

# 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 13

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

Anna Schmidt

Anna Schmidt woke with a sharp intake of breath, dragged abruptly from a dream whose weight lingered even as its details dissolved. For a moment she lay frozen, heart pounding, unsure whether the unease belonged to the residue of sleep or the world beyond it. The clock on the bedside table said 3 a.m. and she lay for a moment listening to the low murmur of the wind rattling the window in its frame, the rain's insistent tapping, like fingertips on the glass. Beside her Josef was still, lying on his side facing away from her, the bedsheets lifting and falling with a gentle rhythm. She held her breath, listening for that familiar, brittle sound she understood. A desperate cry in the dark. Little Edith's voice seeking comfort and solace. But the house remained quiet. No bombers tonight. No sirens. The silence itself felt heavy.

Carefully, Anna slipped from the bed. The floorboards were cold beneath her feet as she pulled on her robe. Despite the darkness, she negotiated the narrow landing to her daughter's bedroom with practiced ease.

The children's room lay in shadow. Edith slept curled tightly in her cot, her small body folded inward. Her thumb was jammed into her mouth, the blanket kicked aside. Anna felt the familiar fluttering in her stomach as she watched her daughter sleep, the sudden, overwhelming rush of love so fierce it bordered on elation. That something so small could command such utter devotion frightened her.

She leaned over, drawing the blanket back into place. For a moment, she rested her hand

on Edith's chest, feeling the gentle breaths, the soft insistence of life. The heartbeat beneath her palm felt so fragile.

Karl slept on the other side of the room, sprawled on his back, mouth slightly open. His eyelids fluttered in the grip of his dream, his fingers twitching as though grasping something just beyond reach. Anna smiled faintly. He would be dreaming of his new bicycle. A boy's uncomplicated joy in a complicated world. She crossed the room and closed the small window, sealing out the wind and rain, then stood in the doorway, committing the sight of them to memory.

And then the other memory she had been holding at bay surged forward and muscled aside this little moment of tender affection. The Jewish girl appeared in her mind without warning. Her dress, once white and patterned with flowers, was smeared with dirt and darkened by rain. Her long blonde hair hung in tangled ropes, streaked with mud. A livid bruise bloomed across her cheek, purple and yellow against pale skin. Anna recoiled physically, her stomach clenching as she remembered the doll crushed against the child's chest, small fingers white with fear.

The mother's face followed, blood streaming from a gash where a soldier's rifle butt had struck her. The child had screamed as they were dragged away, boots splashing through puddles, mother and child stumbling to keep up. Everyone knew where they were headed, what that meant, even if no one said it aloud. Anna tried to banish the thoughts, but they swirled relentlessly.

Her mind conjured up images of the Jewish mother standing in a room like this, watching her own child sleep, feeling that same unbearable love grow in her chest. In her mind's eye,

Anna saw a vision of this pretty little girl grown to womanhood, as a mother with a husband and a child of her own, as one day her own daughter Edith would. A future now cruelly denied her. All those hopes and dreams had been snatched away by the soldiers, and Anna had been partially responsible for that dark fate. The truth pressed down on her until she felt she might suffocate beneath it. For a moment she let it wash through her, unfiltered.

In a world consumed by death, this small house, their island of serenity, was a blessing. But for how long? If the invasion came as she knew it must, would enemy uniforms fill her street? Would she find herself in the place of the Jewish woman, watching as soldiers tore her children from their beds? The image was so vivid it stole her breath. A sob clawed its way up her throat before she could stop it. She clamped a hand over her mouth, tears spilling hot and uncontrollable down her cheeks.

She told herself there had been nothing she could do. That helping the girl and her mother would have doomed them all. If the soldiers had found Jews under her roof, Edith and Karl would have vanished just as easily. The logic was inescapable. She clung to it because the alternative was unbearable.

The simple fact, she reminded herself, was that they were Jews. Enemies of the Fatherland, enemies of the Führer, and they deserved their fate. This was the language of conformity, the language that allowed her to breathe again. Those in power knew what they were doing. It was not her place to question it. Loyalty demanded obedience, even when obedience required silence. Even when it demanded unspeakable cruelty.

Anna wiped her face, straightened her robe, and took one last look at her children. She turned away before the guilt could surge again and returned to her bed, sliding back into the

space beside Josef, feeling his warmth comfort her, reassure her.

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