

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 2

May 30, 1944 – Evening. Stuttgart, Germany.

Maximillian Beck

In the relative calm on the fringes overlooking the city, Maximillian Beck peered through the blackout curtain at the full moon hanging above a slumbering river, its silver reflection slicing through the water's darkness like a blade. Stuttgart's silence was not peace, but the hush before devastation. The bombers had spared the city tonight, but the gutted heart of Stuttgart was a constant reminder of the RAF's vengeance for London.

Beck had been born into this city; an ageless landscape of beauty now defiled by the ugly regime that governed it. Ironically that same regime had made the industrialist a rich man by the relatively young age of twenty-eight. His munitions factory thrived, feeding the Nazi war machine, and every shattered building in this city was perhaps a fitting monument to his own complicity in the destruction of so many others.

Behind him a party was in full swing, a grotesque masquerade of soldiers and extravagantly attired local dignitaries gorging themselves. A single precious night of calm from the violence that lurked just beyond the gilded walls. Beck had hired the third-floor ballroom of one of the few remaining lavish hotels that were still fully intact. Milling about amongst the gathered guests were waitresses dressed in black and white serving gowns. The industrialist was playing host to the officers from the latest German division to head out to Russia. In one corner a small quartet played Wagner.

Beck turned from the blackout screen and lifted a glass from a silver platter offered to him by one of the hostesses.

“Here’s to the Fatherland,” he proclaimed to the room. “May it endure for a thousand years.” The toast tasted of bile in the back of his throat.

The German soldiers, heavy with good food and drowsy with equally good wine, raised their glasses and joined the sentiment. One inebriated oberleutnant stood and shouted, “Heil Hitler!” resolutely refusing to relax from his rigid salute, rocking gently as though the floor was moving.

A newly arrived senior German officer standing by the large double oak doors shouted across the room, “Sit Oberleutnant, before you fall. You have done your duty to the Führer. I’m sure he’ll forgive you relaxing this one time.”

“Yes, sir!” the drunk officer responded, collapsing back into his chair.

Beck slapped the man on the shoulder and said, “You make your country proud, Oberleutnant. Your glass is empty. Please help yourself to more wine.”

A hostess quickly took the cue and refilled the glass.

Beck caught the eye of the newcomer standing by the entrance to the ballroom offering his coat to the maître de. When he had entered, the air had somehow grown colder.

Oberst Dieter Kriek was tall, elegant, and immaculate. He wore his uniform not as a badge of honour but as a costume for manipulation. An outfit more appropriate for Hollywood celluloid, crisp and new, pressed with military precision and looking like it had seen more parties than battlefields. The leather of his boots and his holster gleamed like the day they had been made. His hat and boots added a further three inches to his already impressive six foot frame. His

outward bonhomie belied his inner selfishness and cruelty. His smile was facade, his eyes calculating, reflecting not camaraderie but predation.

When in this man's presence, Beck would often have to mask his natural revulsion in favour of a strained cordiality. Even now, as he weaved through the uniformed throng towards the officer, collecting a small walnut box from a table on the way, he felt a familiar knot of anxiety in his stomach.

"An excellent party, Max," the officer said. His voice, smooth and venomous. "And Wagner to serenade us. Although being a proud Austrian I prefer Strauss. Wagner can be a little, well, Wagnerian, don't you think?" He laughed at his little personal joke.

Beck made a slight gesture towards the corner of the room and the quartet broke out into the first sweeping notes of the Blue Danube. Several couples stood and began to spiral about the room to the mellifluous tones of the music.

"Much better, Max," the officer said. "The men will appreciate this send off in our honour."

"It is the least I can do for the brave soldiers of the fatherland, Oberst," Beck said.

The officer smiled coldly and lowered his voice. "Please, Max, we've known each other long enough to set aside such formalities. Please call me Dieter. And I think we can also dispense with the empty platitudes."

Beck frowned. "I don't understand, Dieter." This man always made him feel anxious, constantly on his guard.

"Of course you do," Kriek said, reaching for a glass of champagne from one of the passing hostesses. "But I won't hold that against you." He took a sip and nodded in appreciation.

"Excellent Champagne, Max."

“Thank you, Dieter,” Beck said, paying lip service. But those same lips did little to make the forced smile seem genuine. He flipped open the walnut box in his hand. “Can I offer you a cigar?” He resisted the urge to use the Oberst’s Christian name again, as though his already tainted morals could stand no more hypocrisy.

Kriek accepted the cigar, rolling it between thin fingers. He picked up a lighter from the expansive food table and lit the smoke. The flame from the lighter flared in his round glasses, casting a momentary shadow in the hollows around his eyes, a spreading darkness accentuated by the sharp cheekbones and a cruel thin-lipped mouth.

“Havana! I am impressed, Max,” Kriek exclaimed, exhaling thick smoke. “My general would give his Iron Cross for a box. How did you get them? Not on the black market I hope?”

“Of course not,” Beck stammered.

Kriek slipped an avuncular arm around the industrialist’s shoulders and said, “Relax, Max, I’m teasing you. The only way to get anything these days is on the black market. I have a man who gets me wine and brandy from France. It’s expensive, but worth every penny. It’s fortunate I don’t have to rely solely on my army salary or I’d have to endure the swill this lot drink.” The oberst cast a dismissive hand at the other soldiers in the room.

Beck laughed nervously. “Perhaps I could get a box for your general.”

“I’m sure he would be grateful,” Kriek said. “For a box of these he may even reconsider sending me to the Russian front.”

Truths and lies slid out of this man’s mouth as easily as a snake’s forked tongue, thought Beck.

A rousing rendition of *Deutschland Deutschland über alles* suddenly burst from the corner of the room, played by the quartet and delivered with drunken gusto by five soldiers standing arm in arm saluting the ceiling with steins of beer.

Kriek shook his head and said, "The fools think they are going to glory and immortality. They are going to pain, death and oblivion." He cast off the momentary darkness and took a long draw from the cigar, inhaling deeply. "Exquisite, Sir Walter Raleigh's gift to the world. An extraordinary people, our enemy, no?" Kriek lowered his voice and whispered. "Tell me, Max, what is the Jews' gift to the world?"

Beck glanced around to see if anyone was within ear shot. The party was too loud and involved to be interested in the machinations of a Jewish industrialist and a corrupt German officer.

"We gave the world Jesus Christ," he said.

Kriek coughed, choking on the smoke he had swallowed. He stared in disbelief at Beck and then laughed derisively. "Excellent, Max, Excellent. Jesus Christ, of course. Although your people didn't treat him quite so well the first time around."

Beck shuffled uncomfortably and said, "Perhaps we could save religious semantics for another time."

"Oh dear, Max. Did I strike a nerve?" Kriek had that hard look back in his eye. Then with a dismissive wave of his hand, he said, "Never mind. It is a discussion for another day. One I would look forward to greatly."

Across the room Beck noticed one of the other officers standing alone and watching the oberst intently. Beck recognised his insignia as that of a hauptmann. If the sneer twisting the

corner of his mouth was anything to go by, it wasn't a look of adoration for his commanding officer. He had often seen this same look on many men in the oberst's division. Kriek wasn't a popular man, not made from the same mould as the officers and men he commanded.

On taking command of his division in Stuttgart, he had been given access to general records. Some innocuous document had led the oberst to probe deeper until he finally learned of Beck's Jewish heritage through his grandparents. He had hesitated in reporting it, instead using the information for personal gain. He had blackmailed the industrialist to keep a secret that would otherwise mean the end of Beck's way of life and possibly even incarceration if the whispers were to be believed. Beck realised that as much as he hated this man, he and his wife were kept safe by Kriek's greed and silence. Another more patriotic officer would undoubtedly have informed the authorities. It was an unpleasant but convenient symbiosis. Beck patted his jacket, feeling the familiar and comforting weight of an envelope in the inside pocket that he always carried with him for every meeting he had conducted with the oberst. He suspected the need to reveal its contents was fast approaching.

"Oberst Kriek..." Beck began, tentatively.

"Back to formality, Max," Kriek said. "This sounds solemn."

Beck looked around again. The party was losing a little of its energy. He offered a subtle nod to the hostesses who understood the gesture and began circulating with fresh glasses of beer and wine. Another gesture to the quartet spurred them into a lively polka. He turned back to the oberst and said, "I would like to talk in private if you would indulge me."

"Of course, Herr Beck," Kriek said, echoing the formality. He put down the empty champagne glass and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Lead the way."

© 2026 R. K. Bown. *All rights reserved.*