparation for flight, moonlight glinting off the cockpit Perspex. At the beginning of the war it had been a giddy thrill for Kane to climb into the cockpit and take the bomber up into the blue, feeling that thrumming power beneath him. These days that thrill had become a clenching dread that gripped him each time the Lancaster's wheels left the ground.

With their final mission only days away, a familiar heaviness settled in his gut. Hopefully, if all went well with the invasion, the need for bomber pilots might not be as crucial any longer. He felt relieved to have reached this point. Not just for himself, but also for his men. He had brought

them home after each mission when so many of their friends had taken off from this airfield never to return. He wasn't so conceited to believe that it had been his skill as a pilot that had kept them all safe. The hand of fate had played its part, like the random spin of a roulette wheel.

He was already thinking about what he might do after the war was over. Of course, he'd marry Enid. Those plans were already underway, left in his fiancé's capable hands. He could see her now in his mind's eye, standing on a sun-lit doorstep looking out onto a small, stubborn garden with roses that never quite did as they were told; cricket whites airing on a washing line that snapped softly in the wind. He could almost hear the click of a child's wooden bat, the short proud cheer that followed. Enid sitting on the grass with their daughter threading buttercup chains while freshly baked cakes cooled on the windowsill. The image held steady for a heartbeat and then blurred. He took another pull of his cigarette and made himself look at the aircraft again, at the stencilled letters and the nose art; a blonde-haired starlet called *Betty*.

Bootsteps crunched on the gravel and Flight Engineer Jimmy Briggs materialised out of the night. Briggsy, as he was affectionately known, was a tall youth from Birmingham, just turned twenty-two. He was a good-looking boy and knew it, always attending dances with a different girl on his arm. He noticed the plaintive smile on Kane's face and said, "Penny for your thoughts, Skip."

"Not sure they're worth that much," Kane said, tipping the glass to get the last warmth from it. "Just thinking about afterwards, you know."

"After the mission?"

"After the war," Kane said. Only now, after five years, had he dared say those words aloud.

"What will you do, Briggsy?"

Briggsy shrugged. "Dunno, Skip. Never thought much about it. Guess I'll go work with my old man in the foundry. What about you?"

"Marry Enid. Maybe work for one of those fancy airlines and play cricket on Sundays."

"Football for me," Briggsy said. "Birmingham City."

Kenny "Ginger" Moore, the navigator, stepped up beside the duo. He was holding a bottle of single malt whisky in one hand and an empty glass in the other. He was medium height and sported a head of thick red hair and a moustache on which he lavished more time and care in its grooming than he did with almost anything else. The colour of his mane informed his nickname. He had just celebrated his twenty fourth birthday and already had a wife and a child.

"Did I hear you mention that bunch of halfwits, Birmingham City, Briggsy?" Ginger scoffed. "Bolton Wanderers more like. Now that's a football team."

"Get away with yer," Briggsy countered. "We'd beat you blindfold."

"It looks as if you play wearing blindfolds already," Ginger said, laughing.

"Hey, Ginger, I heard they changed the name of your team to match their weekly performance," Briggsy said. "Bolton Wanderers Nil."

Ginger scowled at his friend.

"We were just discussing what we're going to do after the war," Briggsy said.

"I intend to grow old, fat, and pompous," Ginger said. "I shall complain about the politicians and moan bitterly about the cost of a pint of beer. I shall get nagged by the wife for leaving my dirty boots in the kitchen and I will watch football every Saturday and get drunk when they win, and even drunker when they lose."

"Already half-way there then," Briggsy said.

“Football is the perfect game for you unsophisticated grunts,” Kane said, screwing up his face in mock disgust. “Blindly chasing after a ball. No skill, no tactics. Now cricket, that’s a real gentleman’s sport. The crack of leather on willow. The delicate strategies of the game. It’s like chess on a grass pitch.”

“I’d rather watch paint dry,” Ginger said, refilling his own glass from the bottle.

“At least we’re agreed on that, Ginger,” Briggsy said, toasting his friend.

“What’s the scuttlebutt on the invasion, Skip?” Ginger asked, lowering his voice as if the night might be listening.

“Enid told me the hospital has taken on extra hands,” Kane said. “Supplies are being moved south. Convoys of lorries on the roads at two in the morning. Feels like the whole country’s holding its breath.” He finished the whisky in his own glass and held it out to his navigator to refill. Behind them the music finally fell silent in the mess hall.

“Has the party finished, Ginger?” Kane asked.

“It has in the mess hall,” Ginger said. He held up the half-empty bottle of whisky. “It’s just moved out here.”

Briggsy finished his whisky and held his empty glass up to the sky.

“Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow...”

“Don’t you dare say it, Briggsy!” Ginger warned, refilling the flight engineer’s glass.

Briggsy made a zipping motion across his own mouth.

“You ever think,” Ginger said, more softly, “about the ones who took off and didn’t...” He left the sentence unfinished. “It always looks as if there are fewer tyre tracks on the runway after each mission.”

Kane looked across at the Lancasters. "I think about it every time I see Betty," he said. "And I think whoever's listening that we've still got our rubber on that tarmac."

"Amen."

"Bedtime, I think, chaps," Kane said.

"Night's still young, Skip," Briggsy said. "You married men just can't take the pace."

"I'm not married yet," Kane protested.

"As good as," Briggsy said. "Gimme the bottle, Ginger. It'd be a waste leaving all that whisky undrunk."

The navigator handed the bottle to Briggsy who strode off back to the mess hall.

Ginger's gaze drifted past Kane into the dark where the runway ran out. "Weather's closing in a touch, Skip," he murmured, more to himself.

"Let's hope it stays that way," Kane said. "Don't want a clear night when we go up."

"I'm turning in, Skip," Ginger said, and turned to leave.

Kane paused briefly, looking around the airfield. This had been his home for the last three years. He had brought Enid here to a squadron dance for their first date. The place had shaped the man he was, and part of him would miss it when it was all over. He dropped the cigarette stub on the ground and crushed it under his foot. He turned to the nearest bomber with an old habit of courtesy.

"Goodnight, Betty. Sleep tight, girl," he said, lifting the glass in a small salute. He finished the whisky and turned back towards the mess hall.