

From chapter one

It was dark outside. Sirens blared. People screamed. The intense smell of smoke filled the air. Warplanes droned overhead, and the roaring of their engines became louder and louder. Then, *BOOM!* The earth shook, and the horizon lit up as though a million lights had been turned on all at once. After a moment of eerie silence, the screams started up again.

I was fascinated by this fantastic display of fire and noise in the sky. My mother ran across the street to the neighbors. They had built a bomb shelter in their front yard and had offered to share it with us and other neighbors. My mother pulled me along faster than I could run while her arm was wrapped around my baby brother, Hilmar. He was straddling her hip, but slipping. My father followed right behind. He carried a suitcase in one hand and papers in the other.

To me, this bomb shelter was nothing but a deep black hole in the ground, filled with people. Through a small, grassy opening, a narrow wooden ladder led down into a large square room with a dirt floor. Wooden posts held up the dirt ceiling and walls. Benches stood unoccupied along the walls. People seemed to prefer standing while waiting for the all-clear signal. They didn't talk much, and when they did, they whispered.

The musty odor of cold, wet soil hung heavy in the air. A candle lantern dangled from the ceiling. Surrounded by thighs—some clad in striped pajamas, some in plaid, and some with wool trousers—I could only see bellies, chins, and nostrils when I looked up. No eyes. I couldn't see the ladder, which was the only way out.

There was no toilet. A metal bucket with a bit of water in it stood in a corner. For privacy, a gray wool blanket thrown over a wooden pole in front of the bucket acted as a curtain. Drawn shut, no light could seep through the tightly woven fabric. There was no toilet paper, only bits of newspaper scattered on the ground.

As soon as we were all huddled together in the shelter, I decided I had to pee. My mother pointed to the bucket.

“Outside, Mama,” I said.

“The bucket,” she said, still pointing to it.

“Outside!” I insisted.

“Then you just wait until you hear the all-clear signal,” she said.

I tried my father. “Papa, please take me up! I have to pee, I really do,” I lied.

“You heard your mother,” he said.

“Papa!”

I won. He grudgingly gave in and took me up the ladder, into the fiery red night.

“Hurry up,” he said while lighting a cigarette, drawing and expelling short puffs of smoke in rapid succession. Flashes of light on the horizon where bombs exploded illuminated every puff.

“Hurry up!” His eyes scanned the sky. I took my time, though. Squatting on the ground, looking up at the sky in anticipation, I had no desire to go back down into that hole. I felt safe: I was with my papa.

This was Berlin in 1944, during air raids by the Allied forces. I was three years old. It is the earliest memory I have of my father, Herbert Reinecker, the writer, who would become a celebrity just six years later...

