

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 14

June 4, 1944 – Early morning. Côte d'Or, Normandy, France.

Hauptmann Conrad Mundt

Conrad Mundt lurched up in bed in frustration. For a moment he sat motionless, listening. The storm that had raged through the night had finally spent itself, leaving only a damp, restless silence in its wake. Rain still clung to the window in beads tracing lines down the glass like pearls. Intermittently, a mournful wind brushed against the house, sighing through the eaves.

A blade of moonlight sliced through the gap in the curtains, painting a silver slash on the opposite wall. A full night of restful sleep was always a luxury for a soldier on the battlefield, but this peaceful little room, borrowed from a French farmer conscripted to shelter German officers, was far from the frontline, far from the pounding guns. He tried to convince himself that the weather had kept him awake but it was a different tempest that had disturbed his sleep, a storm within his soul, gathering strength with each passing night.

He switched on the small bedside lamp. Its weak jaundiced glow pushed back only the nearest shadows, leaving the corners of the room heavy and unresolved. His watch read 4 a.m. Too early to rise. Too late to hope for rest.

He pressed his palms into his eyes, trying to scrub away the after-images already crowding his mind. He liked to think that his disturbed sleep was because of his new posting, the unfamiliarity of his surroundings and the change in his daily routine, but deep down he knew his lack of sleep had begun the night after he had captured the Jewish family.

His nightmares had fashioned a new tormentor to haunt his thoughts. He saw them as clearly now as the night he'd captured them. The mother's face, bloodied from the rifle blow. The father's shaking hands. The child, her eyes wide with terrified disbelief, her small, fragile body trembling so violently he'd wondered how she remained standing. Mundt still felt the girl's desperate fingers clawing at his sleeve as he dragged her away.

He wondered what became of them. He knew about the camps, the killings. He knew enough to understand the shape of what awaited those he had handed over. But he clung to the justification drilled into him since his youth. He was a soldier. He obeyed orders. He killed when ordered to kill. The enemies of the Fatherland were many, and he had never doubted the righteousness of Germany's mission. He trusted the Führer, trusted the vision of a purified nation. Or was that just denial?

He had started to sense something breaking. A gradual fracturing of his soul. How could that small girl, barely old enough to hold a pencil properly, pose any threat worthy of extermination? What future crime could she commit that justified such terror? He imagined his own younger sister in her place, her dark hair tangled with rain, her mouth open in a scream. His throat constricted at the image and he swallowed past it.

He rubbed at the throbbing scar on his thigh. Yet even as he touched it, he knew the real wound lay elsewhere, deeper than flesh. He swung his legs out of bed, wincing as his leg protested. He sat on the edge, massaging the pale, puckered flesh, trying to put some heat into the damaged limb. If only he could do the same for his troubled conscience. He stood and strolled haltingly around the room, the limp fading slightly as his muscles awakened. The floorboards creaked under his bare feet as he walked to the window and pulled the curtain to one side. The

moon was above the house, almost harsh in its brightness, washing the fields in a ghostly pallor. The countryside lay deceptively peaceful, far from the artillery thunder he had grown accustomed to.

His reflection in the window startled him. He looked older than he realised, lines etched by fatigue. He exhaled slowly, releasing a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. He knew he wasn't going to get any more sleep this night. He crossed to the washbasin in the corner and splashed cold water onto his face. The shock sharpened his senses, made him feel more present. He dressed with slow, deliberate movements, each piece of his uniform a familiar weight; the tunic, the belt, the insignia. The uniform took away the uncertainty, the doubt, and made him feel like the man he had been trained to be, clear-minded, obedient, decisive.

He left the house quietly. Outside, the cobbled street glistened with rain, reflecting the moonlight in splintered pieces. The air smelled of sodden grass, tinged again with the faint, saltiness of the sea. He walked slowly at first, the limp more pronounced in the cool morning air, but as he continued, the stiffness eased.

The silhouette of the church spire stood imposing against the trees. Mundt lifted his face to the wind. The night was quiet, deceptively so. He headed toward the beach, grateful at least to have a purpose to direct his thoughts. Routine offered stability, an anchor against the guilt that gnawed steadily at him. Beyond this village stretched the coastline, the bunkers he commanded, the men who waited restlessly for the invasion that rumours insisted was imminent. Thankfully, the sea had been a churning monster in recent days, waves smashing against the shoreline, mirroring his own dark mood.