

Chapter One

Chill

The corpses around me provided an odd sort of comfort. These people had been my friends and fellow captives. We had worked alongside each other during long, harsh months in the Nazi slave camp, helping each other when we could.

Above me was Josip, who had been injured with me in the bomb blast at the factory. In life, he'd tried to protect us younger boys from the harshest jobs, and now, in death, his body was my shield.

Below me were two women and one man who had all died slowly from lack of food. I felt guilty, lying on top of them. They deserved more respect than that, but would I have smothered if I had hidden any deeper in this death wagon? I said a silent prayer for their souls.

Shuffling footsteps close by . . .

I held my breath and closed my eyes. I forced my face to take on the slackness of death. The canvas rustled as it was pulled aside and I tried not to flinch as a beam of light penetrated my eyelids. A guttural grunt. Canvas rustling back in place, returning the truck bed to a welcome darkness.

The *snick* of a truck door opening and the *smack* of it closing. The engine roaring to life and the smell of diesel fuel. We were moving. But within moments the truck idled to a stop, the engine still grumbling. Fear threatened to grip me, but I had no time for that. What if the canvas was opened again? I had to look dead. Forcing my body into limpness, I closed my eyes once more.

An exchange of laughter and words in German between the driver and someone else — likely one of the guards at the gate. I held my breath and emptied my mind, then waited for what seemed like an eternity but was probably only a minute.

The truck engine roared once again, and we were moving. Relief washed over me, but I knew that my challenges had just begun.

I had to get out of this truck once it was a kilometre or two away from the camp. If I was still here when it got to its destination, I would be burned alive.

I gently rolled Josip's body away from me and tried to sit up, but I was stiff and chilled and dizzy. I wore nothing but a thin hospital gown, and the jagged row of stitches holding together the wound in my thigh throbbed. The truck pitched and bumped along the bomb-pitted road and I felt queasy from the sweet smell of the corpses.

Crawling amidst the dead, I got to the back of the truck bed and shifted onto my knees. The canvas was tied from the outside, so I worked one arm through where the fabric ended and groped around for the knotted rope outside. As the driver swerved and swayed, probably trying to miss the bigger holes in the road, I grabbed onto the side of the truck bed so I wouldn't fall, and worked at loosening a single knot. It had begun to rain, making it hard to get

a grip on the rope, but finally I managed to loosen the canvas enough.

I squeezed my body out between the canvas and the metal, balanced my bare feet on a tiny bit of ledge and took in one long gulp of cold, clean air. Rain washed over me.

My plan was to hold on and prepare for a careful fall, but just then the truck hit a pothole. I flew through the air and crashed down in the darkness.