



Hindenburg,1937

By Cameron Dokey

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Torn between the promise of new love and the treacherous lure of the man who holds her heart -- and her future -- in his hands, Anna sets course for America, on a voyage into history.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Cameron Dokey lives in Seattle, Washington. During the time it took her to write this book, the part of the country in which she lives set a whole new record for total rainfall. She is seriously considering setting her next book on a nice sunny tropical island and then relocating there to write it.

Cameron has one husband and three cats and is the author of twelve novels for young adults. She has also written two short story collections. Her favorite books are the novels in J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Her favorite TV show is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

When she's not writing books, Cameron likes to work in her garden -- or she would if it would ever stop raining.

She also knows every weird word in the entire universe that rhymes with her weird last name. So if you're thinking of writing to her about *Hindenburg, 1937* (and she sincerely hopes you will), you can just spare her any funny stuff like "Okey Dokey."

Trust her, she's heard it.

Happy reading!

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Chapter One

Frankfurt, Germany, late April 1937

He was dying and there was nothing she could do. Anna Becker sat at her grandfather's bedside, her icy hands clasped in her lap. She could feel her palms sweating where she pressed them tightly together. Knew that, if she unknotted her cramped fingers and dried her hands on the front of her skirt, she'd have done so a thousand times already, leaving the fabric rumpled and damp.

Anna's legs ached from the long hours of sitting in one position. Her neck and shoulders felt as brittle as eggshells, as if the slightest movement would cause them to snap.

She had a sudden vision of her head tumbling from her body like something from a children's bedtime story, while the rest of her body stayed in the chair, perfectly motionless.

Kurt would hate that, she thought. It wouldn't be what proper German young ladies did.

The unbidden thought of her older brother sent a hot spear of panic shooting across Anna's chest. She unclasped her hands and pressed cold fingers against the base of her throat, desperately trying to force the panic back.

Naturally, Kurt had been sent for when their grandfather fell ill, but he hadn't arrived yet. He had a long way to travel, all the way from Berlin. He'd been sent there several months ago, shortly after his eighteenth birthday, when his time in the Hitler Youth had ended and his military service began. Anna could still remember how thrilled he'd been.

"Berlin is where the important decisions regarding the future of our country are being made," he'd told her. And he wanted to be as close as possible to the great men who were making them.

At first Anna had missed her brother. Their grandfather's house in Frankfurt, never full to begin with, had felt even emptier without Kurt in it. But lately she'd come to dread Kurt's infrequent visits.

Every time he came home, Kurt seemed more and more different, less and less like the brother Anna remembered. It was as if his time in Berlin was turning him into a stranger. A stranger full of plans for her. Plans of which Anna wanted no part.

A sharp handful of rain spattered against her grandfather's bedroom window, startling Anna out of her reverie. She started, then squirmed in her chair, as if the seat with its plump cushion had suddenly grown rock-hard.

It's because I'm thinking about Kurt, she realized.

Just the thought of her older brother was enough to make Anna uncomfortable. The distance between them grew with each of his visits, and Anna had no idea how to bring him close again.

Even worse, she was no longer sure if being close to Kurt was what she really wanted. It seemed they disagreed about everything these days.

With fingers that trembled ever so slightly, Anna rubbed her hands against her skirt again.

"I do not understand you, Anna," Kurt had said impatiently on his most recent visit. As usual, they'd been quarreling about the way Anna spent her weekends. Kurt thought Anna should be part of the Hitler Youth, as he had been.

But Anna didn't want to spend her weekends dressed in a uniform, tramping around the countryside, pretending camaraderie with girls for whom she felt nothing. She wanted to spend them as she always had, at home with her grandfather, poring through the volumes in his library.

Even the name of the young women's unit, the Bund Deutscher Maedel, League of German Maidens, filled Anna with misgivings. She didn't want to be part of a league of young women, all taught to think the same things.

She wanted to be acknowledged for what she was: an individual, with her own thoughts and feelings.

She'd tried to say as much to Kurt, but he refused to listen. He disapproved of Anna's independent thinking, a trait for which he blamed their grandfather.

"Can you not see that the life you are leading is selfish?" he'd all but shouted. "That, by living in this way, you are neglecting your duty to the fatherland?"

"If Grandfather truly loved you, he would not keep you here with him, filling your mind with dangerous ideas, allowing you to read books that he knows are not sanctioned. He would send you out into the world to do your duty and prepare you for your true destiny."

Anna had bitten her tongue to keep from shouting back, defying her older brother. But she was beginning to learn that the ideas she treasured most were the ones Kurt agreed with least. And so she hadn't told him what she was really thinking.

No one, not even her beloved grandfather, would plan her future for her. Anna herself would decide her true destiny.

A second gust of wind rattled the windows, a gust so strong it howled down the chimney. Anna's stomach tightened at the sound.

How that used to frighten me as a child, she recalled. And it was always Kurt who came to comfort me, telling me stories of what we would be when we grew up.

But her brother's visits brought her comfort no longer. Now Kurt told her stories of the future that were nothing less than horrifying.

Anna would be married, he said, to a man of her brother's choosing. A man who was willing to overlook the fact that Anna's hair was too dark -- not the pale spun gold of corn silk but the deep amber of honey, that her eyes were too pale, not the deep blue of an alpine lake but the soft blue of a morning sky in summer. A man who was willing to overlook the fact that Anna's figure was small and slight, far from ideal for childbearing.

It might be difficult to find such a man, particularly since Anna's behavior was so unsatisfactory. But Kurt was confident he could do it. After all, he was a rising star in the German army. His behavior was above reproach.

And once she was married, Anna's must be also. For the rest of her life she must be perfectly obedient to her husband. She must do his will, never question his authority. She must bear his children and raise them to believe in the glory of the fatherland.

Just thinking about it made Anna shiver uncontrollably.

Please, she thought, as she stared down at her grandfather's still, pale face, at his shallow breathing, which barely stirred the coverlet. Please stay alive. Please don't die and leave me, Opa. If her grandfather died, Anna would have no one left but Kurt. No one to help her stop her brother's plans for her.

"Anna! Why are you sitting here in the dark?"

At the sound of a voice from the doorway, Anna jumped, then dropped her head into her hands. It wasn't Kurt. Not yet.

"Ursula," she choked out. Her grandfather's housekeeper moved across the room with a rustle of the starched apron she always wore, her round face puckered with concern.

"There now, I didn't mean to startle you," she said, giving Anna's shoulder a gentle pat. "But you can't see how your grandfather's doing in the dark, and you must be cold. You've let the fire go out, and you've no sweater, as usual."

Anna almost smiled. Her grandfather's house was drafty, and his housekeeper was forever fretting because Anna never wore a sweater. Ursula's fussing was usually guaranteed to make Anna smile, but today she couldn't quite get the corners of her lips to curve upward. "I'm sorry, Ursula."

The truth was, she'd been so lost in her own fear that she hadn't noticed the progression of the hours making the room grow cold and dark around her. She'd thought the darkness was all in her own thoughts.

"There now," the housekeeper said again. She left Anna's side to move around the room briskly, stirring up the fire, drawing the curtains against the raw and rainy April evening, switching on a wall sconce. Slowly the

colors of Anton Becker's room came back into view. The deep brown of the polished wood walls, the burgundy of the satin coverlet.

Anna watched, feeling comforted in spite of herself by the housekeeper's simple everyday actions. But then, Ursula almost always had that effect. She had been a presence in Anna's life for as long as Anna could remember.

It was Ursula who'd told Anna stories about her parents, dead almost before Anna could remember them. "Your parents loved each other so much, they couldn't bear to be parted. Not even by death," she had said.

When Anna's father was killed testing the new airplane he was designing, her mother had simply lost the will to live. Even her small children could not make her hold on to life. One month after her husband's accident Ilse Becker too was dead. Six-year-old Anna and eight-year-old Kurt had lived with their grandfather, their only surviving relative, ever since.

"Come downstairs and eat something, Miss Anna," Ursula said now, from her position on the far side of the bed. "You've been up here all day. You won't help your grandfather if you wear yourself out. You must pace yourself. You heard what the doctor said today."

"Yes, I heard him," Anna answered.

She'd heard him say her grandfather's heart, never strong, was giving out that day. As if it had suddenly taken on a burden too great for it to carry, a shock too great for it to bear.

But what that shock had been, not even Anna knew. Her grandfather would take that secret with him to his grave.

With another rustle of her apron, Ursula reached over and switched on Anton Becker's bedside lamp. Anna winced at the sudden glare.

In the glow of the electric light, her grandfather's face looked even worse than it had that morning. Then his skin had been flushed bright red, as if he'd run a long race. Now it had paled to the sickly gray of fireplace ash.

Anna felt the panic rising, searing the back of her throat. "I can't leave him, Ursula," she said. "Besides, I'm not hungry."

The housekeeper's sympathetic eyes met hers across the coverlet. "There's been no change?" she asked.

Anna shook her head.

No change since the telegram had come that morning after breakfast, bringing to a screaming halt all their whispered confidences. Anna and her grandfather had been in the library, congratulating each other on the success of their plans.

"We will have an adventure, Anna," Anton Becker had declared, his blue eyes sparkling as he smacked his fist into the palm of his hand. "One not even your oh-so-proper brother can find fault with. Even he cannot argue against our making a journey on such a glorious symbol of the fatherland."

"The *Hindenburg*." Anna had whispered the name like an incantation.

After months of planning, Anna and her grandfather were going to travel on the great rigid airship's first

voyage of 1937. On May 3, less than two weeks away, they would fly all the way to America.

"Well, now," Anton Becker had continued, rising from his favorite chair by the fire. "That's enough idle chatter for this morning. I have some correspondence to take care of, and you must have some packing to do."

"Grandfather," Anna protested, laughing. They both knew that she'd been packed for days. Ursula had protested that Anna's clothing would be wrinkled beyond recognition. Anna had said she didn't care. She was going on an adventure, not to a fashion show.

"Your pardon, Herr Becker." With a quick knock on the library door, Ursula had entered. In one hand she'd carried a silver tray with a piece of paper in the very center. "A telegram has just arrived for you."

"Thank you, Ursula," Anton Becker had answered.

"Who's it from?" Anna had eagerly asked.

Ursula had clicked her tongue on her way out of the room, but Anna's grandfather had chuckled indulgently and murmured, "Patience, Anna."

But by then his eyes were already on the message, and what he saw made his face turn sheet-white, then a harsh and fiery red. He took two stumbling steps to the fireplace and dropped the paper into the flames. He paused a moment, leaning against the mantel, and watched as the telegram burned to ashes.

Only then did he turn to Anna, but by then it was too late. His hands were at his chest, his eyes bulging from their sockets as he struggled for breath.

"Anna," he'd said. Just once. Just that. Nothing more than her name. It was the last thing he'd said. The last thing he might ever say.

"You know that's not a good sign, that lack of change," the housekeeper said quietly.

Anna came back to the present with a brutal snap. Her beloved grandfather was dying before her eyes, and she could only watch, helpless. Her throat burned so that she could hardly force the words out.

"Yes, Ursula, I know that. But I will not leave him. Not until -- "

"There now," Ursula said again.

Suddenly Anna could sit still no longer. Moving stiffly, she forced herself up from the chair. If she sat and did nothing for another instant, she'd begin to weep. Or worse, she'd begin to scream.

I can't afford to lose control, she thought. She couldn't give way to her fear and grief. Not now. Not yet. Not as long as there was the slightest chance her grandfather might still need her.

"Go stand by the fire and warm yourself," Ursula said, noting Anna's actions approvingly. She stepped away from the bed. "I'll fetch your sweater, then send you up a nice bowl of hot soup. Try to eat something, Miss Anna. You must be ready for whatever comes."

Whatever comes, Anna thought, as she listened to the housekeeper's footsteps move off down the hall. *Whatever comes, I must be ready.*

Even if what came was the end of the only life she knew. Even if what came was death.

Anna shivered and was grateful for the sound of Ursula's returning footsteps. She reached for her sweater, but Ursula was too quick for her. She stepped in, took the sweater, and wrapped it around Anna's shoulders. For one moment Anna felt the housekeeper's arms around her. For just one moment she felt warm and safe.

Then Ursula released her and turned to go, closing the bedroom door softly behind her. Anna turned to face the fire, thrusting her arms into the sleeves of her sweater. In spite of the fire's heat, she shivered again, because she was almost certain she knew what was coming: if her grandfather died, Anna was in for the fight of her life. The fight for her life. And without Anton Becker there would be no one to fight beside her. She would have to do battle all alone.

"Anna."

Anna whirled at the whisper of sound from the bed. Her grandfather's eyes glittered in the firelight. He was awake at last.

"Anna," he said again, his hands moving restlessly across the coverlet.

"Opa!" Anna cried, moving swiftly to the bed to lean over him.

At the sound of her childhood nickname for him, her grandfather smiled. But there was still no color in his face. His skin looked pale and stretched. It was plain that just keeping his eyes open was taking all his strength.

"Anna," her grandfather gasped again. "Anna, you must promise me -- " He broke off, fighting for breath.

"Of course, Opa," Anna said soothingly. She laid her hand over his and felt her heart stumble in her chest. Her grandfather's fingers were even colder than hers. "I will promise whatever you want. Only rest now. You must gain your strength back."

Her grandfather's head moved back and forth on the pillow in restless refusal. "No time. There is no time, Anna. You know that. Use your head. You must -- "

He reached out toward the nightstand, hooking one trembling finger into the pull for the top drawer. Gently, trying not to see the way her own hands trembled, Anna moved her grandfather's finger aside, pulled the drawer all the way out, and set it on the bed.

"What is it?" she asked. "Tell me what you want, Opa. I will get it."

But her grandfather's fingers were already scrabbling among his papers. Before Anna could prevent him, he struggled to raise himself up on one elbow, the better to see into the drawer.

"Wait, Opa," she cried in alarm. "Let me do it. Let me help you."

Anton Becker fell back against his pillows, something clutched tightly in his right hand.

"Anna, promise me," he whispered again.

Anna could feel the panic rising like a wave within her. *Anything*, she thought. *Anything*. "I promise, Opa," she said urgently. "Only, please, now you must rest."

Without warning, Anton Becker began to gasp, his left hand clawing at his chest. He pulled in a shuddering breath. His mouth worked, then stayed open. Before Anna could so much as move to summon help, he exhaled one long, slow breath.

Then he lay still, the fingers of his right hand still tightly closed around the paper he'd pulled from the nightstand drawer, his eyes stiff staring straight up at Anna.

It was over; her beloved grandfather was dead.

Anna sank to her knees beside the bed, her face pressed against the coverlet. Her grandfather had been the most important part of her life for as long as she could remember. What would she do now that he was dead?

"Promise me," he had whispered, trying to communicate his dying wish. With all her heart, Anna wished to grant it. But how could she? She didn't know what her grandfather had meant.

If only I'd been faster, she thought. If only --

She lifted her head.

"Anything, Opa," Anna whispered, as she stared at him. "I will do anything for you. If only you will come back and tell me what you want."

Slowly, watching her hands as if they belonged to another person, Anna straightened the bedclothes, smoothed the hair back from her grandfather's face. In a moment, she knew, she must summon the rest of the household.

I don't feel anything, she thought. That can't be right, can it?

Carefully she rose to her feet and removed the crumpled paper from her grandfather's grip.

Pain rushed in then, filling every single cell in Anna's body. She felt something now. Something she wasn't sure she could bear, because she knew now what her grandfather wanted. She understood his final wish, the thing he'd wanted so much that he died trying to make her promise.

"Miss Anna Becker," the paper said. "May 3, 1937."

It was her ticket to travel on the *Hindenburg*.

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