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Diary of an
IMMORTAL
(1945-1959)

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Evil is selfishness to the point of destruction.

Albert Harrison

CHAPTER

1

Death. I was so sick and tired of death. By April of 1945, I considered death, not the German Wehrmacht or the SS, to be my real enemy. I was a twenty-one-year old medic assigned to Rifle Company I, Third Battalion, 157th Regiment, 45th Division of the Seventh United States Army, and though it was obvious we were winning the war I did not count myself among its victors. My job was to save lives, not take them, and I failed many more times than I succeeded.

On Saturday, April 28th, we were approximately thirty miles west of the Bavarian capitol of Munich. The Nazi war machine was convulsing in the final grip of its death throes and nearly every German man, woman, and child was fighting with suicidal desperation to defend what little was left of their precious Fatherland. And every day I bore witness

to the desecration of one more law, ethic, or code of humanity as we journeyed one muddy step at a time into the depths of the abyss.

That afternoon, the other company medic stumbled upon a wounded German boy. The child couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen and was huddled tightly on the frozen ground curled in the fetal position while clenching his stomach. This medic was fresh off an LST at Marseilles—six feet of smiling, buck-toothed, corn-fed Omaha farm boy. Full of idealistic fervor, he was quite vocal in his belief that we were all on a sacred crusade to save Europe from fascism.

“There, there,” the Nebraskan said tenderly, kneeling beside the boy and softly brushing his dusty hair off his mud caked forehead as if he were calming a newborn calf on his daddy's farm. “You'll see, we're going to get you all fixed up in no time.”

I'd just stretched my legs and was walking over to assist him when I saw something that froze me in my tracks. There was a double black thunderbolt crudely sewn onto the boy's upper right shirtsleeve. Up until to that point, I'd never suspected the Nazis would recruit children for combat, but all the Nebraskan medic saw was a wounded child writhing in unbearable agony. His senses were so consumed with seeking the source of the boy's pain that he never noticed that the innocence naturally native to a child's eyes had slowly transformed into a cold, calculating stare. And that stare was now fixed upon him with a boiling ferocity.

He never heard the first word of my scream.

In a flash of sweaty earthen gray wool, the German youth unleashed a pistol out of the waistband of his greasy pants and shot the

unsuspecting medic point-blank through his freckled forehead. Blood, bone, and brain matter exploded out of the back of the Nebraskan's skull and splattered the face of a curious corporal who'd been standing behind him. The child's crooked smile of satisfaction was nothing less than demonic. As the corporal furiously wiped the human debris from his eyes, he began stomping the tiny SS warrior with his steel-toed boot, instantly transforming one of Hitler's fearless youth into an ordinary little boy wailing for his mother.

Boys.

That day I tried to save, patch up or repair at least a dozen boys. Not men, boys. Boys with their intestines sliding out through their fingers, their flesh torn out in chunks, their limbs so shattered it was only a question of where to amputate. Do you know what the face of a nineteen-year-old boy looks like when he knows he's about to die? It's one of absolute disbelief. For regardless of the bullets whizzing by his ears, the mortars exploding around his head and the bombs shaking the ground beneath his feet, a nineteen-year-old truly believes he is invincible. He truly believes he is immortal.

For youth is the great deceiver.

And when one of those anonymous German projectiles found its fragile mark, when white-hot shrapnel ripped through tender flesh, the universal truth was finally revealed to him. The truth that just as surely as he was powerless to choose the day he entered this world he was just as powerless to determine the day he would leave it. And if he was an American soldier, and if that day came in the spring of 1945, it was someone like me who rushed pell-mell through the smoking haze of

cordite to find him sprawled flat on his back with that twisted look of shock etched across his face. The rousing ideals that had previously sustained him, the siren's song of patriotism, bravado and glory were now all cast aside in a desperate struggle to preserve what little life was pumping through his veins. And it was at that moment he would look up at me with the eyes of a lost and lonely child, and always whisper the same last word:

"Please."

That night I listened to the cries of the dying and fought a losing battle with sleep before we geared up the next morning for our march on Munich and the possibility of liberating our first POW camp. The camp was located in a small town called Dachau about halfway between our position and Munich. Scuttlebutt was that Josef Stalin's son and other political prisoners were being held there. We'd also heard reports from the hordes of refugees streaming westward towards us about medical experiments and medieval style torture; stories almost too fantastical to believe. On the other hand, what kind of civilized nation used children for combat? That night I covered my ears to mute the sound of dying men and tried to shake the feeling that something I'd never experienced before was waiting for me just beyond the smoky Bavarian horizon. At 0730 we broke camp with Companies L and K leading the assault towards Munich. Our Company I was held back as the reserve unit with instructions to mop up any resistance that survived L and K's onslaught. We followed a comfortable distance behind, meeting little resistance, until we reached a town of tightly shuttered cottages called Prittlbach. There we received news that all bridges forward of our position had just

been sabotaged by the Germans. We were milling around wondering what to do next when our point man motioned for us to take cover. I dropped to the ground, slamming my stomach against the cobblestone street, and waited for the gunfire to snap. As I held my breath I heard a continuous squeaking sound steadily making its way toward us. I peered up from under my helmet to see a young woman sedately bicycling in our direction.

As she came into view I could see she was a classic Nordic beauty with long blonde hair cascading past her bare shoulders. It fell all the way down her back in the longest pony-tail I'd ever seen bouncing atop a lithe body festively adorned in a brightly patterned yellow and blue sundress. She was busily looking up at the sky, distracted by a squadron of silver P-51 Mustangs flying high overhead, and didn't notice us lying directly in her path until our point man jumped up and grabbed her handlebars, eliciting an adolescent squeal of surprise.

Private Doug "Lucky" Morrison was a red-haired Irish middleweight Golden Gloves boxer from Chicago with a face like a forever smiling English Bulldog and his nickname carved on the butt of his M1 carbine. Lucky and I were the only surviving members who'd come ashore in Sicily during Operation Husky in July of 1943. He held tightly onto her bicycle's handlebar and flagged me forward to translate. The poor girl was shaking, stuttering and probably scared to death we were going to rape her. My mother's grandparents were from Germany and I knew enough of the language to learn she had traveled here from Munich to check on her ailing grandfather in Prittlbach. We couldn't have cared less about her sick grandfather in Prittlbach. What was important to us

was that she had made it safely from Munich by crossing a bridge a little further down an unmarked side road. This was the kind of paradox in war that could drive a man over the edge. All day long we'd been crouching low behind our Sherman tank escort looking out for Volksturm snipers taking aim at us from behind any window or tree and this girl comes wheeling along like she's taking a Sunday ride in the park.

Satisfied she presented no danger, I warned her to get to her grandfather's house and off the street as soon as possible. She nodded nervously and pedaled away as fast as she could. With a throaty growl and a belch of oily smoke, our Sherman escort revved its engine and we cautiously proceeded around the sharp turn ahead. We soon discovered the girl had told the truth. Barely visible at the end of a narrow street was a narrow but thick wooden suspension bridge spanning a placid canal about thirty feet wide. But would it hold? We stepped back as our thirty-three ton steel behemoth gingerly began to curl its metal treads over the lip of the entrance.

Boom! There was an incredible flash of light, as if a photographer had popped a flashbulb in my face, accompanied by a deafening explosion as the center of the bridge disintegrated into a roaring orange fireball that mushroomed hundreds of feet into the air. The tank pitched forward, tottered for a moment, but miraculously stopped short of flipping into the murky water. Enraged, every man spun around on his stomach and leaned tightly into his M1, hell bent on placing a well-aimed .30 caliber bullet between the shoulder blades of a young German girl. Luckily for her, she had bicycled around the bend and was safely out of sight.

While we were checking the bridge to see if the center could be patched, Lucky poked his head underneath and spotted a small cable footbridge strung below. We scampered down the embankment and seconds later I found myself standing on the other side of the canal in Dachau.

At first glance, Dachau had all of the Old World charm of a sleepy Bavarian village on a Sunday morning. But there was a war going on and anything that appeared this quiet was usually sinister. A stained glass window could conceal a sniper, a vegetable garden could be mined, and anything else was probably booby-trapped. We were cautiously making our way down one of Dachau's narrow cobblestone streets when we began detecting a strange, rank odor. An odor even stranger and more disconcerting than that omnipresent combat cocktail of decaying flesh, caked perspiration and cordite. In fact, the last time I'd smelled anything remotely like it was in the monkey house back home at the Miami Zoo. Off to our left we caught sight of a large siding of forty to fifty sealed railroad freight cars positioned on the far side of an open field. As we crept up to the first car, I nearly stumbled over the badly decomposing corpse of a young female hidden in the tall grass her filthy, faded, blue and white striped pajamas barely visible beneath a dense carpet of hungry flies. Lucky grabbed the latch of the first freight car and shoved open the door. I wish I'd closed my eyes because the sight that greeted us will forever haunt me. It was a vertical wall of decomposing corpses that completely filled the freight car from wooden floor to roof. Dozens of dulled eyes stared back at us from the depths of starved eye sockets, each pair set in an ivory face frozen in a grimace of agony. There were men

and women of all ages, of all shapes and sizes, many locked in death embraces. And huge piles of human excrement everywhere.

A couple of the guys vomited, some cried, but most just cursed under their breath and looked away. Every soldier knows that in war there are no rules, but this was different. This was wholesale murder. We later estimated that there were at least two thousand bodies packed into those freight cars.

We were ordered to proceed and secure the Dachau concentration camp. This was a good thing because, after seeing those corpses inside those freight cars, nothing would have stopped us. We followed a line of winding railroad tracks until we reached a road marked by a lamppost with the words *SS Konzentrations Lager* suspended from its ornate arms. Above these words were two sets of three brightly painted enamel figures, one trio pointing right, the other to the left. The trio pointing right was of two peasants, one playing an accordion and the other holding an umbrella accompanied by a soldier leaning on a cello. These innocuous fellows pointed the way toward the entrance of the camp. We approached an imposing steel gate emblazoned with the words *Arbeit Macht Frei*—Work Makes One Free. Finding it locked, we scaled the adjoining brick wall and ran headlong into some SS troops and their German Shepherds. The early morning chill erupted with the sounds of gunfire and barking dogs. In less than a minute every Nazi man and beast was shot dead and an unsettling silence had descended upon the camp.

The quiet was broken by the sound of boots clanking down one of the guard tower's staircases. We turned to see a spit and polished SS

officer stiffly making his way down the steps. He was a veritable blueprint for one of Hitler's Aryan supermen: blond and Nordic, powerfully built, about six foot three and clean-shaven with his uniform perfectly pressed. I could smell the citrusy bergamot scent of his cologne from twenty yards away. Ignoring the fact that every one of our carbines were aimed at him, he proudly held his head high, jugged his chin out and marched directly up to our commander, Lieutenant Colonel Sparks. The German briskly saluted him and said in perfect English, "I hereby surrender to you the prisoner of war camp at Dachau. We have a total population of twenty-nine thousand, seven hundred and thirty with two thousand, nine hundred and forty-one sick cases and five hundred and fifty-one guards and soldiers remaining. Heil Hitler!"

Taken aback, Sparks motioned for the SS officer to join a group of about fifty other surrendering Germans who were being guarded by one of our machine gun squads against the brick wall of the camp. Without warning, the machine gunner opened fire, dropping the SS officer and at least a dozen other German prisoners who'd been standing with their hands in the air. Every one of us hit the ground except for Sparks who angrily rushed the gunner and kicked him clear of his weapon. He lifted the private, who couldn't have been a day over nineteen, up by his collar and brought the boy's terrified face close to his.

"You dumb shit, what in the hell are you doing?!"

"I'm sorry, sir," he stammered. "I thought they were trying to get away."

His answer was so ludicrous that Sparks was at a loss for words. Shaking his head in disgust, he assigned another gunner and was

beginning to address us when he was interrupted by the feeblest, most heart-wrenching voice I've ever heard.

"Americans?"

Sparks raised his hand for silence as the pitiful wail reverberated again throughout the camp.

"Americans?"

I've heard hundreds of dying men beg for mercy in a voice that claws at every fiber of your soul, but I'd never heard a human sound like this. This was a voice long devoid of hope. This was the voice of a man echoing from the bottom of an abyss.

"Yes, we are Americans!" Sparks shouted back at the empty camp.

With a terrific bang, every wooden door in the camp simultaneously slammed open and a tidal wave of human corpses hobbled across the ground swarming toward us. We were terrified of being trampled and braced ourselves against each another. The prisoners were horribly emaciated and dressed in the same filthy blue and white striped pajama type garments we'd seen on the corpses in the freight car. They were so physically weak that their hands felt like feathers brushing against our faces. Even their voices sounded avian, their sinus cavities deteriorated so badly they sounded like high-pitched, raspy birds. But for me, the gnawing question of "What are we really fighting for?" had finally been answered. Good had triumphed over Evil. And Evil was about to pay a heavy price. There were some major scores to settle in the camp and a number of prisoners appointed themselves both judge and executioner. Traitorous inmates called *Capos*, whom I later learned had enjoyed the easy life as Nazi collaborators, were tossed screaming in terror above the

crowd like human beach balls before being pulled down and torn limb from limb. And considering how physically weak the inmates were, these Capos did not die quickly.

While this mass retribution was taking place, I followed Lucky, Private Robert Torello and Corporal John Hanson over to the SS administrative area. In stark contrast to the inhumane conditions of the prisoners' quarters, it was obvious that the Nazi officers here had lived the good life. Freshly scrubbed cobblestone walkways gave way to meticulously tended gardens of cabbage and leeks surrounding quaint living quarters.

We followed one pathway to the end of a cul-de-sac with a small cottage marked *Kommandant*. Torello kicked in the door and we stepped into a lavish room decorated with French watercolors and carved German furniture. It reminded me somewhat of my parents' living room in Florida, but with two notable exceptions. In the center of the room was a giant aquarium at least ten feet long and five feet deep filled with dozens of colorful tropical fish and other exotic forms of marine life. Next to it was a small lampshade with a flaming dragon emblazoned upon it. On closer inspection, we were revolted to discover that the lampshade was constructed from tattooed human skin. If the former inhabitants of the cottage had been present we would have summarily executed them on the spot.

We explored the bedroom in search of any spoils we could cart away. Lucky rifled through the dresser drawers while Torello and Hanson ransacked the closets. They were coming up empty-handed until Lucky pulled a massive oil painting of Hitler dressed as a Teutonic

knight off the wall and discovered a combination safe. Torello immediately volunteered to open it. A wiry, street-smart Italian kid from Brooklyn, Torello often bragged that his uncle was a safecracker for the mob and had taught him a couple tricks of the trade. Torello cracked his knuckles and quickly went to work with all the confidence of a brain surgeon.

I was wolfing down some hard cheese and rye bread in the kitchen when I heard Torello mutter “Got it,” followed by a barely audible metallic click. A mad rash ensued as the men scrambled to view the contents of the safe. Stacks of Reichsmarks and assorted jewelry were snapped up in a flash. Christmas for these boys arrived early that year. Exhausted, I fell back into an overstuffed leather chair and watched them go to town. It was the first time I’d seen them smile or laugh in a while and I was just beginning to doze off when one of them said, “Hey, Doc! We’ve got something for you!”

Torello wheeled around to hand me a heavy, but beautifully polished mahogany case the size of a large tackle box. My first impression was that it had once belonged to a doctor or surgeon of high rank and probably contained precision instruments. I waited until the men returned to pilfering the safe before I flicked open the brass snaps and peered into the case. There were two envelopes stacked atop dozens of bottled pills. The first letter was hand-addressed to SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr. Sigmund Rascher from SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. My heart raced at the sight of the double-thunderbolt S’s embossed in black on the letterhead. I opened the envelope and translated the contents:

Sept. 9, 1943

Hauptsturmführer Rascher,

I am in receipt of your letter dated August 30th. I share neither your enthusiasm, nor your vision. Immortality is nonsense. I don't care how successful your experiments have been, I order you to destroy all of the shark extract and any research pertaining to it immediately.

The Führer has never, I repeat, never, expressed any desire to live beyond what is considered the average human life span. This Dr. Otto Krueger must be disciplined and possibly dismissed. I believe the only reason the Führer appointed him to perform research at Dachau was because of his family's association with Dr. Rosenberg. Therefore, please be discreet in this matter.

I want you to use every means possible and find out who is responsible for ordering Krueger to circumvent me on these experiments and report the findings directly to the Führer. I am glad that our beloved Führer was not bothered with this idiocy. Your demonstration of loyalty to me in intercepting this shipment will be rewarded. I look forward to hearing the results of more practical experimentation, such as the High Altitude tests.

Reichsführer-SS

Heinrich Himmler

Berlin SW 11

Prinz-Albrecht-Straße No.8

The other envelope was dated earlier and I found the content of its letter to be even more incredible.

July 1, 1943

My Beloved Führer,

It is with great pride that I inform you that my experiments have been more successful than I would have dreamed possible. I will not belabor you with the scientific terminology.

I believe that I have discovered a way to stop the aging process in humans. Please tell Dr. Gravitz to relay my personal thanks to our cooperative Japanese counterparts in Kobe. Their research papers were invaluable. The pills enclosed are extracted from the liver of the tiger shark. There are no side effects. Take one a day on an empty stomach immediately before bedtime. I have already produced enough pills for a fifty year supply. However, the anti-aging results will probably not be noticeable for ten to fifteen years.

Theoretically, you should be able to personally enjoy the fruits of your thousand year Reich. My Beloved Führer, may you truly live forever!

Your obedient and grateful servant,

Dr. Otto Krueger

I was lightheaded from sleep deprivation and it took a moment to comprehend what I was reading. Sitting in my lap were fifty large

hermetically sealed deep sapphire colored bottles packed in columns of five with ten across. Each bottle contained hundreds of tiny gold speckled pills. The insanity of war had just become a little more insane. My first thought was that it would be the ultimate irony if such an efficient factory of death had discovered a way to actually prolong life. I neatly refolded the letters, placed them on top of the bottles and resealed the case as the others finished cleaning out the safe.

“Hey Doc, we hit the jackpot!” Torello said, flashing a fistful of Reichsmarks in my face. “Find anything in the box?”

“No, not really,” I replied. “Just some sedatives. After seeing what they’ve done here, I’m sure some of these guys had trouble getting to sleep at night. However, this box is solid mahogany and the quality of craftsmanship is quite remarkable. I’ve never seen anything like it. You guys can keep the rest. I’m going to hang on to this.”

Lucky, Torello and Hanson stopped counting the money and looked at me as if I was shell-shocked. They grinned mischievously at one another and shrugged their shoulders. What the hell, now they only had to split the loot three ways.

Weighed down with Reichsmarks, gold, silver and a large wooden box, we scurried out of the administration area and slipped back undetected into the compound. By now, more units of the 45th Division had arrived and the place was humming with activity as Dachau’s floodlights casted an eerie glow over the concentration camp. Exhausted from celebrating and meting out justice, the majority of the former inmates milled about, unsure of where to go or what to do with their newly liberated lives.

The next day, April 30th, Munich fell to the Allies. And, except for the fanatical SS and Hitler Youth, the majority of the Germans were quickly losing their will to fight. The populace of Munich signaled their surrender by simply hanging white sheets from their balconies and rooftops, but the memory I will forever attach to that day is much, more personal. That afternoon my closest friend, Private Douglas “Lucky” Morrison, was killed in action two days short of his twenty-first birthday.

We were cautiously rounding one of Munich’s identical battle scarred, cobblestone streets when a rifle shot cracked the cloudless sky like a thunderbolt on a sunny day. Everyone instinctively slammed themselves to the street in a desperate attempt to get out of the sniper’s sightline. Everyone, except Lucky. I was horrified to peer up and see him still standing tall in the sunshine, oblivious to my whispered pleas to get down. His right hand slowly opened and his M1 clattered the cobblestones. Then, he sank to his knees, crumpling over onto his side. Ignoring the sniper, I dashed over to him praying for the umpteenth time that the red crosses attached to my helmet and jacket would somehow guarantee my safety. When I reached Lucky, his face was so tightly contorted in pain that, despite the hundreds of times I’d seen it on a wounded soldier, it still tied my stomach in knots. I ripped open his shirt to see blood pulsing from a small circular chest wound. As his lungs filled with fluid and he began to struggle for breath, he grabbed my jacket and gasped the last word I wanted to hear.

“Please.”

There was absolutely nothing I could do except whisper the battlefield lie I’d come to master so well. “Hang in there buddy,

everything's going to be okay."

As I cradled him in my arms, his eyes rolled into the back of his head and his gritted facial muscles relaxed, slowly transforming his agonized expression into one of a man serenely at peace. I gently laid him on the cobblestones as a bazooka team lined up and dispatched the sniper with surgical precision. It was all over that fast. One minute you're joking with someone who's survived the war long enough to qualify as your best friend and the next minute he's gone.

I was now, at the age of twenty-one, the only surviving member of my original unit. And I had no idea why I was still alive. It was certainly not because I was a medic. The Germans had been sniping medics left and right. And I didn't believe in luck. All of the four leaf clovers in Erin couldn't have saved Lucky Morrison. The bottom line was that I could be killed at any time. I sat in my tent that night contemplating my fate while I studied one of the sapphire colored bottles I'd found in Dachau. The three hundred and sixty-five round white pills packed tightly inside reminded me of tiny pearls, each embedded with tiny gold iridescent flakes that glistened when I turned the bottle against the moonlight. I cracked open the seal and detected an odor that smelled vaguely of the sea, reminiscent of many a seaweed encrusted seashell I'd plucked from the warm sands of Miami Beach. I reached in with my finger and fished out one of the pills. No longer shielded by the deep blue glass it sparkled so brightly that it illuminated the palm of my hand. It certainly looked as if it was imbued with magical properties. What did I have to lose? Perhaps I could cheat the Grim Reaper until I'd made it safely home to Florida. I hesitated when I thought about my strict Southern Baptist

upbringing and the soul-searing penalties of eternal damnation for attempting to alter my destiny in such a supernatural way. But I mostly thought about Lucky Morrison and the dozens of other good men who died struggling for breath in my arms after realizing they would never see their loved ones again. And then I thought of the one word I never wanted to hear escape my lips.

Please.

I popped the pill into my mouth and washed it down with a swig from my canteen. I winced at its metallic taste and patiently waited for some sort of reaction. Eventually, I fell asleep after experiencing nothing more earth shattering than if I'd swallowed an aspirin.

The next morning I walked into an intact Munich *café*, a miraculous escapee of the thousands of Allied bombs that had been dropped upon the city. The only thing available was coffee.

I slapped a dime on the black walnut bar and was rewarded with a steaming cup of joe poured into a badly chipped porcelain teacup. Through a cigarette haze I spotted Torello and Hanson with their muddy boots propped up on a sawhorse table as they quietly sipped their coffee behind a plume of smoke rings. Blowing on the brew I made my way over to their table, pulled up a chair and endured a full minute of tense silence before Torello spoke.

"I can't believe this shit. Lucky made it all that way, only to get it at the very end."

"Yeah, I know," I replied, searching for something profound to say. "I wish there was some way I could have saved him."

“Saved him?” Hanson said, resting his coffee cup on the table. “Listen Ronson, you may be a very brave medic. You may be a very good medic, but you’re not God. When it’s a man’s time to die, his time is up. His fate has already been decided by a higher power.”

Torello solemnly nodded his approval while I avoided Hanson’s gaze and stared down into my steaming cup of joe. “I don’t believe any of our destinies are written in stone,” I said. “We’ve all got more control over our lives than we think.”

Torello and Hanson frowned skeptically at each other before exploding with laughter. Embarrassed, I got up and walked away to seek refuge against a window frame. Hanson was laughing so hard he was practically choking back tears.

“Hey, Doc, no hard feelings, I just didn’t know this war had made you, uh, so philosophical!”

I returned a feeble grin and rested my head against the shattered frame. I didn’t know why I bothered to waste my time. Torello and Hanson were tough, cynical men who had long ceased to wonder why a random bullet fired in the heat of battle would choose one man over another. It was more of a comfort for them to believe they were unwitting pawns in a greater plan.

I was deep in thought, watching an endless stream of jeeps, trucks and tanks roll down the muddy snow strewn boulevard, when I became aware of a strange reflection in the shattered glass of someone standing behind me. I spun around to face a beautiful German girl. A young woman with brilliant blue eyes, flawless alabaster skin and blond hair pulled into a ridiculously long pony-tail. It was the same girl we’d

encountered on her bicycle in Prittlbach. At first, her beauty and soft smile were so disarming that I could only stare at her in a daze, until I realized what would have happened if I'd been anywhere near that bridge when it exploded. I grabbed her wrists and pulled her against me.

"I should break your arms right here," I hissed.

"Please, you must listen to me," she pleaded in heavily German-accented English, squirming against my grip. "I came here to tell you the truth."

I stared into those Nordic baby blues and paused. If she'd really been trying to kill me, she sure as hell wouldn't have been trying to talk to me about it. I pushed her away.

"Talk fast."

She claimed she didn't know the bridge had been rigged with explosives. She admitted seeing a couple of German soldiers fumbling around on the Dachau side of the canal, but didn't think anything of it as one of them smiled and waved her across. Her story made sense and even though I was attempting to maintain a cold, angry disposition, my resistance was crumbling. She was talking in broken English a mile a minute with her blue eyes flashing in all directions while begging for absolution in a breathless, schoolgirl-like voice. I stopped her just as I was about to crack a smile.

"All right, come with me." I said, grabbing one of her delicate hands and spiriting her out of the cafe before Torello or Hanson could react.

"So, you are a doctor?" she shouted above the din of the military vehicles as we walked along the boulevard.

“No, I’m not a doctor. I’m what’s called a combat medic. I give first-aid to the wounded in the battlefield until we can get them to a real doctor.”

“But I heard your friends in the cafe call you Doc.”

“It’s just a nickname. When a wounded soldier looks up and sees a guy wearing red crosses on his helmet working as fast as he can to keep him alive, he has a tendency to call him Doc.” I craned my neck and looked up and down the boulevard. “You know, I’m not supposed to be fraternizing with you.”

She looked at me quizzically and asked, “What does fraternizing mean?”

“It means I shouldn’t be standing here in public talking to you and acting as if a war isn’t going on. In other words, it’s against Army regulations to be strolling along with a German girl in a German city we occupied only a couple of days ago. I could get into serious trouble.”

“That’s ridiculous! How could I hurt you?”

I couldn’t believe she was that naive. There were more than enough stories floating around about drugged GIs awakening to find their genitals sliced to ribbons.

“We’d better get back,” I said.

She jerked me to a stop. “I have a solution to this fraternizing problem. If anybody asks, you can say that I am injured and you were kind enough to escort me home. I don’t understand how you could get into trouble for helping an unarmed civilian.” And with that brilliant, humanitarian solution that could only be born of an adolescent mind,

she tucked her arm inside mine with determination and pulled me forward. Christ, what could I say to that?

“Okay, you win,” I laughed. “But just remember to limp every now and then.”

Her name was Erika Orsic. Nineteen years old and, from all outward appearances, amazingly unaffected by the war. She lived with her adopted family on a small dairy farm on the outskirts of Munich. Her biological mother abandoned her soon after birth, but she retained her last name. Ironically, her adoptive parents had been ardent Nazi supporters until one morning when they awakened to discover the SS carting away an old Jewish woman who lived across the street. She had been a surrogate grandmother to the family and their political loyalties switched in a heartbeat. I just hoped the old woman had a better fate than the poor souls I’d seen at Dachau. Dachau! Erika must have bicycled right past the camp.

“What do you know about the concentration camp at Dachau?”

She glared at me as if I’d asked if she was a Nazi.

“Dachau? Why would I know anything about that godforsaken place? My father went to Dachau to retrieve a cousin who was sent there for making a joke about Hitler at a dinner party. When he came home his face was pale and he was trembling. I remember his hand shaking so badly that he couldn’t pour himself a glass of Schnapps. He said that his cousin had died of fever and that I was to never go near there under any circumstances.”

Erika also told me about a friend of hers who was mistakenly sent to Dachau and lived to tell about it. This man was incarcerated there for

almost two years before his misidentification was discovered. After he was released, he was nearly locked up again for telling Erika and her friends what he'd witnessed. My heart began to race when she told me no one believed his fantastic stories about torture and medical experiments. This man might know something about the origin of the pills. I asked Erika if there was any way she could locate him.

"Of course. He's the owner of the *café* where I found you."

Our conversation was interrupted by an angry voice shouting Erika's name from across the street. I looked over her shoulder to see the weathered face of a white-haired man in a green canvas trench coat glaring at me through the endless procession of military traffic.

"It's my father!" she said. "He'll horsewhip me just for speaking to you. I must go."

"Wait a minute," I said, pulling her back to the curb. "I need to talk to your friend who was at Dachau."

Erika yanked free of my grasp and gestured obscenely at me with her upturned middle finger as her father nodded his approval behind her.

"You can." she winked. "Meet me tomorrow afternoon at the *café*."

I arrived at the *café* the next day at 1700 to find Erika seated beside a rotund middle-aged man who looked as if he'd stepped out of a magazine advertisement for a Bavarian beer, complete with a waxed handlebar mustache and round, silver wire-rimmed, glasses. His appearance was highlighted by a ruffled white shirt that barely contained his swollen beer belly straining behind a leather vest. Before Erika could introduce us, he stood up to shake my hand.

“I’m sorry,” I said, while his outstretched hand remained empty, “but it’s against Army regulations to shake your hand.”

“Ridiculous,” Erika said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s quite all right,” the man said, retaking his wooden stool. “My name is Walter Dietrich. Erika tells me you want to talk about Dachau. How did you come to know this place?”

“My army unit liberated the camp.”

He eyed the other patrons in the *café* suspiciously. “It would be better if we go someplace quiet where we can speak freely,” he whispered. “Please follow me.”

Walter led us outside and up a wrought iron spiral staircase. The upper floor of the *café* consisted of a long musty green carpeted corridor with numbered rooms. Unlocking door number three, we entered a sparsely furnished room with nothing more than an oak bookcase and torn leather couch on one side and a small brass bed on the other. However, what was impressive was the view—a stunning panorama of the distant snowcapped Bavarian Alps.

“What was your personal experience with Dachau?” Walter asked as we seated ourselves on the couch.

“I was one of the first Americans to enter the camp. I saw what the Nazis did to the prisoners.”

Walter immediately turned to Erika. “My dear, I would appreciate it if you went downstairs and waited until I called on you.”

“No!” she protested. “I need to hear this!”

“Erika, you forget your place,” Walter said, his voice swelling with anger. “Respect my wishes and leave here at once or I will notify your father!”

With a huff, Erika rose and stormed from the room. Ignoring her reaction, Walter locked the door and pulled the bookcase away from the wall. Reaching around, he withdrew a dusty bottle of wine.

“What is your name and what do you do in the American Army?” he asked, pouring himself a glass as I politely declined.

“My name is Steven Ronson. I’m a medic.”

“Ah, a medic,” he nodded. “Well, you may come to appreciate some of the duties I performed at the camp. I had the unfortunate privilege of being imprisoned at Dachau from January of 1942 until November of 1943. The Gestapo picked me up one night as I was leaving my café after celebrating my wife’s birthday. They accused me of fostering anti-Nazi sentiment, whatever that meant. Believe me, I may never have supported the views of Adolf Hitler, but I knew enough to keep my mouth shut. And as incredible as it sounds, there was another man named Walter Dietrich who also frequented my *café*. After a couple of drinks, he’d start loudly criticizing Hitler, calling him ‘That worthless Bohemian corporal’ and other such insults. This other Walter Dietrich was a veteran of the Great War and claimed that Hitler’s Iron Cross First Class was unjustified. In Germany, the walls have ears and it wasn’t long before someone told the Gestapo that a certain Walter Dietrich at the Sonnenrad *Café* in Munich was labeling Hitler a coward. They picked me up, not believing a word I said about the other Walter Dietrich, and carted me off to Dachau. The other Walter Dietrich heard about my fate

and took to the hills. I rotted in Dachau for twenty-two months before an SS officer interrupted me as I was performing my medical duties. He led me to the front gate, pointed me in the direction of Munich and simply said, 'Don't return.'"

"I later learned that the other Walter Dietrich had come out of hiding and, after a few drinks, started laughing aloud about his good fortune. The bastard actually thought it was funny! Unfortunately for him, the Gestapo has no sense of humor. When they got wind of it, they took him away and pumped a bullet into the back of his neck." He paused to clear his throat and sip his wine. As he lifted the glass, I noticed his hand was shaking. I made my move.

"What medical duties did you perform at Dachau?"

"First," he said, putting down his glass, "I want your word that anything I tell you will not be used against me in any way."

Even though I didn't have the authority to do so, my intuition told me anything Walter did at Dachau was not of his free will.

"I won't say anything."

Walter took a deep breath and began to speak in a barely audible voice. "I was told the charges against me were quite severe, that I might be sent to a camp much worse than Dachau. Since I was a German, and not a Pole, Russian, or Jew, I was given the choice of assisting in the medical and scientific laboratories at Dachau or being relocated to another camp further east."

"Did you know Sigmund Rascher?"

Walter eyes widened as he gulped his wine. “Of course I knew Sigmund Rascher! He was called *The Captain*. He was my boss.”

Walter said that Doctor Rascher was originally a captain in the German Air Force Medical Service and a personal favorite of Heinrich Himmler. He smirked at the memory. “Rascher was a real boot licker. He eventually persuaded Himmler to allow human experimentation at Dachau to benefit the pilots of the Luftwaffe.”

Walter described one of the experiments, named the High Altitude test. This was the same experiment that Himmler had referred to in his letter to Rascher. A mobile decompression chamber, referred to in the camp as the *Sky Ride Wagon*, was set up next to Block 5. The chamber could simulate rapid ascent and descent to an atmospheric pressure of 70,000 feet. German fighters couldn’t fly that high, but the Nazis were curious to see what would happen if they did and the cabin became depressurized. A prisoner was strapped in and observed through a thick glass portal. Walter said what happened next was practically indescribable. The prisoners would start to rip the hair from their heads and claw the flesh from their faces in an attempt to relieve the pressure expanding inside their skulls.

“I was sent in to clean up the mess,” he said. “In the beginning, inmates happily volunteered to enter the Sky Ride Wagon because The Captain promised them better food rations, but when no one returned from the tests, he forcibly selected his next victims.”

In addition to the High Altitude tests, Walter recalled the equally horrific Freezing Experiments, Sea Water Experiments and Malaria Experiments. All of these tests had produced nothing but incalculable

human suffering and death. Nevertheless, for his achievements, Dr. Rascher was promoted to the rank of captain in the SS.

I was relieved Walter had mentioned nothing about any immortality experiments. He had been at Dachau during the time when Krueger had written his letters and surely would have known if any human medical experimentation was done in conjunction with them. If there had been any human experimentation, I would stop taking the pills. I couldn't live with that and wanted to be sure.

“Did you know a Dr. Otto Krueger?”

Walter shrugged. “I have never heard of this person.”

“Are you sure? Maybe this Dr. Krueger didn't have anything to do with prisoner experimentation.”

Walter dismissed the idea. “That would have been impossible. Anyone with the title of Doctor would've been involved to some degree with prisoner experimentation at Dachau.”

“Did anyone in the camp experiment with sharks?”

Walter paused in thought for a moment before his eyes brightened. “Sharks? Why, yes! There was someone who worked with sharks.” He drained his wine glass and sank back into the leather couch. “We called him *Der Fischer*. The Fisherman. He was a handsome man from Munich in his forties who took great pride in the large aquarium installed in his private laboratory. It was filled with all kinds of beautiful fish, including some baby sharks. He maintained the tank himself and I wasn't allowed to go near it. He was not a Nazi or a member of the SS. In fact, the Nazi doctors disliked and distrusted him because he displayed nothing but

contempt for their human experimentation. When Rascher accused him of stealing laboratory supplies, the Fisherman laughed in his face and walked away, and I later learned he'd been transferred. How did you come to know about Rascher or this Otto Krueger person?"

I unfolded the two letters from my jacket pocket and handed them to Walter. He read each and returned them without questioning their authenticity or contents. After living for so many years in Nazi Germany, Walter had learned that curiosity could be a very dangerous thing. All he cared about was that someone had finally listened to his Dachau story and believed him.

Walter smiled warmly. "Would you like to be alone with Erika? I can see she fancies you. Please, finish my bottle of wine. It's a splendid pre-war vintage. Stay here and drink, while I fetch her for you."

I pulled out my lighter and examined the bottle. It was a 1934 Chateau La Mission Haut-Brion and there wasn't a drop left. After a light tapping on the door, Erika reappeared and, noticing the empty wine bottle, reached behind the bookcase and pulled out another. "Would you like a glass?" she asked, straining to uncork it. "This is an excellent Liebfraumilch. It's my family's favorite."

"Sure." I replied. "I'll definitely need a drink after what I just heard."

She poured us both a glass and sat close enough to me on the couch so that her partially bare slender, long legs rubbed up against my drab olive winter combat trousers.

"And what exactly did you hear?"

Walter had just bared his soul to me and I didn't feel I had the right to share it. Even though I believed that young Germans like Erika needed to know the truth, I wasn't about to assume that responsibility. Besides, after two years of war I was now alone with a beautiful girl and a bottle of wine. I could think of a million other things I'd rather do than to talk about torture and human experimentation.

"Erika, I don't feel comfortable discussing this right now. Walter told me things in confidence. You should ask him yourself."

"Ridiculous," she said.

"There's nothing ridiculous about it. A good number of your fellow Germans committed unspeakable crimes."

"So what?" she replied. "War is always terrible." As mature as she was attempting to act, it was painfully obvious that Erika didn't grasp the magnitude of how terrible war could be. And if I hadn't heard Walter's story or seen firsthand the condition of the prisoners at Dachau, I would've had trouble believing it myself. The problem was that Dachau wasn't the work of a solitary deranged man. It was the result of a nation allowing itself to be seduced by a deranged man. Everyone in Germany shared the blame, including Erika, her friends and her family.

And she wasn't about to take no for an answer. She slid off the couch, rested her chin on my knee and looked up at me with her beguiling blue eyes.

"Enough of these ridiculous reasons," she said. "Please, tell me what you saw at Dachau."

Fine. I could see this going on all night. I finished my glass of wine and launched into a vivid account of everything I'd witnessed including the bodies of the men and women entwined in death in the railroad cars, the diseased and near-death condition of the inmates and the vengeful murders of the SS guards. I didn't tell Erika about the pills. That was my business.

Erika curled up against the couch and began to cry. "I'm so ashamed," she sobbed. "At this moment I'm ashamed to call myself a German. Now I know why my father told me never to go near there. He was trying to protect me."

I felt terrible. In less than twenty minutes, I'd managed to destroy whatever shred of innocence Erika had retained throughout the war. And I wondered if her reaction was a prelude to what millions of her countrymen would experience when the reality was revealed to them about Hitler and his Third Reich. Nevertheless, I felt more than pity for Erika. As I watched her cover her face and sob, something inside me began to stir. Something I hadn't felt in nearly two years. Something I'd begun to believe I would never feel again.

I slid off the couch, wrapped my arms around her and held her until she stopped crying. Lifting her chin, I tenderly kissed her tear stained face, her forehead, her temples, her lips. She pulled away and stared at me with desirous eyes. Then she rose to her feet, grabbed my hand, and silently led me to the brass bed. That night, I made passionate love to Erika Orsic while the guns of war thundered off in the distance. I released every emotion I'd kept bottled up for the past two years in a flood of desire. For the rest of my life I want to remember how badly I

wanted her. I want to remember how her skin felt, how her hair smelled and how her lips tasted. I could feel my senses returning to me. I was becoming human again.

After closing my eyes for what seemed like an instant, I woke to find Erika asleep snuggled against me. I didn't want to move a muscle. I didn't want to ruin the moment. I could have laid there in that small brass bed with her forever. Then, reality set in.

It was late.

Very late.

A.W.O.L. late.

I bolted out of bed and looked out the window. The dark streets of Munich were completely deserted with not a soul in sight. The German spring moon was full, gorgeously opaque and positioned so low in the sky that it appeared to be sitting just above the snowy Bavarian mountain peaks. As I watched in awe, a thick layer of clouds seemed to bounce off the mountain tops and swirled majestically upward toward the moon like five gigantic cosmic fingers extending to embrace it. For a brief moment, I felt as if I could have reached out and touched eternity. I looked back at Erika. Her bare ivory skin glistened softly in the glow of the moonlight. God, she was beautiful. I reached across the bed and gently stroked her blonde hair. She opened her eyes, stretched contentedly and smiled up at me.

And again, reality set in.

"Oh my God!" she cried. "What time is it? My father will kill me!"

“It’s very late,” I replied, quickly pulling on my boots. “Where is Mr. Dietrich?”

“He lives down the hall in room number six.” We dressed quickly and hurried down the hallway.

“Mr. Dietrich, it’s Erika,” she said, tapping on his door. “Please help us.”

The door slowly unbolted to reveal a half-naked Walter, his naked beer belly hanging grotesquely over the lip of a bath towel slung low around his waist. He grinned lasciviously as he rubbed the sleep from his bloodshot eyes. “Ah, you kids,” he croaked. “Erika, don’t worry. I’ll talk to your father. But Steven, I’m sorry. I have no desire to tangle with the U.S. Army.”

“You won’t have to. Just make sure Erika gets home safely.”

I kissed Erika on the lips and scurried down the staircase. This time I had my hands full. There was a curfew on. A shoot-to-kill curfew. I’d confided to Torello that I was going to meet Erika and my only hope was that he’d covered for me. The streets were deathly serene and, no matter how softly I lifted my feet, the sound of my combat boots slapping against the cobblestones made my presence known. My unit had been bivouacked in the wine cellar of an abandoned warehouse. Torello told me there was a makeshift tunnel that led out of the cellar and surfaced about a hundred yards south at a market square. I had only a couple of blocks to cover, but under the conditions that night it might as well have been a mile. U.S. Army patrols were everywhere and it took me a good thirty minutes of furtively darting in and out of shadows to bridge the distance. Finally, I spotted the tunnel entrance across the deserted

square. It was nothing more than a jagged hole of broken cobblestones. A large upside-down red arrow was crudely painted on the wall above it. The Germans must have been using it as a bomb shelter entrance.

I inhaled deeply and made a mad dash, the sound of my footsteps ricocheting off of every building in the market square. Breathless, I reached the tunnel entrance and began to feel my way down into the darkness when I was startled by the roar of an army patrol jeep racing in my direction from across the square. Convinced that a pair of MPs would soon be storming in to arrest me, I groped my way wildly, raking my fingertips bloody along the rocky walls until I entered a dimly lit tunnel that led to a wine cellar filled with snoring men. The last thing I heard before I closed my eyes was Torello leaning over to whisper, “You fucking owe me.”

Germany surrendered on May 7th, 1945. I should have been elated, but I was in no mood to celebrate. Erika was gone. Not from this world, but from mine. Dietrich told me that he personally escorted her home the morning after our night of passion, telling her father that she had accidentally locked herself in the basement of the *café*. Her father would have swallowed the story, but Erika made the mistake of telling one of her girlfriends that she wanted to follow me home to America and word reached her family. When confronted by her father, Erika broke down and told him everything.

I cringed. “Everything?”

“Well, not quite everything.” Walter smiled, deviously. “But enough to send her father into a rage. He has her locked up in her room like Rapunzel. He’s also threatened to speak to your commanding officer.”

My stomach tightened.

“Don’t worry. When he said that, Erika practically became suicidal and the old man backed down. He won’t come forward against you, but I can promise you that her father will make sure you never see her again.”

I was devastated. “I don’t understand. Erika told me her parents hated Hitler and the Nazis.”

“They do. But that doesn’t mean they like you Americans.”

My journey home began unexpectedly that evening when Torello informed me that he’d finagled us onto a troopship departing France in a few days. I have no idea how he pulled it off, but he mumbled something about his family’s black market connections and assured me that if we didn’t leave immediately we’d be stuck in Europe for a very long time.

The next morning we huddled under a tarp in the back of an empty supply truck and sped west to the French port of Le Havre. The scenes that flashed before us were of total devastation. Twisted German and Allied aircraft littered the countryside like crumpled metal birds, resting alongside huge bomb craters. Most of the towns and cities had been annihilated, reduced to nothing more than a field of brick and cobblestones resting silently under a heavy gray sky that hung down from the heavens like the final curtain on this *Götterdämmerung*.

By now, I’d been taking the pills daily for almost a week. Before we boarded the truck in Munich, Torello pulled me aside and, in his inimitable Brooklyn style, asked, “So what was the deal between you and that hot German broad?” Word spread fast and practically everyone in my unit had heard the rumors about Erika and noticed my deepening

depression. As insensitive as he sounded, Torello was simply voicing his concern in the only way he knew how.

As I told him the story, I began to envision Erika. We'd only known each other for less than a day, but if there is such a thing as "love at first sight" this was it times ten. I simply could not stop thinking about her. A flood of anguish welled up inside of me and tears rolled down my face. Torello was shocked. He'd seen a dozen men die in my arms and I'd never once allowed my emotions to get the best of me.

"Hey buddy, get a hold of yourself," he said, resting his hand on my shoulder. "She's just a German broad for Christ's sake."

I could barely hear him because I felt as if my heart was being crushed in a vise. In just one night, Erika had managed to pierce a protective shell I'd carefully constructed around myself during the past two years. To preserve my sanity, I'd steadily disconnected myself from my emotions and allowed myself to become more machine than man. I would smile, but there was no happiness or joy behind it. Now I was paying a price for embracing my humanity again. Torello's lips moved and he said something, but I couldn't hear him. I was in too much pain. At the moment, I felt as if my heart would burst. Suddenly, I was jolted by a blinding flash of light as if a firecracker exploded deep inside my brain. I began to lose consciousness as my knees buckled and the ground rose to embrace me. Torello caught me just in time and prevented my face from crashing into the street. The next thing I knew I was lying flat on my back, blinking my eyes up at the sullen gray sky as a fog slowly lifted from my brain.

Regaining my senses, I realized that something was missing. The heart-wrenching pain had disappeared and was replaced by the most comforting feeling of calm I'd ever experienced. It was as if I'd been empowered with the paradoxical belief that everything and nothing in the world mattered at the same time. That everything and nothing in the universe lasted forever. I also saw something—a vision that flashed quickly and evaporated. When I closed my eyes, I could still see its image imprinted across my closed lids like a photo negative. I strained to distinguish the outline of what appeared to be some type of ancient fortress. My initial impression was that the pills were governing my mind and body, and possibly feeding me information. Regardless, I wasn't afraid simply because I'd never felt better in my life.

I believe my reaction was the result of my mortal side conflicting with the immortal part of my transformation. If my body had truly stopped aging, then every part of me from the smallest cell to my subconscious mind would be aware that there were no longer any time constraints. The biological and instinctive deadlines had vanished. The attraction between Erika and me was extremely powerful. If our relationship had been allowed to progress I would have probably chosen her as a mate. In a normal life span, there are only so many people a person meets who can be considered truly compatible. Some people never find that person. There's only so much time.

With immortality, time is on your side and the omnipresent tick of the biological clock is silenced. When I lost Erika, my mortal side plunged into a conventional state of despair. I have no doubt I was quickly falling in love with Erika as she slipped away. Every mortal

instinct and emotion was thrown into an evolutionary induced turmoil. It was at that point that the immortal part of my being attacked my mortal reaction as if it were some sort of virus. Finding no justification for the severity of such a response, and seeing it as a threat to my well-being, my immortal side simply shut it down. Afterwards, I still thought about Erika but the devastating and debilitating heartbreak was gone. It was as if the whole experience had been placed in its proper perspective—that of a microscopic piece of an infinitely larger picture.

The experience was so fantastic that it convinced me to abandon my original plan and continue taking the pills after I returned home to Florida. As our troopship, *John Ericsson*, glided out into the open Atlantic, I leaned against the rail and watched the war ravaged French shoreline slowly slip into the horizon. For the other soldiers aboard, their journey had finally ended. They were on their way home to embrace their loved ones and tell them all about the horrors they'd survived. From that day forward, they would lead relatively normal lives. Many would marry, have children and someday sit around the fireplace to tell their grandchildren what it was like during that terrible time in the 1940s when the world descended into war. But no such safe harbor awaited me. I knew that destiny had other plans for my restless soul.

My journey had just begun.