

Chapter 1

September 1944 Arizona

The question exploded upon Rudolf Meier like a torpedo hitting the hull of a German U-boat.

His head jerked violently to see who could possibly have voiced such an outrage and then Rudolf's gaze landed on the son of the farmer who owned the fields where he and other Nazi prisoners of war labored.

"Why do the German people still believe in Hitler?" the youth asked, unexpectedly throwing his inquiry into the stifling air. In that terrible moment of frozen impotence, Rudolf knew he would never forget the brazen American kid who stood in the midst of a scorching Arizona cotton field, leaning against the wooden handle of a hoe.

The German straightened suddenly from his bent position where he had been digging fiercely at a tenacious weed. "Why do you ask such a thing?" Rudolf spat out his words, rage soaking his voice. Wasn't it bad enough he suffered such degrading work tending the hated *baumwolle*? Rudolf felt no better than a lowly nigger in this parched American wasteland, and now there was the added injury of a stupid American questioning the German people's love for *Der Führer*. Like the small flame of a match to a cigarette, Rudolf's fury lit the crumpled edge of his German soul.

The teenager answered Rudolf's angry words without flinching. "Well, in school yesterday—in my civics class—we were discussing the war and our teacher said the German

people would gladly follow Hitler into...well, into Hades. Of course, you need to understand my teacher's brother was killed in the Normandy invasion...fighting you guys, so maybe that's why she thinks that. I heard you speak English to the guard, so I thought I would ask you why the German people still believe in Hitler."

Rudolf stared at the American with unwavering suspicion. He guessed him to be about seventeen. Rudolf's first inclination was to retort he was a prisoner and not allowed to talk to impudent farmers' sons, but he knew the sluggish guards did not care. Deciding to answer the question after a long moment, Rudolf looked around to make sure none of the other POWs could hear; he did not want to be seen talking with the enemy.

"We believe in Adolf Hitler because he made life better for us," Rudolf said, trying to keep a calm demeanor, but his right eye began twitching. "Before Hitler, under the Weimar Republic, there was no work for the German people because of the injustice of the Treaty of Versailles. The *Führer* brought food to our tables, gave us work for our hands. He is our leader, our strength."

The teenager digested that for a moment and then countered, "Yes, but he's led you into this awful war. Germany is losing..."

Rudolf's face, burned brown from the Arizona sun, blanched. He wanted to strike out against this idiot who voiced such blasphemy, but he knew the trouble he would be in if he did. Instead, in a measured tone, he said, "Don't be so sure of that," and then he abruptly turned from the source of his enmity, his eye still twitching against his fierce will. Rudolf quickly found another patch of weeds in an adjacent cotton row to hack into, hoping it would alleviate his wrath.

Moments later when Rudolf glanced back at the farmer's son, he saw a quizzical look, as if the youth wanted to say more, but the guards called the men together to take them back to Camp Papago Park. Rudolf carried his hoe to the shed at the end of the field and turned it in; he was glad for the end of this day and the disrespectful questions by the American.