

Chapter I

From a void, black as death, his perception slowly spiraled into consciousness. Sensation reignited. His eyelids fluttered, and pain, the true proof of life, shot from behind his left eye and buried itself deep in the meat of his brain. Black became gray.

He moaned. The headache caused blood vessels running through his temples to pound in his ears. Other sensations competed for his attention. Cold won out. It bit into the back of his legs, into his buttocks and shoulders. Chills ran through his body. He moved his head warily. Feeling dizzy and light-headed, he attempted to rise, without success.

Questions pushed sensation into the background. He tried to rise again but felt so weak that he settled for mastery over his eyelids and failed. He tried again to open his eyes. He would not give up and the constant tension was working—slivers of light turned gray to gold. Suddenly the lids broke free of the crust that bound them. The intensity of the overhead light scored his pupils. Light refracting through crusted crystals allowed a hazy view of his body and past his feet to a gray block wall. But his vision was brought up short as his eyes tracked back from his feet to his chest.

“No wonder I’m cold,” he muttered aloud. “Where the hell are my clothes?”

As he lay there cold and questioning, his reason took hold and he began to organize his thoughts.

Think. Think back. What’s happened?

He tried to penetrate the void that was his memory, but there was nothing. He tried to rise again. Failing, he attempted to raise an arm, a hand, a finger. With effort he raised his head. He looked along his right arm. Light reflected from metal restraints and alarm centered his focus.

With all the strength he could muster, he struggled against his bonds. He could not even move a finger.

“What’s going on?” he shouted.

Like a distant echo, a voice speaking German froze his blood.

“Alert the Oberst. The subject is conscious.”

Chapter II

He did not know how much time had passed. A searing pain across his right thigh caused his eyes

to snap open and his body to recoil in place. He was helpless. He rolled his head backward and was greeted by a wall of khaki cloth. He followed the brass buttons of a military tunic upward until they disappeared into the dark tie wrapped around the white flesh of a slender neck and the underside of a jutting jaw. The riding crop came down again. He gritted his teeth, ready to absorb another blow. It did not come.

He looked backward again but only saw a distant wall. He raised his head, cast his eyes about, and found the figure cloaked in the blinding light. He strained to keep his head elevated, even though a clamp bit into his neck. The person stood motionless. His straining neck muscles stood out in his futile attempt to elevate his head. He shouted his frustration and fear.

“Who are you?!” Gathering his composure, he attempted to project his most commanding presence. He spoke slowly, “Release me and give me my clothes.”

He was greeted with silence. The silhouette looming before him had moved closer. Around the light’s halo he could make out blond hair and the shape of an officer’s cap. He heard a dry chuckle and then the thin compressive snap of leather-covered hands brought together in applause.

“Bravo, General.” The voice was emotionless English. “A great performance, considering you are strapped naked to a steel table and utterly in my power.”

A gloved hand clamped itself around the general’s throat, pushing his head against the table. Leaning closer, the bill of his tormentor’s cap blocked the hated light. Ice blue eyes stared into his. Lips compressed in anger softened, exposing bright, even teeth that contrasted with deep red lips.

“Welcome to Stalag 2, General Cullom.” Her voice brightened noticeably as her hand released his neck. “I am Colonel Offenbach, commander of this facility.” Her arm shot out in salute.

“I welcome you in the name of Reichsleiter Martin Bormann and der Fuhrer.”

“Where am I?” the general demanded.

The exaggerated emotion and movement, the pain and the cold were taking their toll. He tried to lift his head, but the best he could do was a sideways glance that brought her into vision. She stood impassively for a few moments, studying him. He saw her eyes slowly move over his body. An involuntary response to shield himself, though useless, rippled his muscles and brought her eyes back to his.

“Patience, General. I know there are many questions, but you have an eternity for the answers.” Her voice was tinged with disdain, giving each word its own force.

“I do want you to know that I will tell you only the truth. We have learned that the certainty of the truth is the most powerful tool we have. I will tell you everything, and it will always be the truth.” She came forward to fill his vision. For a moment he could smell her perfume, but as she continued, she came within a few inches of his face, and the coffee on her breath overpowered the floral scent of her body. Suddenly, he realized he was famished.

She spat the next words into his face: “And the truth is YOU ARE DEAD!” She laughed as though this were a joke. “Yes, you are dead, and in a day or so you will realize that not only are you dead, but that you have gone to the very depths of hell.”

“Release me,” her prisoner demanded, as fear and reality coalesced in his mind.

“Calm yourself,” she advised. “You are thirty miles west of Berlin at a secret military facility.” The enormity of her words quelled any protest. Confusion painting his face, her eyes bore into his.

“Think back,” she said. “What is the last thing you remember?” He closed his eyes. There was nothing, just darkness and confusion.

“Think,” she commanded.

“I can’t remember.”

“Not good enough,” she shouted, grabbing his jaw with her left hand. He fought her for control, but lost.

“Look into my eyes.”

He searched the blue irises.

“Haven’t you seen these eyes before?” she asked.

“I don’t know. What does it matter?”

“It matters,” she shot back, “and shortly you will understand.”