

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 4

May 31, 1944 – Afternoon. Stuttgart, Germany.

Maximillian Beck

It was the first day that the sun had made an appearance during a portentous week of dark clouds and rain. Maximillian Beck liked to think of it as an omen, a sign of the future after his confrontation with Oberst Kriek the previous night. He had decided to take his wife for a nice walk around the park, *their park*, their special idyll. It was the place they had met six years before on a similar summer's day, before the madness had broken the world.

The city, battered and bruised, seemed to breathe for a moment, as if the sun itself was offering a fragile promise of hope. The park was the only part of Stuttgart untouched by the bombs. There were no valuable strategic targets here, no munitions factories, no installations, no troop concentrations: just trees, flowers and a small lake with swans. Nobody was making war on wildlife, nature was the innocent bystander, unfortunate collateral damage.

Beck was grateful that there still remained one place they could come to and escape the conflict for an afternoon, pretend it was a different time. He struggled with the incongruity between the devastated suburbs and this small, colourful, unspoiled paradise. It was like a single red rose emerging out of an ugly, ragged fissure on a slab of granite. Perhaps that was what the world would become, left to the Nazis; rare and delicate buds of freedom desperately trying to reach up out of a bleak uncompromising wasteland. The thought made him shiver and galvanised the decision to get away from here, from Germany.

It would be difficult to leave, he knew that. He had lived here his whole life. His grandparents had been Romanian Jews. In the face of Russian expansion, they had come to Stuttgart as part of the 1883 Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria. Beck's mother, Alice Zilberman, had married a local man, Gerhardt Beck. Little Max had been born just as the First World War had broken out. Gerhardt Beck, a farmer, had been spared service, just as Max, in his capacity as owner of a munitions factory, had been excused the second incarnation of the brutal global conflict. His father, having seen the writing on the wall, had ensured that the name Zilberman and all trace of his wife's Jewish heritage had passed into history with the death of Beck's grandparents.

Things had been bad in Germany after the end of the first war, but Beck's family had survived intact. He had come to this very park as a child with his own parents. They would stand by the lake throwing bread to the birds as lovers strolled arm in arm beneath flowery parasols. Children would play games of chase on the grassy slopes below the bandstand, where a small quintet often played oompah music through shiny brass instruments, dressed in lederhosen. The bandstand was still here, but silent now.

Beck stared up at the sun through the lace of his wife's parasol. Ahead were families picnicking. Soldiers lay on the grass with girlfriends or wives, drinking wine and laughing. Further on, he recognised some of the soldiers who had attended his party, their faces sombre with hangover, or the prospect of their immediate future on the Russian front. Here, in this small piece of paradise, the juxtaposition of peace and war was stark. He also saw the scowling Hauptmann from the previous evening. Neither man acknowledged the other as they passed.

Beck led his wife down to the lake. It was a walk of about a kilometre around its perimeter, edged with bushes and brightly coloured flower beds. On one side, close to the water's edge, was

an old lodge where walkers could buy refreshments or rent a boat to take out onto the water. In the centre of the lake was a tiny islet where assorted wildlife nested. Today, the birds crowded around one end of the lake, scrambling for the bread being thrown to them by walkers traversing the path.

Beck and his wife began their walk around the lake, passing an ice-cream vendor by the old lodge. Close by, a picnic was in progress, a small family, a mother and father with their two children, one child still a baby lying asleep in a pram. He recognised the man as a worker at his own factory. The name came to him, Josef Schmidt. One of the few paid shift workers amongst the many unpaid forced labour.

Beck had no illusions that this was slavery in all but name, the exploitation of the populations of conquered countries. He had too much to concern himself with to give it any consideration; a wife, and the growing child in her belly and the real possibility that their lives might soon be in real danger.

“Oh look, Max, they are beautiful,” Hannah said, pulling at her husband’s arm. She led him to a miniature rose garden in full bloom with reds, pinks and whites. She leaned down, picked a white rose and slipped it into the top buttonhole of his jacket. Sliding her arm through his, she quietly said, “You seem very subdued today, my dear. Is something troubling you?”

Beck took Hannah to a small bench overlooking the water. They sat and watched the birds and the small boats traversing the lake, the oars breaking up the perfect reflection of the small islet. With a heavy heart, he said the words he knew she would not want to hear.

“We have to leave Stuttgart, Hannah.”

He heard his wife sigh deeply. "I knew this day would come. I might have risked staying before this gift." She touched her small bump. "Now it's all about little Oskar."

Beck laughed. "Little Oskar, is it?" He turned and faced her. "So not only have you decided the sex of our child, but the name too."

"Well, I *am* making our son," she said, playfully. "I think I have that right."

"I did have a small part in that," he said.

She showed him her thumb and index finger with barely a sliver of daylight between them and said, "About that much."

"What makes you think it's a boy?" he asked.

"It is a boy," she insisted. "I can feel it."

"Well, little Oskar cannot be born in this Germany," Beck said. "It is no longer safe for us. Our protector and tormentor is leaving soon."

He told her about the conversation he'd had with Oberst Kriek the evening before. Hannah tensed on hearing the German officer's name.

"I hate that man," she said. "He is a coward and a leech."

"He's both of those things," Beck agreed. "But I don't hate him. Ironically, he's as trapped by his heritage as we are. He's getting out before he is shipped to the Russian front."

"What about the factory?" Hannah asked.

"I have found someone who will buy it for gold," he said. "I'll only get half its value but with what we have saved already, it should be enough to set us up in America."

Hannah squeezed her husband's hand and said, "Then I am resolved to go. My family will be my home. One day, when all of this is over, maybe we will return."

The couple stood and started walking towards one of the exits.

“Herr Beck?”

Startled by the sound of his name, Beck turned sharply towards the source. A man stood before him, short and stooped. There was a weariness about him. His face was creased and pitted, but not with age. The lines were the map of his suffering and pain. Beck knew he was one of the many forced labourers in his factory, and his servitude had bent him like a strong wind bends the weak trees of the forest.

“Yes!” Beck snapped. He felt his wife’s hand squeeze his own in admonishment for his sharp tone. He softened his voice. “Yes?”

“I am a worker at your factory,” the man began. “I was brought to Stuttgart with my wife and daughter.” He gestured to a woman and a young girl sitting on one of the benches. The woman was attractive and perhaps the casual observer would think the age difference between husband and wife was many years but Beck suspected the gap to be narrower. This man clearly carried a heavy burden, which had aged him prematurely. The young girl was perhaps six or seven, dressed in a pretty white dress with a yellow flower print. Her long blonde hair was tied with a blue ribbon. It was obvious from the shabby attire of her parents that they lavished more than love on their child. She was clutching a small doll to her chest.

“What can I do for you?” Beck asked.

“I have heard,” the man began, drawing a deep breath. “Some of us at the factory will be sent to the camps soon.”

“Why would they send you to the camps?” Beck asked. “Your skills have value to me here.”

“It is true that my experience has kept me and my family out of such places, but some of my friends have already been taken, those with less value.” He lowered his voice. “I am a Jew, you see.”

Beck casually dismissed the man’s fears. He said, “I have influence here, and you work for me. I need your experience.”

“That is why I’m here now. To ask for your help.” He glanced furtively around the park and stepped closer to Beck. “I have worked for you for free, like many of my co-workers. You have made money from our labour, and perhaps you could use some of that money and your influence to get us out of Germany. Save my family.”

“What you’re suggesting is treasonous,” Beck said. “I am a loyal German, and I have my own family to consider, and my reputation. I will not discuss this any further with you.”

Beck started to walk away, but the man grabbed his sleeve.

“Please, Herr Beck, I beg you. If not us, then help my daughter. She is an innocent child.”

Beck shook his arm free. “I will not help you, and if you continue to harass me, I will report you.”

The man backed off and Beck and his wife continued on towards the exit.

They were silent for a while, until Hannah finally said, “Can we not help them? They are Jews like us.”

“You are not a Jew,” Beck admonished his wife.

He felt immediately guilty for raising his voice to her, an outward expression of the inner guilt and bloom of shame he felt. As much as Kriek had said about the camps being a propaganda

tool used by the Allies, Beck had heard too many rumours, too many whispers to dismiss it as mere misinformation.

He turned his wife to face him. "Marrying me was your only crime. We need our money to be safe, to escape ourselves. It would be costly getting them out of Germany and might risk our own escape."

"Surely we have more than enough," she said. "We could use some of it to..."

Beck didn't allow her to finish. "I don't feel inclined to..."

His wife turned on him then. "To what? Waste our money on hopeless causes? This war is taking away our humanity, Max."

"It is those that subjugate us that have no humanity," he said.

"If we can be so callous in the face of all this," she said, quietly. "Do we deserve to have that opportunity when so many cannot? Are we no better than those who seek to destroy us?"

She was right, of course. He could use his money to get others out, but then they could not enjoy the lavish lifestyle he had come to expect in their new home of America. After all his hard work, he was reluctant to give up everything he had achieved only to start again at the bottom.

"There is no place for humanity, Hannah," he said, patting her stomach. "Are you willing to put little Oskar at risk?"

"That's not fair," she said, her eyes flashing anger at him for using the one thing she would not, could not, risk. Even if that meant sacrificing others.

"The world is not fair, my love," he said, more gently. "If I have to choose between saving others or saving ourselves, then I choose us. You'll understand, Hannah, when we get to America and can start again."

They passed the bandstand and Beck noticed a group of people standing by the small squat open-air building. The sunlight made them appear hazy and indistinct. He shielded his eyes and could make out six figures, and they were looking directly at him. The glare made it impossible to make out their features.

“Who are those people by the bandstand?” he asked his wife. “Why are they staring at us?” He pulled off his glasses and wiped them with his handkerchief.

Hannah turned and stared, peering through the sun’s glare. “I can’t see anyone,” she said.

When Beck put his glasses back on, the group had disappeared. He looked around but there were no others close by.

He shook his head. “They are gone,” he said.

A dark cloud passed across the face of the sun, and a sudden, cold wind struck him and it felt like icy fingers had touched his very soul. The sensation made him shudder. He shrugged off the oppressive feeling and led his wife back through the tall metal gates, pausing a few moments to look back into the park, knowing they may never return to this place again.

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