

# **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 12

June 4, 1944 – Early morning. Stuttgart, Germany.

Maximillian Beck

Maximillian Beck sat at his desk, sleep abandoned long ago. Outside, wind drove rain into the house, branches scraping the window with a persistence that felt deliberate, almost accusatory. It was after one and the house lay still.

Exhausted by the growing child inside her, Hannah had gone to bed hours earlier. He had watched her climb the stairs with one hand resting instinctively on her stomach, and the sight had filled him with something close to panic.

For Beck, sleep was a luxury he couldn't allow himself. Tuesday was an important day, probably the most important day of their lives, and he had so much to organise, so many things to prepare before their departure.

He had to be careful about his arrangements. Everything needed to be done behind the scenes. Movements had to look ordinary so as not to attract any unwanted attention. He had learned the danger of one word out of place, an altered routine. One mistake would be enough to endanger their plans.

On the surface of the desk, in the pool of yellow light from the solitary lamp, lay the leases for his house and factory. Next to these documents were all the pictures and sheets of typed pages that made up the evidence against Oberst Kriek.

By tomorrow evening, the life he and Hannah had built here would be dismantled. The house and the factory. Everything reduced to currency, then reduced again into forms small enough to transport safely. Gold and diamonds. Items that could be concealed to elude a search.

When the day of the meeting arrived he would be ready, and then he and Hannah would soon be on their way. Their stay in Switzerland would be brief. America loomed beyond it like a fantasy.

Beck leaned back and let his gaze wander the study. The old furniture, worn smooth by years of use. The many photographs lining the walls spoke of moments from quieter, happier days, before uniforms filled the streets and loyalty became a public performance. Five years in this house. Leaving brought a dull ache, but beneath it ran a current of something sharper. A strange exhilaration about this next chapter of their lives, a new adventure.

Like any fantasy, he pictured the future too easily. He could see a child in a small garden surrounded by a white picket fence beneath a clear, bright sky. A boy who played baseball instead of saluting and drills. As an adult, he might become a doctor or a lawyer or a businessman like Beck. And later, there could be other children and then grandchildren. The little daydream steadied him, offering a thread of hope.

Then it shattered as the image of the Jewish girl came back to him uninvited. He could picture her in the bright white dress with yellow flowers, a pigtail tied with a pretty blue bow, standing rigidly in the park clutching onto her doll as she listened fretfully to the panic in her father's voice as he begged and pleaded with Beck. He recalled the silent tears of the girl's mother as this incomprehensible scenario played out before her.

The man never returned to work. Nor did several others. When Beck made discrete enquiries, he was told they had been relocated. The word had been delivered gently, as if it had been a kindness and not the brutal deed Beck knew it to be. The industrialist had nodded. He had returned to his office and continued his day.

He told himself he had no choice that intervention would have endangered Hannah. Compliance was invisibility; silence was survival. Yet the knowledge remained, corrosive and persistent. He had accepted it, but had refrained from telling Hannah. He imagined her listening without interruption, her disappointment masked. She would not judge him. That was the cruelty of it. She would simply know that he had chosen it.

And then his pleasant little reverie twisted in on itself and now became the chilling image of Hannah and his own child being herded forward beneath a sky thick with smoke. Concrete walls and iron doors. The screams as they closed. Beck gripped the edge of the desk, breath catching, and forced the image away with effort that left him trembling. He hated himself for his weakness.

He went to his drinks cabinet and poured himself a generous measure of cognac and drank it in one gulp, feeling the fire burn his throat, steadying him. A second glass followed him back to the desk, where he sorted papers with meticulous care, slipping them into various labelled folders. Order had always been his refuge.

He felt a growing trepidation about the meeting with Kriek and hoped the Oberst felt equally apprehensive knowing Beck held the material that would put his life, his future in jeopardy. Power had shifted between them, if only briefly.

He opened the desk drawer and took out a pistol. Standard issue. Familiar and heavy. He turned it once in his hand, noting the balance. He would carry this one to the meeting. It was a

precaution. He told himself he would not use it —could not use it. It seemed like an obscene contradiction when he considered the fact that he had built such weapons his entire adult life, yet had never fired one. After a moment, he returned it to the drawer and locked it away.

He finished the cognac, switched off the lamp, and stood in the darkness feeling the house settle around him, a living thing he was preparing to abandon. Upstairs, Hannah slept, oblivious to the fears and doubts he felt. He went to bed knowing that sleep would be elusive, wondering if the Jewish girl would inhabit his dreams again.