

Chapter One

June 1944. Poland.

The dark-blue sedan rumbled over the unpaved road, passing an arid field where a group of farmhands toiled under the scorching sun. Obersturmführer Blaz Schaffer sat in the back seat of the German staff car with two suitcases at his feet. He peered at the unfortunate souls. Their meager, worn clothing and dirty skin starkly contrasted Blaz's neatly-pressed uniform and clean-shaven face. The workers' gloomy expressions underscored the misery felt by the conquered subjects of the Third Reich. Blaz looked down at the military orders in his hands as the laborers drifted out of his sight. His new assignment seemed far less dangerous than the battlefield duty that had nearly cost him his right leg. He ran his fingers against the smooth surface of the cane that allowed him his limited mobility.

Blaz folded the orders and put them back in the official envelope. He slid the paperwork into his coat pocket just as the driver abruptly applied the brakes. The officer whipped his hands up to cushion his collision with the front, passenger seat. Blaz craned his neck and saw that an impoverished family had stumbled onto the road. The driver blew the car horn and cursed at the pedestrians. The foot-travelers ignored the reprimand as they staggered toward the burnt grass ahead of them. A frail-looking woman in a tattered, blue dress held two skinny children by their hands, while three adults walked behind her. The driver spat on the old man at the end of the cavalcade before speeding the car forward. Blaz crossed his arms over his chest and sighed at the driver's insolence.

The car thundered down the road for another quarter-hour until the driver turned a corner and Blaz saw the compound ahead of them. The menacing structure was surrounded by barbed-wire fences that seemed to stretch to the clouds. Train tracks ran toward the facility and disappeared inside. A strange odor filled the air and Blaz couldn't determine what it was from, but it burned his eyes and nose. As the vehicle eased to a stop at the front gate, Blaz saw the words *Arbeit Macht Frei* emblazoned across it. He guessed that the sign provided little comfort to the prisoners. Blaz took a deep breath and tried to bury his anxiety.

A young guard with fierce green eyes and a standard-issue rifle in his hands approached the vehicle. Blaz rolled down his window and slowly handed over his paperwork. The guard silently looked over the documents before examining the passenger. "Good morning, Obersturmführer," greeted the guard. Blaz nodded politely as the guard handed the papers back to him and saluted. Blaz returned the gesture. "The commandant is expecting you," added the guard. He then addressed the driver. "The office is in the fourth building on the right." The guard motioned to another to open the gate and the driver eased the car into the camp.

Blaz tilted his head to get a better view of the camp. He saw numerous rows of single-story brick buildings pass by on both sides of the car. Thin, sickly men, women and children in striped clothing littered the outsides of the barracks. Some performed menial tasks, while others sat on the ground with empty faces. None of them acknowledged the presence of the staff car. To Blaz, the inmates moved like ghosts across a barren land. Their lack of emotion chilled his spine.

The car stopped at the appropriate location and Blaz saw a soldier exit the office and stop at the automobile. Blaz got out of the car, put his bags on the ground and

saluted. The man returned the salute. "Heil Hitler," said the man. Blaz repeated the greeting. "I am Scharführer Wilhelm Gratzfirmer," continued the soldier. "Welcome to Auschwitz-Birkenau." The men shook hands before Blaz instinctively covered his face with his right hand. Gratzfirmer laughed. "Don't worry, you will get used to the smell." He graciously picked up Blaz's bags and led the way toward the office. "Did you have a good trip?" he asked.

Blaz nodded as he hobbled beside Gratzfirmer. They climbed the four steps of the landing and entered the building. Two secretaries sat behind small desks and banged on typewriter keys while they spoke on dual sets of telephones. Gratzfirmer put Blaz's bags down against a near wall before knocking on an office door. A voice inside instructed him to enter. The soldier opened the door and allowed the new arrival to enter first.

The SS men stood at attention as their leader rose from behind his oak desk. The commanding officer was a middle-aged man with thinning brown hair and a firm chin. Gratzfirmer introduced the men to each other. Commandant Richard Baer sized-up his new officer before extending a hand to him. Blaz shook it and returned to his stance. Baer then circled the men like a shark in a warm ocean. He stood before them again and rubbed his stubby nose. "Give me your orders, Obersturmführer Schaffer," he said.

Blaz fished the envelope out of his coat pocket and handed it to Baer. The commandant took the papers out and sat down in his chair behind the desk. He read the documents carefully before dropping them onto his desk. "Very impressive, Obersturmführer," he said. "Two accommodations for bravery and no disciplinary record. You have shown yourself to be a fine soldier so far. I hope that continues," he said. He folded his hands and rested them on his lap as he stared into Blaz's blue eyes.

“I will do my best not to disappoint you, sir,” said Blaz. He winced from the pain in his right knee. Despite the medications, the area where the bullet was removed throbbed on good days and hurt like hell on bad days. This had been a bad day.

“How does your leg feel?” asked Baer. It sounded more like an accusation than an inquiry. The commandant pressed his lips together. They formed a single line across his face that accentuated his serious demeanor. His chest moved so slightly that it was hard to tell if he were still breathing.

“My leg is much better, sir,” replied Blaz. He saw Gratzfirmer smile ever so slightly.

“Can you perform the duties of your new position?” asked Baer.

Blaz tried to sound confident. “Yes, sir, I can. I am a German soldier and I will do my best to serve the Führer.” He stared straight ahead and hoped that he was convincing.

Baer’s expression softened. The commandant nodded and opened a different folder on his desk. Without looking up, he addressed Gratzfirmer. “Show him his quarters,” he said. “Make sure he has everything he needs. Dismissed.” The men saluted their commander and exited the office.

Gratzfirmer picked up Blaz’s bags and carried them as he led Blaz through the compound. The stench took Blaz by surprise again, and he covered his mouth with his right hand for a moment. He nearly asked his guide what caused the odor, but he thought better of it. Gratzfirmer pointed out different buildings and what they were used for as Blaz made mental notes. Blaz noticed that the prisoners looked down or moved hurriedly away when Gratzfirmer came near them. They seemed more afraid of

him than they did of the other guards. “Is this your first time in a camp?” asked Gratzfirmer.

“Yes, it is,” said Blaz. He had trouble maintaining traction with his cane, which nearly slipped a few times, even though the ground was dry. “How long have you been here?” he asked. Blaz tightened his grip on his cane and glanced down at the ground for a moment.

“Three years,” replied Gratzfirmer. The soldiers stopped walking and looked each other squarely in the eyes as Gratzfirmer dropped the bags onto the ground. “Three long years,” he added, without trying to hide his bitterness. “I am the senior guard here and what I say goes. No matter what your rank is.” He paused to let that sink in. “The men under me respect that. I expect you will do the same, war hero.” He slapped Blaz’s right shoulder in what was supposed to be a friendly gesture, but Blaz felt the underlying hostility. Gratzfirmer picked up the bags again. “And this is the last time I shall be your bellboy.”

They began walking again. “I’m not here to cause trouble,” said Blaz. “I just want to do my job.” Gratzfirmer nodded and Blaz hoped that settled things. Blaz reached over and took his belongings from Gratzfirmer. “I don’t need a bellboy,” he said.

The men stopped in front of the officers’ barracks. The grey building blended in with the other structures, the only discernible difference was the identifiable sign over the front door. Gratzfirmer stepped forward and opened the door, holding it in place as Blaz went through. The creaky door slammed shut behind them.

There were six single rooms inside the building. Blaz was assigned room 4. He opened the door and entered the tiny room. The claustrophobic space was occupied by a

bed, two bureaus, and a modest night stand. A small desk and chair were also pressed against one wall, with a typewriter and a lamp resting on the desk. Blaz put his bags down in front of one bureau. He sat down on the bed to rest his aching legs.

“It will be good not to be short-handed anymore,” said Gratzfirmer, as he leaned against a wall. “The extra duties were beginning to strain morale,” he added.

“What happened to my predecessor?” asked Blaz.

Gratzfirmer grimaced. “He was not a loyal German, like us,” he said through gritted teeth. “But the Gestapo took care of that,” he added. Blaz nodded and he didn’t ask for any more details. “Well, I have other things to do. The duty roster is posted outside of the commandant’s office. Your first shift is tomorrow at 7 am.” Gratzfirmer put on his hat and looked at his reflection in a small mirror above a bureau. “We eat breakfast at 6 am in the mess hall and dinner is at 6 pm. Heil Hitler,” Gratzfirmer said enthusiastically.

“Heil Hitler,” responded Blaz. He watched the man leave and the door close behind him. Blaz lay back on the bed and sighed. He rubbed his bad leg as he stared blankly at the ceiling. After a few minutes, he dutifully rose and unpacked his bags.

There was still more than an hour to go before dinner, so Blaz took a walk through camp to get more familiar with his surroundings. The air felt thick and the daytime heat remained oppressive. Pigeons gathered near trashcans and picked at the scraps on the ground. Blaz exchanged salutes and greetings with the other guards; most of them reacted to him with genial curiosity. Some politely offered him cigarettes, which he turned down with the wave of a hand. The inmates in their ragged clothing shot nervous glances in his direction, but none of them appeared to be a serious threat.

Blaz stopped when he spotted a group of children playing near a southern fence. The young boys wore shorts, but no shirts or shoes, while the young girls had ripped tops and threadbare pants. Despite their miserable conditions, they managed to run and yell while kicking around a nearly deflated soccer ball. They closely resembled any youngsters one might find in the richest neighborhoods in Berlin.

“Loud, nasty vermin,” said a voice behind Blaz. He turned to see an officer standing nearby with a cross expression. The soldier moved closer and saluted Blaz. “Scharführer Conrad Kroller,” said the man. Blaz saluted back. “You must be the new man.” Blaz nodded and introduced himself. “Good to know you,” said Kroller. He pointed at the children. “Future enemies of the Third Reich, according to the Führer.”

Blaz wondered if this were a test. It wasn’t like an SS man to be so flippant about the leader of the German people. “All enemies start off as children, don’t they?” he asked. He moved on with his tour and Kroller followed him. “We can’t take any threat too lightly,” he added.

“I suppose not,” said Kroller. He wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his right hand. “I’ll be happy when this whole war is over and I can get back to work on my farm. I miss my freedom.” He paused and glanced at Blaz. “Are you married?” he asked.

Blaz smiled. “No, not yet.” He looked down at his injured leg. “I’m not sure there will be a big demand for cripples,” he said. He stopped as the pain began to worsen again.

“They won’t see you as a cripple, my friend,” said Kroller. “All they’ll see are the medals on your chest that you earned in battle. You’ll have any lady you want.” He

smiled and Blaz appreciated the sentiment. Kroller nodded toward Blaz's bad leg. "Is the injury permanent?" he asked.

"It's hard to say at this point," replied Blaz. He wiped some sweat from his face. "The doctors told me to get as much exercise as I can and hopefully the leg will heal completely." They started walking again and Kroller matched Blaz's slower pace. Then, in a quieter voice, Blaz asked: "What do you make of our commandant?"

Kroller raised his eyebrows. "Baer?" He shrugged. "He is a good officer. He expects the best of his men, which he should. But he is a reasonable man." Kroller cleared his throat. "It's Gratzfirmer you need to watch out for," he advised. Blaz nodded. "He thinks he is second in command, which of course Karl Hoecker is, and he has eyes on the commandant's chair," said Kroller. "Those close to the top are much like schoolchildren."

Blaz and Kroller finished their tour at the mess hall just as other soldiers were entering the building. The duo was met with salutes from the other hungry men. They stood in the food line with metal trays in their hands. Workers in striped shirts served the chow. Blaz chose two hunks of meat, two scoops of potatoes and a serving of something green that looked like string beans. Kroller led him to a table and introduced him to the other soldiers.

The men laughed and told stories as they ate. Kroller led most of the conversations, his booming voice echoed off of the walls. Blaz felt comfortable for the first time since his arrival. Soon, another soldier approached the table with a tray-full of food. It was Gratzfirmer. He sat across from Blaz and greeted his fellow soldiers. Then he addressed Blaz. "Do you find our accommodations to your liking, war hero?" he asked.

“Everything is fine,” replied Blaz. He picked up the pitcher of water from the middle of the table and poured some into his glass. He sipped the cool liquid and stared at his adversary. Gratzfirmer put a forkful of food into his mouth.

“What do you mean, war hero, Gratzfirmer?” asked one of the other guards.

Gratzfirmer swallowed with a smile. “Don’t you know?” he asked, keeping his eyes on Blaz. “We are in the presence of greatness.” He pointed at Blaz with his fork. “Obersturmführer Schaffer has medals for bravery in battle. I’m surprised he hasn’t told you all about it.” His smile vanished. It was replaced with a sneer. “Go ahead hero; tell us how you did it.”

“You sound jealous, Wilhelm,” said Kroller. Gratzfirmer glared at him. “How can you fault a man for doing exceptional duty? If you like, I can shoot you in the leg,” he joked. The other men laughed, but Gratzfirmer’s face reddened. Kroller smiled. “The enemy is out there, remember?” he added.

“I know just where to look to find my enemies,” said Gratzfirmer. “And where to point my rifle.” The senior guard looked away from Kroller when a worker brought a new pitcher of water over to the table. The worker stood by Gratzfirmer’s side until the guard nodded. The man quickly turned to go back to his station. In his haste, he accidentally bumped into another SS guard, knocking the soldier’s tray to the floor.

Everyone in the mess hall watched as the guard screamed at the worker. Some of the food from his tray had spilled onto his pristine uniform. The guard grabbed the worker by the collar and slammed him against a wall. “Look what you’ve done, you stupid Jew!” he yelled. The worker vehemently apologized. The guard pulled out a pistol and pressed it against the worker’s head.

Blaz began to rise, but thought better of it when he realized there was no one else was trying to intervene. Gratzfirmer was the only other person who spoke. "If you're going to shoot him, at least have the decency to do it outside," he said. "Some of us are still trying to eat."

The angry guard dragged the worker outside as the prisoner begged for his life. Once the mess hall door closed, the other men resumed their conversations. Blaz sat still, not sure of what to do. He glanced over at Kroller, but the storyteller didn't seem affected by the altercation. A few seconds later, a shot rang out from the yard.

Everyone paused again until Gratzfirmer broke the silence. "If this keeps up, we'll be serving the food ourselves," he joked. Most of the men laughed. Gratzfirmer peered at Blaz. "Something wrong with your dinner?" he asked.

Blaz shook his head. He continued eating and forced himself to finish. The angry guard returned and got himself a new tray of food. Blaz rose, dropped his empty tray in the disposal area and left the hall. Once outside, he saw the body of the executed worker. It lay in the middle of the yard as a warning to the other prisoners.