

Prologue: 1945



The young boy stood in the ruins of what had once been his home, watching the retreating Russians, tears of anger and pain carving flesh-colored rivulets down his grimy face. A gash on his forehead oozed blood, and the skin surrounding it was already turning a sickening purple.

He glanced upward and spotted a formation of B-17s heading west. Silver birds migrating home, he thought.

Stifling a moan of anguish, the boy looked down at his feet, imagining the delicate corpse that lay in the cellars below him, its vacant eyes staring into eternity. The pain overwhelmed him then.

“BASTARDS!” he screamed at the retreating bombers. “Why didn’t you come? Why did you leave us?”

His voice echoed in the burned-out structure—another ghost among the uncountable dead.

The Americans had abandoned them.

They'd halted at the Elbe River, leaving them at the mercies of the Russian swine. And after those pigs had finished their savage games, they'd left him for dead, their coarse laughter fading into the hot afternoon.

And now, he was alone, alone in a frenzied world bent on its own destruction.

They would pay.

They would *all* pay.

The Russians *and* the Americans—especially the saintly bastard Americans.

He gathered up a few meager belongings and headed west. Shortly before nightfall, on his fourth day of flight, he stumbled across a patrol, a squad of American infantry. He held his hands up as a sergeant came forward, M1 rifle aimed casually at him. The man had the face of an ugly bulldog, yet his eyes held a gentle nobility his rough features belied.

"Ich gebe auf!" the boy said, his eyes riveted on those of the sergeant.

The sergeant frowned and turned to another soldier, a tall blonde man wearing the stripes of a corporal. "What'd he say, Muller?"

The corporal stepped forward, giving the boy a warm smile. When he spoke, his voice betrayed its Pennsylvania origins. "He says he surrenders, Sarge."

The sergeant grinned. "Looks like we got ourselves a high-level war criminal here, fellas."

The other soldiers broke out laughing.

The boy fumed.

"Ich bin ein Waisenkind," he hissed.

The smile slid off the corporal's face.

"What is it?" the sergeant asked.

❖ Camp Stalag ❖

“He says he’s an orphan.”

The sergeant sighed. “Too damn many of those, these days,” he said, slinging the rifle over his shoulder. “Come on, we gotta keep movin’ or the Captain’s gonna have our hides.”

“For Christ’s sake, Sarge, we can’t just leave the kid here!”

With his teeth, the sergeant pulled a cigarette from a wrinkled pack of Luckies, lighted it and took a long drag, blowing the thick blue cloud out the side of his mouth. He regarded the boy with a solemn gaze; the boy stared back, defiant.

After a long moment, the sergeant looked away. “All right, Muller, he can come,” he said. “But he’s your responsibility. You speak his lingo. He slows us down, or gets in the way, he goes, understood?”

Muller nodded, a wide grin creasing his narrow face. “Thanks, Sarge!”

The sergeant grumbled something at Muller and walked off, leaving him and the boy alone. Muller smiled at the boy. “You want some chocolate?” he asked in German.

The boy’s eyes widened, but he said nothing.

Poor kid’s seen too much death, Muller thought. But then again, haven’t we all?

Not waiting for a reply, Muller took out the Hershey bar he’d been saving, and tossed it to the boy, who snatched it out of the air, tore off the wrapping, and gobbled the soft confection in three swift bites.

Muller chuckled. “Whoa, hold on there, Kid. There’s more where that came from—a whole lot more. What’s your name, anyway?”

The boy hesitated a moment, then shrugged. “Heinrich,” he said, his voice a sharp soprano.

Muller smiled again. “Well, Heinrich, you stick with old Muller, here. Just stay out the way and you’ll be just fine, okay?”

The boy nodded, managing a cheery smile.

❖ Bill Walker ❖

It came easy.

Five days later, while his newfound benefactors slept in the ruins of a bombed-out church outside Stendal, the boy found the smile came even easier when he slit Muller's throat and ran off into the night.