

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 3

Beck led Kriek into a small anti room just off the main ballroom. The sounds of the party faded behind the thick ornate door as it closed. In the small space was a single chair and table. The room was in darkness and the blackout blind not drawn. Below them a freight train slipped past on the single track, its smoke stack belching white clouds into the dark sky.

Kriek stood waiting, staring out of the window at the city and drawing deeply on his cigar. The end of the Havana flared red and Beck's eyes were drawn to the cherry ember until it seemed to fill his vision. In his mind's eye he could see the fire suddenly full of naked bodies, screaming and writhing in the heat of the furnace.

"I am waiting, Max."

The oberst's voice encroached on the image and it was gone as quickly as it came.

"I've heard..." Beck began.

"Yes, Max?"

"Rumours."

"Ah, rumours," Kriek said. "The silent weapons of war."

Beck looked down at his feet, unable to meet the oberst's penetrating gaze. He said, "I've heard stories about Jews being transported on trains to labour camps."

"You know better than to listen to rumours," Kriek rebuked. "Probably Allied propaganda meant to stir up dissent."

"Then they are untrue?" Beck asked.

“Not entirely,” Kriek said, evasively. “But more than likely exaggerated. What can I say? These are trying times and we need all the help we can get. They are well taken care of.”

The tone in the oberst’s voice sent a shiver down Beck’s spine.

“And my wife and I?”

“Don’t worry, Max,” Kriek soothed. “We have a nice arrangement you and I.” He took a final long draw from his cigar and held Beck’s eye. “The new Polish workers. They are satisfactory?”

“Of course,” Beck said, feeling like a helpless fly caught in Kriek’s web. “I am grateful for your efforts.”

Kriek stubbed the cigar out on the bottom of his boot and said, “It was my pleasure. It must be difficult to man your factory with so many away fighting in the war. Now, not only do you have enough workers, but you don’t have to pay them.”

Beck bowed his head. “They work very hard.”

“As they should,” Kriek said. “It is in their best interest to justify our trust in them. It is far better than the alternative. They are fed and housed. I had to call in a great many favours on your behalf to procure them for the factory. I think my superiors might be upset if they knew about our other little arrangement. They would undoubtedly add you and your beautiful pregnant wife to those bulging trains.” Kriek’s words were veiled but unmistakable, the threat explicit. Beck’s safety was a currency the oberst traded for gold and silence. The officer’s self-interest was absolute.

“And what would they do to you?” Beck asked. “Would they court martial you?”

Kriek lifted the sash cord of the window slightly higher, allowing more of the cool night air into the room. He cast the smoldering cigar stub out through the gap. "No, my family are too influential to allow that dishonor," he said. "They would send me to the Russian front."

Beck blinked in confusion at the German officer. "But you are..."

Kriek grinned. "Already going to the Russian front?"

"Yes."

"That's the dilemma, Max," the oberst said. He sat back down on the solitary chair and lifted one boot up onto the table. "The Kriek family has a proud military tradition going back two hundred years. There was a Kriek at Waterloo, did you know that?"

Beck shook his head.

"The British and the Prussians on the same side against the French. Now it appears our Führer demands we fight the world." Kriek's words were tinged with bitterness. "My father was a field marshal in the first war and my brother was a highly decorated general who was recently killed fighting in Italy. Do you not find it odd that I hold the high rank of oberst and yet have never fought a single battle?"

"There has been much gossip," Beck said.

"And it is all true, Max," Kriek said. "I am considered the disappointment, the black sheep of the family. My father was delighted when the war started. It gave him the perfect opportunity to get his ineffectual offspring a commission, but he conspired to keep me out of trouble, have me stationed far away from any of the dangerous places."

"It is because he loves his only remaining son and wants no harm to come to him," Beck said.

Kriek rocked forward, laughing hard, his boot crashing down on the floor. "Oh Max, I envy your naivety," he said. "No, it is because he doesn't want me to bring shame to our family. My father knows me very well, you see. He knows that I am a coward."

Beck couldn't hide his surprise.

"You are shocked by my admission," Kriek said. "Don't be. I am comfortable with the fact. I am also at ease with the knowledge that I will not be accompanying my division to that hell hole in the north. With the help of substantial funds already paid to me by your good self and one final large payment in gold, I will be heading in the opposite direction to live out the remainder of the war in safety and comfort. Why do you think I chose this location for my posting? As beautiful as this city is. It is its close proximity to Switzerland which is its overriding appeal."

"They will never let you go," Beck said. "They will come after you, hunt you down."

Kriek stood. "I think not. We have lost in Africa. The invasion of Europe is imminent. The Allies are already working their way through Italy and the Russians are driving us back from their lands. Germany has lost the war but just doesn't know it yet. I give the glorious fatherland a year, maybe less. They will be far too busy trying to survive the chaos to chase after me. Eventually, after the war is done, I will return home to Austria and claim my birthright after my father dies."

"Without your protection, Dieter, my wife and I will be vulnerable again," Beck said.

"*Dieter?*" Kriek said. "I take it we're suddenly friends again, Max."

"I meant no disrespect," Beck said, carefully.

"And there was none taken," Kriek said, smiling, a glimmer of warmth in the oberst's eyes. "I know you don't particularly like me, Max. I can understand our relationship isn't one of amiability. In a different world we might have been friends." The warmth evaporated like

morning mist. “Unfortunately, under the circumstances of *this* world, I can’t allow sentiment to cloud my judgement. You are a respected industrialist. You might be safe, remain undetected.”

And we might not, Beck thought. Despite what the oberst had said, the industrialist had heard of the trains departing with their human cargo packed in like sheep. The camps with their death chambers. The mass graves full of his own people. He had heard, and he had turned away, as he refused to help many of his own kind. Why should he care if foolish people paraded their nationality and beliefs in the face of so potent and determined a regime? He tried to stop his thoughts and was relieved to find it easy. He had also heard about the murmurings of invasion. Who knew how the Allies would treat a man who made the weapons that had claimed the lives of so many of their sons?

With Kriek planning his own escape, Beck knew the safety he and his wife enjoyed at a price would be threatened. He had known that a time would come when he would have to leave this city, but he was loathe to relinquish the wealth he had worked so hard to acquire. Kriek had been content to ignore Beck’s Jewishness as long as it continued to line his pockets. The industrialist’s door had not been scarred by the nightsticks like so many. His home had not been invaded by the black army in the early morning hours. He decided now was the time to play his trump card.

“It is also very possible we will not remain safe after your departure, Oberst,” Beck said. “Therefore, I wish to get myself and my wife out of the city. A man with your influence and contacts could get travel visas for us.”

Kriek studied the industrialist closely. “Travel visas are very hard to come by, very expensive,” he said. “They would attract unwanted scrutiny.”

“I could pay what is necessary,” Beck said. “And, of course, pay you a generous fee for this favour.”

“And if I refuse.”

Beck shrugged. “It would be unfortunate if news of our arrangement and your intended desertion slipped out. I doubt even your father’s influence would keep you from a firing squad.”

Kriek walked to the door, his hand resting lightly on the handle. “And I could open this door and announce to the others about my sudden discovery of our hosts religious affiliations,” he said. “I very much doubt they would believe the word of a Jew over that of a German officer.” The oberst tilted his head in challenge –*your move*.

The final negotiation was a duel of threats. Both men understood that survival depended on ruthlessness, and mercy was a luxury neither could afford.

Beck smiled now with the same coldness he had seen earlier in the oberst’s eyes. “Yes, you could. And they certainly would believe your word over mine. However, they might reconsider if they became aware of documented evidence of every one of our transactions over the years. Even photographic proof of our exchanges. They get me, *Dieter*,” he said, this time using the Oberst’s Christian name like a slap in the face. “They get you.”

“You’re bluffing.” Kriek’s bravado faltered, desperation flickering in his eyes.

The industrialist pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket and casting it onto the table. The evidence of Kriek’s corruption that would signal his downfall. The oberst released the handle and went to the table, picking up the envelope and pulling out the contents. Inside were about a dozen photographs showing various payments made to the German officer and several other incriminating documents.

“Those are copies,” Beck said. “But there are more where they came from.”

Kriek scanned the documents, a smile spreading slowly across his face.

“I assume these are kept safely.”

“They are with a trusted third party,” Beck said. “With the instruction to release them to the authorities should anything happen to me. And without my final payment in gold, I think your planned escape might be made more perilous.” Beck recalled the scowling officer from the party. “I know there are men in your own division who question your allegiance. It would only take a word, a suspicion, for them to move against you.”

The German officer nodded and then began to clap slowly. “Stalemate. Bravo, Max. Well played.”

“I had an excellent teacher,” Beck said.

Kriek bowed his head. “You flatter me, Max.” He handed the photographs back to the industrialist. “However, I suspect you may have been this calculating and devious before we met.”

“I also want the original document that revealed my heritage,” Beck said. “I want to eliminate all records of my Jewishness.”

“I will get you your travel papers and that incriminating document. I have no need for it any longer” Kriek said. “My division is due to leave for Russia on June 7. I intend to be gone before this date, amid the confusion of the deployment. We shall conduct our exchange on June 6. Do you know the graveyard of the bombed-out church behind the old railway station?”

“Yes.”

“We will meet there at, shall we say, midnight.”

It sounded suitably melodramatic, which exactly befitted the oberst's personality.

"Agreed," Beck said, accepting the photographs back.

Kriek thrust out his hand. "My regards, Herr Beck. It has been stimulating."

Beck accepted the oberst's hand, and the two men held each other's eyes for a fraction longer before Kriek turned and left the room.

Beck sagged into the chair with a sigh of relief. He now had just over a week to liquidate all his assets. He already had a buyer for the factory, and he had been collecting diamonds for some time now for easy transport and concealment. He and his wife and their unborn child would make their way to America, far from the madness of this war.

The party ended shortly after the oberst's departure and Beck finally drove home, entering his bedroom just before 3 a.m. His wife was an indistinguishable hump beneath the bedclothes. She stirred as his weight dented the mattress beside her. He raised his feet off the floor and curled his legs under the heavy blankets, reaching across to the side table to switch off the lamp. He felt the softness of the pillow cradle his head and he yawned as he lay there, listening to the night sounds that had now become the familiar backdrop to his dreams. Sometimes the sounds of bombs rocking the city, and sometimes the softer knocking on doors and people shouting as they were dragged away from their families and homes to who knew what fate.

