

Night and Fog
by Reno MacLeod & Jaye Valentine

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by *Reno MacLeod and Jaye Valentine*

Chapter One

3. Feb. 1942

Cold, bone-aching cold, and for the past two months life at KZ Sachsenhausen had been miserable for all occupants, guards and prisoners alike. Armed with two fingers-worth of

confiscated Cognac in a snifter, *Sturmbannführer* Karl Schumacher of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* stomped his spit-polished black boots on the wooden porch of his house and looked out over the dreary dawn landscape. Snow danced in miniature cyclones down the residential street leading up to Sachsenhausen's main gate. Within the hour, the same space would fill with the latest arrivals of prisoners from the south and from the east. The Czechs had been particularly problematic lately.

In stunned, shuffling rows of five the deportees marched each morning through the small town from the train station, bringing hardly a glance from the locals, squeezing into rows of two to fit through the gatehouse under Karl's watchful, accounting eye. The streets in this quadrant of Oranienburg had been populated with the hobnailed boot prints and residences of the *Schutzstaffel*—Hitler's mighty SS—for some time. They didn't care enough to awaken early for the spectacle anymore. The novelty had worn off long ago.

The day's first light created a blanketing haze but did little to buffer the sounds of the awakening camp. Shouted orders, occasional gunfire, and the incessant noise of barking dogs echoed far beyond the installation's perimeter. A quick scan of the watchtowers showed them appropriately manned.

Karl gave his glass a slight tip, a mocking toast to the camp at large, and he took another sip of the body-warming, mind-numbing fluid. With any luck, the throbbing at the back of his head would soon fade. The best cure for a hangover was to remain drunk, but he'd been a fool to consume so much liquor the night before with *Sturmbannführer* Dietrich Schmitz and friends. Presenting as anything but sharp and controlled in front of the inmates could cause problems later. At least he'd been able to sleep longer than normal—a fellow guard owing him payment for a gambling debt had agreed to cover for him at the pre-dawn pick-up at the train station. The selection process at the main gate would still be Karl's responsibility, however, but not having to meet the train in town had bought him two extra hours of much-needed sleep.

He finished his liquid breakfast and went back inside to fetch his pistol, coat, and cap. Christof would be approaching the gate at any moment with the day's morning roll-call roster, and Karl had several additional items to discuss.

Another typical workday in service of the *Führer* and the Fatherland had begun.

* * * * *

Karl shoved his hands into the pockets of his gray greatcoat and kept his head down against the wind. The winter bit right through the thin leather of his gloves, and he longed for the pleasant warmth of his modest house or even the meager heat of his office. He passed the front entrance of the large, green building to his right—the SS officers' Casino, quiet now after the previous night's rowdy gathering—before turning left into the camp entrance and spotting Christof.

Christof looked up from his clipboard, striking out his right arm in salute as Karl approached. "*Heil* Hitler! Good morning, *Herr* Sturmabführer."

Mumbling to echo the required verbal salutation, Karl briefly lifted his right arm and crooked his elbow. "When I first took this position, the trains were far less frequent. How many prisoners do we have on the roster today?"

Hauptsturmführer Christof Mehler had five years and ten centimeters on Karl, along with the annoying habit of being too fucking cheerful first thing in the morning. Karl had learned *that* lesson early, during their formative years together in the *Hitler-Jugend*.

"*Too* many—12,497." Christof sighed. "Add to that the three cars just arrived with a total of 513 new detainees. Polish political prisoners, mostly, along with a group of Czech Gypsies spared by an *Einsatzgruppen* unit on *SS-Reichsführer* Himmler's personal orders." He shrugged. "I have no idea why they spared these Gypsies or why they diverted the train all this distance. Although, I have heard rumors to the effect that the Auschwitz expansion has fallen behind schedule, and all the other camps are taking on the overflow. Perhaps that's the reason."

Karl fell in alongside Christof, peered at the list, and grunted a cloud of vapor into the cold air. "Jesus, we'll be here all morning." He looked away from the paper. "I missed you at the Casino last night."

Smirking, Christof flicked his eyes up from the clipboard. "I'm certain you did not. You probably raised a toast that I wasn't able to hover over you for one evening, but duty—aside from keeping your ass out of trouble—occasionally calls."

The ground began rumbling subtly underfoot, the familiar vibration and noise of new prisoners approaching the compound at the end of their hour-long march from the nearest rail station. Why the architects of Sachsenhausen hadn't extended the tracks to the supposedly ideal, modern camp escaped him. In Karl's opinion, such shortsightedness didn't bode well for the

future of the *Reich*.

The prisoners trudged forward in lines five abreast, still dressed in the clothing they'd been wearing at the time of collection. The majority of the incoming shuffled along with their eyes submissively downcast, but Karl noted quite a few had their heads up, their alert gazes taking in the bleak surroundings. Some wore physical badges of defiance: bruises, blood, dirt, one man on an outside row limping badly. A few dared look Karl in the eyes.

"This batch looks wily and too well rested." Karl frowned. "They weren't left on the fucking train long enough. Two or three days with no food and little water makes our job of breaking the rebellious ones easier. How many times do we have to report this to the *Kommandant* before something is done?"

A topless *Kübelwagen* driven by an SS officer kept pace alongside the procession. Another guard stood on the passenger seat with one foot propped on the edge of the door, his rifle trained on the marchers. After lining up the prisoners in a reasonably controlled formation to pass through the main gate—smaller groups like this were relatively easy to herd—the driver roared the vehicle to a halt within a scant meter of Karl and Christof.

The passenger, an SS guard who couldn't have been more than eighteen, stood up in the car, shifted the strap of his Karabiner 98K rifle to his left shoulder, and saluted his superiors. "Heil Hitler! Good morning, sirs."

"Heil Hitler. Good morning." Karl roamed his gaze over the prisoners, some of whom had boldly sat on the ground without permission. Impertinence so early in the morning never failed to act as a harbinger for a shitty day. Karl sighed.

"We have 505 living. Six died in transit on the train. Two more stupidly decided to run during the march." The SS guard behind the wheel handed Karl a sheet of paper, a bloodstain on the wrinkled edge. "These are the names of the transit deaths; they'll be brought here for disposal later. The bodies of the runners are under the tarp in the back."

Karl took the memorandum and gave the rear seat of the vehicle a casual glance. He couldn't be too careful. He needed to account for every single body, living or dead, in order to keep his area of responsibility running without incident. He not only had the camp *Kommandant* to keep satisfied, but the on-site Gestapo as well.

"Herr Hauptsturmführer," he said to Christof. "Check the bodies, please."

Giving Karl a stern glance, Christof flipped open the tarp covering the rear seat of the

Kübelwagen and stared into the vehicle for several breaths before looking up again. "Two. Dead. Male. I'll leave ethnicity determination to the doctor."

Karl pursed his lips and nodded, signed the removal order, and handed the document back to the SS man operating the car. Another salute passed between them and the driver took off through the gates, leaving Karl and Christof to sort out the prisoners. The rising sun glinting off a rifle muzzle flickered from the top of Tower A above the main entrance gate, assuring coverage of Karl and Christof's backs from a bird's eye view. They moved closer to the newcomers.

"You're not in the best of moods today," Karl said.

Christof took a pen from inside his winter greatcoat and poised the tip to write. "The best of moods in this shit-hole is subject to personal interpretation. Shall we proceed?"

Grunting in agreement, Karl went to the head of the line and started the selection process. He pointed to each, asked for their name, and decided their worth on the spot. The first two were strong young men, Polish, no doubt resistance fighters by the looks of their makeshift camouflage garb. Karl motioned them to the right, and Christof recorded them on the list. The next two were presumably husband and wife, Gypsies, and of ages far too old to be useful for labor. With space becoming more precious with each passing day, they couldn't afford to double as a refugee camp. Orders were orders, at any rate. Karl let out a long breath, stroked his nose, and motioned to the left with two fingers.

Right, left, life, death. All in a day's work.

He came to a Polish family with four teenage children, two girls and two boys. Karl dismissed the parents immediately to the labor force line and turned to assess the children. In tears, the mother came rushing back despite her husband's desperate pleas for her to stop.

Damn it. Not today. Karl clenched his jaw so hard his teeth hurt. *Not today.* He herded the four teenagers behind him and caught the frantic woman's attention with a hard gaze. Pressing his left hand to her chest, he pointed over her shoulder with his right. "Back in line."

The woman cried out in Polish, and although Karl couldn't understand the words, he had no question concerning her intent. She started pounding on Karl's chest, sobbing, and his gut twisted.

He took his pistol from his holster and waved the weapon in her face. "Back. In. Line."

Of all times for one of the few higher-ranking officers stationed at the camp to pass by

him. Tall, square-shouldered, and imposing, *Standartenführer* Ernst Köehler had a well-deserved reputation for casual brutality and enjoyed his work far too much. Karl despised the block-headed son of a bitch.

"Why do you hesitate, Herr Sturmbannführer?" A serpentine smile curled Köehler's thin lips. "Shoot her."

Swallowing hard, Karl met the woman's terrified eyes. He lowered his pistol and without flinching, shot her dead, and even before her body fully hit the snow, he pushed her away from his mind. He turned his back on the woman's corpse and considered her two sons more closely. Dwelling on deeds done accomplished nothing.

Standartenführer Köehler tipped his hat to Karl, clasped his hands behind his back and moved on, whistling a cheerful tune.

"A touch too young even for you, Karl," Christof muttered under his breath, frowning. He nodded in the direction of an underling, who moved swiftly to remove the body from view. Letting out a harsh sigh, Christof turned his attention back to Karl. "Weigh your wants carefully, my old friend. I can only protect you to a certain degree without risking my own hide, and I've become rather fondly attached to my ass."

Karl returned his pistol to the holster and clenched his fists, contemplating an angry retort, but instead he exhaled an exasperated breath and motioned the four teenagers to the right. With the harsh example set dictating the result for acts of noncompliance, the crowd settled down. Karl continued the selection process in relative peace, and the dual lines moved steadily, quietly through the gate.

He slid Christof a sideways glare. "You should know by now that I would never endanger you, Hauptsturmführer Mehler." Karl sighed. The morning had gotten off to a bad start. He processed the next hundred or so with little effort, sending to the right anyone who seemed at all fit to work, directing only the extremely elderly and severely infirm to the left. Guilt tugged at him over the woman's termination, but someone so bold would've ended up dead sooner than later anyway, likely beaten and tortured first. He'd done her a favor, really, and from experience he knew his memory of her would fade before noon mealtime rolled around. Today's group contained no children too young to work which, fortunately for Karl, would make the workday easier to drink away. Thank God for small favors.

By 6:50 a.m., nearly all the new arrivals had passed through the Sachsenhausen gate

proclaiming *ARBEIT MACHT FREI*, the false promise of freedom through hard work a permanent fixture of the wrought iron. With the number of incoming prisoners dwindling, Karl shifted the energy of his thoughts to his personal needs. He'd patiently kept a sharp eye out day after day, month in and month out, but the one he sought had not yet crossed his path.

And then a young Roma boy—sixteen, seventeen, maybe eighteen if Karl employed his imagination—stepped forward from the thinning ranks to be counted, pulling a hand-knitted cap off his head to send long, tousled waves of dark-brown hair cascading down over narrow shoulders.

Karl's breath hitched and blood rushed southward to thicken his cock. He stared into big, brown eyes, at an angelic face too beautiful to belong to a boy, but caught himself in time and restored his steel façade. "Your name, Gypsy?"

The boy shook his head and furrowed his brow, clearly not comprehending, which worked to Karl's advantage. Karl grabbed the boy's upper arm, intent on pulling him aside. Unfortunately, the young Gypsy hadn't arrived without family.

A taller, more muscular youth grabbed Karl's wrist and wrenched him off the slimmer boy, shouting in dreadful, broken German. "His name is Antonin Novotny! Leave him alone; he's my brother!"

Yanking the boy against his body by a firm handful of luxuriant hair, Karl turned to Christof. "*Her* name is Antonia—a simple misspelling by some incompetent at the train station."

The look on Christof's face spoke of a multitude of Karl's sins: liar, thief, homosexual. Christof took a deep breath and wrote on his ledger. "*Antonia* Novotny. Best move her out of here immediately."

"You know I can't leave you here alone with these beasts." Karl motioned for a lower-ranked SS man to attend them before turning to Antonin's brother, the youth still standing close enough to warrant a bullet. "What is your name?"

"Marek," the Gypsy answered, with hatred narrowing dark eyes to slits. "Marek Novotny."

Karl regarded him for a moment. Marek didn't serve the purpose of Karl's primary interest—too old, too big, too masculine—but Karl could hold Marek's welfare over Antonin's head as incentive for easy compliance. He looked away from Marek to address the subordinate SS officer. "Make a request on my behalf for this one to be placed in the long-term work force,

Herr *Untersturmführer*. He's healthy, intelligent, and his German is passable. He seems well suited for a clerical job. Have him undergo a skills assessment."

"Yes, sir! Heil Hitler!" The *Untersturmführer* grasped Marek by the elbow and marched away.

With but a few more left to process, the main gate fell silent within minutes. Christof made a few notes then scribbled his name on the bottom of the sheet of paper before shoving the clipboard against Karl's gut. "*She* is all yours. Don't ask me to cover for you again after this one. I'm finished."

Karl didn't need to be a fortuneteller to know Christof had exceeded his daily limit for tolerating stress. Unfortunate—if only Christof would indulge more from the flask at his hip, he'd be better equipped to handle the demands of the job.

With a smile and shake of his head, Karl dismissed his best friend's curt words and foul mood. Back on task, he glanced down and forced Antonin to kneel, receiving only a small whimper of protest in response. Returning his gaze to Christof, Karl said, "I appreciate your loyalty. We understand one another well, yes?"

"We do, sir." Christof clicked the heel irons of his jackboots together, a hint of a smile gracing his handsome face. "Be careful, Karl. I would hate to lose you."

Karl grinned. "I would hate to lose me, too. I'm going to process this one myself. Should anyone inquire, I'll be unavailable until evening roll call. I have a full plate today."

"I'll see you then." Christof glanced at a passing cadre of helmeted SS NCOs marching toward them on their way to the communal dormitories located outside the camp's fortified perimeter. He returned his focus to Karl and raised his right arm straight out, his hand at eye level. "Heil Hitler!"

Karl snapped his heels together and returned the salute, meeting Christof's green eyes. "Heil Hitler." He nodded once, a silent acknowledgement that they both needed to keep their defenses raised, and then he moved a hand down to scoop Antonin up by the armpit.

Halfway to the gate, Antonin started dragging his feet and whining, muttering in an unintelligible tongue. Karl stopped and cuffed the back of Antonin's head and shook him by the arm. He leaned close to the boy's face and spoke in a harsh, hushed tone. "You would be wise to come quietly. There are far worse fates awaiting you inside these walls than what I have planned for you beyond them."

Antonin snarled and spat on the ground at Karl's feet, cursing in exceptional German with a sprinkling of the cur's own language. "Drop dead, filthy *gazhikanò*! You defile me by your very touch."

"So, you *do* understand German, naughty boy." Karl raised an eyebrow, recognizing the Romani word roughly translating as "outsider," which had been flung in his direction with disdain enough times for him to discover the meaning. He backhanded Antonin hard enough to knock the boy on his ass, and two guards rushed over immediately with rifles poised.

With a trembling bottom lip and tears brimming, Antonin swallowed hard. "Apologies, sir. Please . . . I don't want to die."

Narrowing his eyes, Karl raised a hand to halt any further action. "Gypsy scum; you're fortunate to find me in a gracious mood." He flicked one hand to wave off the guards, both of whom snapped to attention. "I can handle this cowering dog. Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" The guards saluted and returned to their post.

Karl gave Antonin a hard nudge to the hip with the toe of his boot. "Get up. Another disturbance will be your last."

On his feet again, Antonin brushed off the palms of his hands on dusty trousers. He met Karl's eyes briefly then hung his head, the very picture of innocent contrition, and he spoke in a soft, hushed voice. "I'll behave, sir. I promise. I've never been away from my family before. I'm scared."

The corner of Karl's mouth twitched involuntarily, and he looked away from Antonin. Emotions of that sort were best ignored. He placed a hand between the boy's shoulder blades and guided him through the gate.

Intimidation played a key role in the smooth operation of all concentration camps, Sachsenhausen no exception. Immediately upon entering the confines of the facility, prisoners saw the residence of the camp commander to the left. Although the house didn't appear remotely ostentatious, no one could enter or leave the compound without passing the structure, and even Karl often felt as if the scrutinizing eyes of the Kommandant, *SS-Oberführer* Hans Loritz, fell upon his back both coming and going. Since assigned to Sachsenhausen by Himmler in early 1940 to remedy disciplinary problems in the guard ranks, Loritz had made every effort to secure a memorable legacy within the SS. Karl feared few things and fewer people, but he did all he could to avoid provoking the angry little troll's wrath.

Karl continued walking, shoving Antonin along in front, eager and anxious to expedite the processing. He steered the boy toward the disinfection building, where incoming prisoners found themselves herded inside in groups of twenty for shaving, haircuts, and near-scalding showers. Piles of clothing and footwear sat just outside on the fringe of the *Appellplatz*, the wide-open field where roll call took place twice each day, naked bodies huddling together at the entrance of the building in a futile attempt to maintain warmth and modesty. Karl spotted the man whose services he required quietly watching over the shivering crowd.

"*Kapo* Tepper! A word, please."

Simon Tepper abandoned his task and approached, as Karl knew he would. Karl had a special working relationship with this particular green-triangle inmate, a con artist from Berlin. As a *kapo*, an overseer, Tepper functioned as a senior member of the *Sonderkommando*—Jews and criminals selected from among the prisoner population by the SS to take care of hands-on nastiness. Cleaning and delousing new arrivals, confiscating the prisoners' personal items, and eventually disposing of the dead—no SS officers dealt hands-on with such unsanitary procedures. As a result, symbiotic relationships often developed between some SS officers and certain kapos. An SS officer—for the minimal cost of a few cigarettes, a nip of vodka, clean bed linens, a loaf of bread or a day off from slave labor—could purchase sexual favors or help in acquiring the same.

A man in his late thirties, still muscular and strong, a German Jew with no immediate family and nothing to lose, Simon had proven a useful ally to Karl many times. Their relationship bordered on tenuous friendship, though both exercised caution to keep that aspect of their dealings concealed.

As permissible for most kapos, Simon wore civilian clothes: dark slacks, a dark shirt, a warm blazer, nearly new boots, all of which had once belonged to now less-privileged inmates. To distinguish him from a new arrival or potential escapee, he had a bright orange armband around his left bicep, the cloth decorated with an upright yellow triangle topped with an inverted green one to form a Star of David, along with his prisoner number. The armband designated Simon's position as a *kapo*; the triangles designated him as a Jew and a criminal.

Simon stopped just shy of Karl's personal space and smiled, removed a floppy beige cap, and ran a hand over the dark stubble peppering his shaved head. "And what is the good word on this fine morning, *Sturmbannführer* Schumacher?"

"Night and fog. This Gypsy requires your personal attention." Karl used the keywords of a decree issued by Himmler to crush resistance against the Third Reich—make suspected enemies discreetly disappear without a trace. Karl had utilized the term on another similar occasion, leaving Simon no room for misinterpretation.

Simon looked from Karl to Antonin then back again, returning his cap to his head. "This one won't need much work. Not much work at all." He took a step closer to Karl, near enough to whisper without anyone else eavesdropping. "I assume Hauptsturmführer Mehler will take care of any paperwork discrepancies?"

"The inexcusable clerical error has already been rectified." Karl shoved Antonin forward into Simon's arms. "A clean uniform and a hot shower should suffice for this one. *Do not* under any circumstances cut her hair or shave her. I trust a full pack of cigarettes and a bottle of vodka will prove adequate compensation for your time? Or do you have different needs today?"

"A full pack and a whole bottle?" Simon grinned broadly and laughed. "I'll have to remember how badly you wanted this one, so I don't receive the short shrift helping you *keep* her."

Karl smiled. "You're far too clever for your own good, Kapo Tepper."

"Evidence clearly to the contrary dictates that I am not." Simon grasped the back of Antonin's neck with a meaty hand. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"True." Karl turned and gazed down at Antonin's mud-spattered face. Those big, brown eyes gazed back, wary and fearful, and Karl's cock once again stirred. He cupped the boy's chin in his hand. "If you wish to live, follow Kapo Tepper's orders to the letter."

He turned and walked away, smiling, counting the hours until he could claim his prize.

Chapter Two

His heart pounded wildly as the man called Kapo Simon Tepper shoved him into a tiled room. Six rusty showerheads jutted out from high on the walls, and there were no windows.

Antonin panicked.

He'd overheard a conversation on the train about the showers in the camps. Several people in the crowded boxcar had whispered frightening words about Nazis killing prisoners in

the showers instead of washing them. He closed his eyes and prayed to God for a swift, painless end should the whispered words prove true. Antonin had always been a devoted son, a loving brother, a productive member of his community. The thought of dying so young upset him badly enough, but the threat of pain and torture scared him out of his wits. He snapped open his eyes and gasped as Kapo Tepper yanked hard at one sleeve of his handmade, woolen coat.

"Remove your clothing." Kapo Tepper sounded strong and commanding, and not unlike Antonin's father. "Strip everything off. You'll be given new clothes after the shower."

A rush of shame warmed Antonin's face as he undressed. He removed his coat and dropped the garment to the floor, and followed with his shirt and suspenders. Squatting, he untied the laces on his boots then stood to kick them off along with his thick, wool socks. He'd never before experienced such embarrassment, but he took a deep breath and kept his eyes glued to Tepper's as he shucked off his trousers and underwear.

God, please help me get through this!

"Use the soap. Wash *everywhere*." Tepper turned a valve near the doorway. Water rained down from the showerheads, creating cloudy billows of steam.

Antonin exhaled hard in relief, his momentary consolation dissolving the instant he stepped under the shower. Scalding water hit his cold skin like a thousand burning needles. He swallowed a scream and swore he could hear Kapo Tepper laughing through the noisy spray. Choking back tears, he grabbed the soiled bar of soap from a white dish built into the tile, summoning every shred of inner fortitude he could muster to keep from vomiting. The Roma were fastidiously clean, and the thought of having dirt from other people, especially from so many *gazhikanò*—those who were not Roma—made him ill. With revulsion and reluctance, he took the soap and began to scrub, pollution seeming a wiser option than death for the time being.

The shower stopped abruptly, a sudden chill replacing the water's heat. Tepper walked up to Antonin, jerked him out from under the drippy showerhead, and thrust a folded garment against his chest. "Put this on. Do not waste time."

Shivering from fear and the cold, goose pimples rose all over Antonin's body and his teeth chattered. He shook out the clothing, made of the same blue-and-white, vertical-striped material he'd noticed other prisoners wearing. In one hand, he gripped a long-sleeved shirt. In his other hand, instead of a pair of pajama-like pants, he held a skirt. He looked up at Kapo Tepper, puzzled. "I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?" Tepper took a step toward Antonin. "Get dressed!"

"But these are clothes for a woman! I am *not* a woman!" Antonin gripped the shabby, faded garments in tightly clenched fists. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Tepper grabbed Antonin by the shoulders, shoving him back against the shower wall, crowding him, rasping into his face with a vicious sneer and sour breath. "Listen to me, you little Roma cunt! You'll wear a skirt because Sturmbannführer Schumacher wants you in a skirt. If he says you are a woman, then you are a woman! You'd best get it into your pretty, little head that your life depends on doing exactly as he says. Trust me—your alternatives are even bleaker than you can imagine."

Wide-eyed, Antonin nodded, forcing himself to relax against the shower wall, demonstrating to Tepper a willingness to listen. "What do you mean, bleaker? What could be worse than—"

"They would slap a pink triangle on your shirt and put you in the isolation barracks with the rest of the homosexuals." Tepper backed off and gave a nod toward the clothes Antonin clutched. "You would be watched constantly, even while you sleep, and you would be forbidden to speak with any other prisoners. During the day, they would give you the hardest tasks in order to kill you quicker. They would send you to the *Klinkerwerk* to make bricks for the Führer, and as skinny as you already are, you wouldn't last a fucking week. Not that you'd last any longer here in the main camp as a man, looking the way you do. Soldiers have needs, and they're often quite willing to make certain concessions to fulfill them."

Antonin quickly donned the despicable garb, thankful his brother wasn't there to see him. He would take this shame to his grave, probably sooner than later, and he hated Kapo Tepper for playing a part. "But I'm not a homosexual! Why would they even think that?"

"It doesn't matter what they think—only what they *do*." Tepper adjusted the knee-length skirt, sliding the loose garment sideways to move the buttoned flap from the front to the side of Antonin's right hip. "The lesser of two great evils for you, pretty, is being in the hands of one SS man rather than passed around among many."

"Oh God," Antonin said with a shaky breath.

"Sachsenhausen isn't on God's itinerary, I'm afraid. You're on your own." Tepper pulled a blue-and-white striped kerchief from the pocket of his tweed blazer. He folded the cloth and placed the large triangle on top of Antonin's head. "Turn around."

Antonin slowly turned to face the wall. "You're a Jew. How do you sleep at night, collaborating with the Nazis?"

A rush of warm air brushed the back of Antonin's neck as Tepper lifted his hair to tie the kerchief. "I do what I'm told so that when I fall asleep at night, I know I'll wake up the following morning. We do what we must to survive, things we would never have thought possible in a civilized world. You will, too, and if we're very, very lucky, maybe one day we'll be able to seek revenge on the men who made us do these things." Tepper muttered something in a language Antonin didn't understand. "Come. I need to have you registered before taking you to the women's barracks. Keep the kerchief in place—there will be those who are jealous enough without them seeing your full head of hair hanging down."

A thousand thoughts raced through Antonin's mind as he turned away from the wall. Despite the internal agony brought on by his shame, he saw no sense in getting himself killed for some minor, preventable infraction. He would be polite and submissive, observant, aware of every nuance regarding camp life. Follow the rules. Play the game. Live to exact blood revenge on these accursed, godless dogs.

The cold, wet tile tormented his bare feet, but he didn't allow his face to express the pain. He tucked a wayward lock of hair beneath the kerchief. "Am I passable?"

Kapo Tepper frowned. "To men starved for sex, probably yes. Women have keener senses concerning such things, but this will have to suffice. You'll only be in the barracks a few hours anyway. Keep your head down and your mouth shut when the guards are near. If anyone asks after I'm gone, say only that Sturmbannführer Schumacher commanded that you keep your hair. Everyone knows of his penchant for fucking the prettiest foreign girls."

A shudder of loathing raced down Antonin's spine, and he swallowed a sour taste. Purposely softening his voice, he replied in a quiet tone. "*Antonia* will behave."

"She had better, if she knows what's good for her." Tepper took hold of Antonin's arm, and without another word dragged him barefoot across the snow into a small shed. Inside, one SS man sat behind a small desk, while another stood behind a large camera perched on a table. The man behind the desk had only two pips on the left collar tab of his tunic. Sturmbannführer Schumacher had four pips, so Antonin surmised that this man held a much lower rank. Not that rank mattered for him, but he had resolved to remain observant.

Kapo Tepper removed his cap and held it to his chest before addressing the man in

charge. "I bring a late arrival for processing, sir."

The man behind the desk opened a book and looked up from the pages. "Why has her head not been shaved?"

"By order of Sturmbannführer Karl Schumacher, sir." Tepper smiled lecherously. "I believe she holds his special interests."

The SS man behind the camera snorted a laugh. "The man's a fucking insatiable hound."

"You're just jealous because he has first choice when they come off the train." Chuckling, the man behind the desk met Antonin's gaze. "*Sprechen Sie deutsch?*"

Antonin nodded.

"Name?" The man removed a fountain pen from its fancy holder.

Taking a breath, Antonin spoke in a soft voice. "Antonia Novotny."

The man wrote on the open page. "Date of birth?"

Antonin swallowed hard. "The thirteenth day of November, 1924. I'm seventeen."

"Origin?" The man wrote in his book again.

"Czechoslovakia." Antonin held his breath.

"There is no Czechoslovakia anymore." The man cackled and looked up, cocking one eyebrow. "*Zigeuner?*"

Gypsy. Antonin grabbed the sides of his skirt with clenched fists. "Yes, sir."

After scribbling another note in the book, the man again looked up from the desk. He reached into a box beside him and extracted a pair of tattered triangles of brown cloth along with two rectangles of white cloth marked in ink with the same six numerals. "Welcome to KZ Sachsenhausen, number 109509. Enjoy your stay. Move to the photography station. After your processing is complete, the kapo will accompany you to the prisoner laundry to have the badges sewn on your uniform."

The other SS man pointed to a rickety chair placed in front of a white backdrop hung on the wall in one corner of the shed. Antonin took the badges from the desk and went to the chair, taking a seat to face the camera. The photographer fiddled with some sort of mechanism on the front of the device before peering into the viewfinder. The camera flash startled Antonin, temporarily blinding him. The photographer then took profile pictures in rapid succession and told Antonin to stand.

"Dismissed." The SS man at the desk closed his book. "Kapo, take her to the seamstress

then to one of the regular women's barracks. The Jewish section is overrun with vermin, so we've had to resort to using space for some of them in the regular barracks." He looked at his comrade and gave a sardonic laugh. "They're multiplying like fucking rats in a sewer."

The narrow-eyed look of disdain that Kapo Tepper gave the SS man went unseen by the SS men, but didn't escape Antonin's notice.

Chapter Three

The seamstress in the laundry facility made speedy work of affixing the identification badges to Antonin's uniform with just a few stitches. He now wore a brown, upside-down triangle and a number patch on the shirt over the left breast area and an identical set on the skirt at his right thigh.

Back out into the snow for an agonizing walk to what seemed like the farthest end of the camp, Antonin's wet hair froze in hard clumps against the back of his neck. He stumbled frequently, his feet so cold he could barely feel his toes, and each time he tripped Tepper jerked him up roughly by the elbow.

The women's barracks, situated apart from the men's, consisted of several lengthy, side-by-side buildings. Long rows of wooden bunk beds stretched down both sides of a narrow aisle, looking more like storage shelves in a warehouse than a place to sleep. By the appearance of so few bunks without bedclothes, the building seemed inhabited to capacity, but only a handful of women presently occupied the space.

Not daring to move without permission, Antonin met Kapo Tepper's dark eyes. "Where is everyone?"

"Working. You should relish the fact that you've missed today's work-detail assignments. This will be your last chance for rest." Tepper jerked his chin toward the bunks. "Select one that has no bedding. Perhaps if someone is feeling charitable, she will donate some to you. There are no more bedclothes in storage, and Berlin has become increasingly slow at fulfilling requisitions. I'll return in a few hours to fetch you. Stay out of trouble."

Tepper left the building. The flimsy wooden door closed behind him, returning the barrack to relative darkness.

With his arms crossed over his conspicuously flat chest, Antonin kept his eyes on the ground and walked slowly down the aisle, flicking his gaze sideways at regular intervals. All the beds looked taken, covered with thin mattresses and shabby, threadbare sheets tucked in at the corners with incongruous perfection. Several women paused in their conversations to look at him as he passed, but they said nothing. He began to give up hope of finding a vacant spot and contemplated what punishment he might incur as a result, when the sight of a barren upper bunk near the end of the right-hand row came into view. He let out a shaky sigh of relief and approached, stopping at the foot of the double-stacked beds. A young woman—with extremely short, brown hair and a body as thin as a winter twig—looked up at him with huge, brown eyes from her cross-legged position on the lower bunk.

Antonin had no clue where the woman came from or what language she spoke, but he had to start somewhere. He pointed to the upper bunk and spoke to her in German, careful to keep his voice soft. "Excuse me, but is this bed empty?"

The woman's gaze flicked to the bunk above, then back to Antonin, a sad smile forming on her drawn and tired face. She replied to him in accented German, "Unfortunately, yes."

"Then I'm sorry to have bothered you." Antonin sighed and looked around.

"Oh no, no bother at all!" The woman stood, frail and starved. Dark hollows underscored her eyes, and her lips appeared too thin and painfully parched. "I only said that because the girl who has been sleeping there won't be back. She was my friend. You're welcome to take her spot. My name is Magrita."

"Anton—" He caught himself and gave a courteous nod. "Antonia. I'm very sorry for your loss. How long have you been here?"

"I've lost track of the days. Two months, maybe three? You'll find that one day runs right into the next." Magrita stood for a second and tugged a blanket off her bed, an identical one stretched taut over the mattress. She folded the top blanket and handed it to Antonin. "Here, take this. The nights are unbearably cold, so I grabbed Beatrice's blanket after they took her away, before they had time to come and reclaim it. I can manage with only one, like everyone else."

Antonin felt his heart warmed by that small act of selfless kindness. Perhaps he shouldn't abandon all hope just yet. He clutched the blanket to his heart like a treasured gift. "Thank you, Magrita. May I sit with you for a while? It's good to have someone to talk to who's not screaming at me and calling me vile names."

Magrita moved closer to the foot of the bed to make room. "In time, those sorts of disturbances become easier to ignore. The random beatings and the starvation, however, will wear you down fast." She paused, and as Antonin sat on the edge of the bed, she reached out to catch a dark curl spilling out from beneath the kerchief. "They let you keep your hair."

"*Bipachivalò beng!*" Antonin spat the angry words in his own tongue before reverting to the local language. "Dishonorable devil!" He took a deep breath and lowered his volume, looking around first to assure no one listened in. "An SS officer pulled me aside when I arrived and directed the man who led me to the hot showers not to cut my hair. I don't know why."

"Monsters. God will make them all suffer one day." With angry tears in her eyes, Magrita kissed Antonin on the forehead. "You must be strong in this place, but if you need a way out, I have seen the quickest method is to run to the wire fence."

Antonin nodded. His people were nomadic, but they were far from stupid or uninformed. Some of his fondest memories as a small boy were of sitting with his *dàki dey*, his maternal grandmother, at daybreak reading the local newspaper while encamped on the outskirts of the nearest big city. He would earn a sip of his grandmother's strong coffee laced with liquor for each paragraph he could read aloud without stumbling. Antonin smiled, feeling wistful, recalling how scandalous and grown-up he'd felt at the time for drinking coffee like an adult. A mobile death squad had killed his beloved grandmother, along with most of the elderly members of his clan. Because of her, Antonin recognized an electrified fence when he saw one, and the triangular perimeter of Sachsenhausen had such a fence lining the borders.

Shoving sad thoughts of his own recent losses away, he slipped a gentle hand into one of Magrita's, all loose skin and sharp bones, and he forced a small smile. "I'm sorry you lost a friend, but I'm glad I found one."

"I know how scared I was when I first came to this place, and I've discovered that I can maintain some sense of humanity by trying to be kind and helpful." Magrita placed her other hand over top of Antonin's. "We *must* be better than they are, Antonia. We must remember who we are and where we came from, and we must behave in a way we can be proud of when we leave this world. When your SS man comes for you, remember that he can never touch your soul—*that* belongs only to you and God."

The encouraging words helped to calm Antonin even as mental exhaustion began to overtake him. The sun hadn't yet reached its zenith, but he'd been in transit for many days spent

mostly on his feet in the freezing cold. The worn blanket on his lap felt like a tiny piece of heaven. He leaned forward and gave Magrita a fond hug. "I should rest while I'm able. Thank you, my new friend."

Magrita offered a smile, and Antonin climbed the rails to the top bunk with a lighter heart. The cold, hard mattress was nonetheless welcomed by his aching back and sore feet, and drowsiness crept over him despite the myriad of horrid noises coming from outside. He snuggled the blanket under his chin, said a silent prayer for Magrita and her late friend, and closed his eyes.

Sleep rescued him from the living nightmare with blessed, blissful speed.

Chapter Four

By the time end-of-day roll call arrived, Karl had nearly depleted his second full flask of vodka. He'd spent most of the day assigning the previous day's new prisoners to their work details, and then he'd gone to inspect the progress on Kommandant Loritz's pet project, the secretly and sarcastically named Station Z. The main gatehouse, officially called Tower A, was the only way into the camp. For the inmates, Station Z—with its massive firing-squad pit, four stationary cremation ovens, and planned mass-gassing chamber—would be the only way out. Construction wasn't moving along nearly fast enough to meet the mid-spring deadline for completion. Karl would have to pull slave-labor resources from other areas or risk an angry comeuppance from Hans Loritz.

All that and more weighed on Karl's mind as he walked across the *Appellplatz* to meet Christof, who'd already started calling out names. Row upon row of men stood before them, some barely able to stand, the sick and dying dropping like so many flies. NCOs with their barking dogs moved the inmates back to their barracks after Christof checked off each block.

Karl stopped next to Christof and folded his hands behind his back. "Don't forget the misspelling."

"Give me some fucking credit." Christof looked up from his clipboard and gave Karl the evil eye. "I've had a great deal of practice keeping your secrets."

Karl made no effort to respond. He waited patiently and watched as the names of the

male prisoners were read off and the men led away, his mind wandering to more pleasant things. He shook off the hazy reverie only when the women spilled onto the field from the laundry, kitchen, and sorting barracks to fall in line.

As Karl looked up and down the rows, he couldn't find the Gypsy boy he'd disguised as a girl. "Where is she? She should be here by now."

"Patience." Christof checked off a name on his list and slid a playful smile sideways. He cleared his throat, stood straight, and addressed the remaining ranks. "Novotny, Antonia, 109509. Step out of line and approach."

Women in the center of the remaining pack parted; within seconds, the prisoner summoned by Christof emerged.

"You made me wait on purpose, you bastard." Karl nudged Christof with his elbow, then turned and beckoned his prize forward. Had he not known of the treasures hiding underneath the striped skirt, he would've never questioned the prisoner's sex. Karl took a step forward, cupped Antonin's chin, and tilted the sweet face up. "There will be no cold, hard bed for you tonight."

Antonin said nothing, but the look in those warm, brown eyes spoke volumes: fear, raw and primal, utterly delicious. The remaining names called out by Christof came purposefully and agonizingly slow. Toward the end of the list, Karl cleared his throat and gave his friend a hard, exasperated poke in the ribs.

"Sorry." Christof snickered and slipped his pen into his coat pocket as two NCOs escorted the last group of females away from the field. "But watching you squirm is one of my greatest pleasures in this forsaken place." He jerked his head toward the end of the camp where the senior SS officers' neighborhood were located outside the restricted perimeter. "Go home. I'll cover for you until morning."

If only you knew how you make me squirm at times, my dearest friend. Karl offered a thankful smile. He'd had too many dreams about Christof's sexy mouth and big, strong hands lately. Forcing himself to look away from Christof and focusing on Antonin instead, he slipped a sweating, gloved hand under the boy's armpit. "I'll see you in the morning, Herr Hauptsturmführer. Thank you for your assistance today. Heil Hitler."

"Heil Hitler." Christof returned his attention to the paperwork on the clipboard, a mischievous smile on his face. "Try to behave yourself."

To be continued

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Reno MacLeod and partner Jaye Valentine live in a quaint, lakeside house on Cape Cod with their small menagerie of cats and freshwater fish. For more information regarding Jaye and Reno's work, please visit: <http://macleodvalentine.com>.

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