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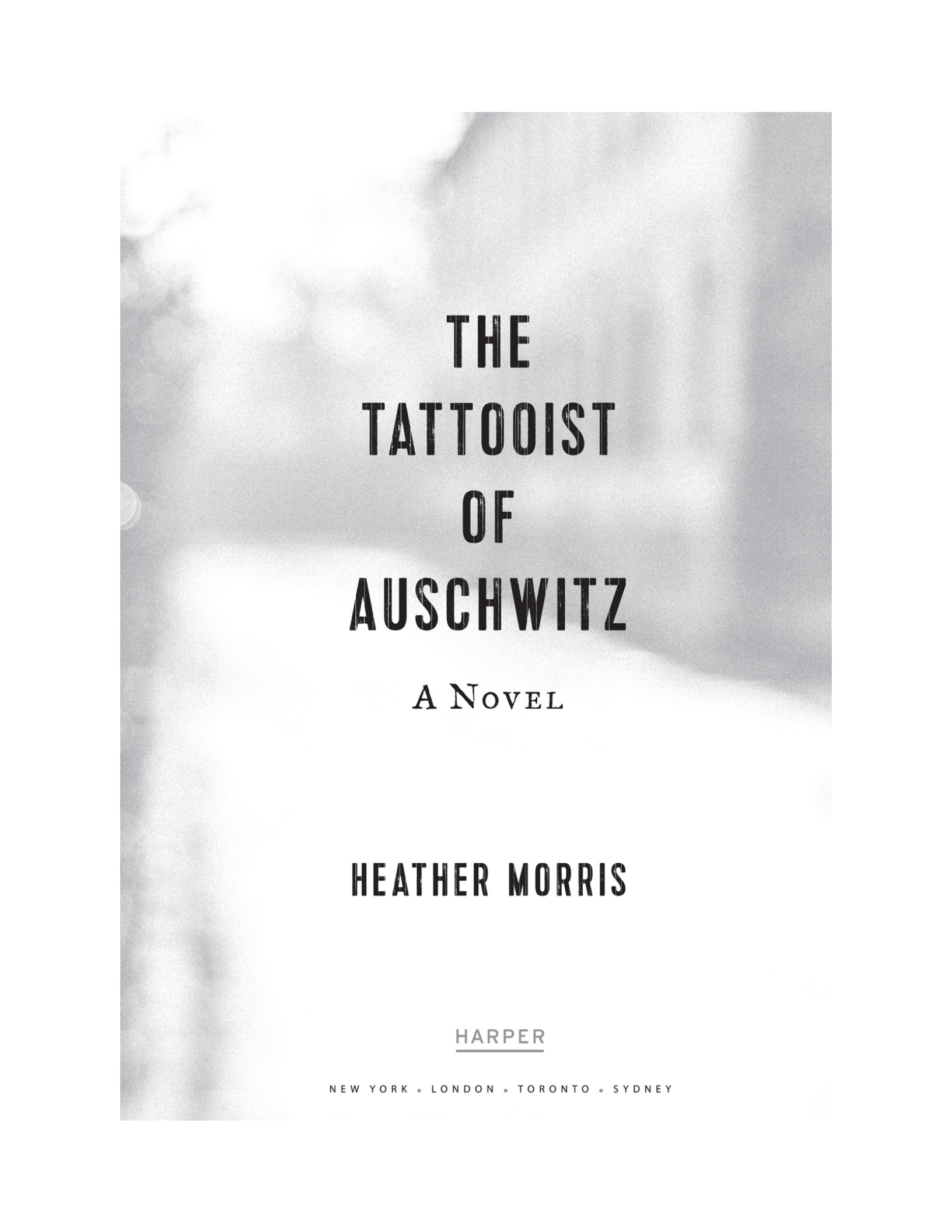
The
**Tattooist of
Auschwitz**

a novel



Heather Morris

BASED ON THE POWERFUL TRUE STORY OF
LOVE AND SURVIVAL



**THE
TATTOOIST
OF
AUSCHWITZ**

A NOVEL

HEATHER MORRIS

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

Dedication

*To the memory of Lale Sokolov.
Thank you for trusting me to tell your and Gita's story.*

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Prologue

LALÉ TRIES NOT TO LOOK UP. HE REACHES OUT TO TAKE THE piece of paper being handed to him. He must transfer the five digits onto the girl who held it. There is already a number there, but it has faded. He pushes the needle into her left arm, making a three, trying to be gentle. Blood oozes. But the needle hasn't gone deep enough, and he has to trace the number again. She doesn't flinch at the pain Lale knows he's inflicting. *They've been warned—say nothing, do nothing.* He wipes away the blood and rubs green ink into the wound.

“Hurry up!” Pepan whispers.

Lale is taking too long. Tattooing the arms of men is one thing; defiling the bodies of young girls is horrifying. Glancing up, Lale sees a man in a white coat slowly walking up the row of girls. Every now and then he stops to inspect the face and body of a terrified young woman. Eventually he reaches Lale. While Lale holds the arm of the girl in front of him as gently as he can, the man takes her face in his hand and turns it roughly this way and that. Lale looks up into the frightened eyes. Her lips move in readiness to speak. Lale squeezes her arm tightly to stop her. She looks at him and he mouths, “*Shh.*” The man in the white coat releases her face and walks away.

“Well done,” he whispers as he sets about tattooing the remaining four digits—4 9 0 2. When he has finished, he holds on to her arm for a moment longer than necessary, looking again into her eyes. He forces a small smile. She returns a smaller one. Her eyes, however, dance before him. As he looks into them, his heart seems simultaneously to stop and to begin beating for the first time, pounding, almost threatening to burst out of his chest. He looks down at the ground and it sways beneath him. Another piece of paper is thrust at him.

“Hurry up, Lale!” Pepan whispers urgently.

When he looks up again, she is gone.

1

APRIL 1942

LALE RATTLES ACROSS THE COUNTRYSIDE, KEEPING HIS HEAD up and himself to himself. The twenty-five-year-old sees no point in getting to know the man beside him, who occasionally nods off against his shoulder; Lale doesn't push him away. He is just one among countless young men stuffed into wagons designed to transport livestock. Having been given no idea where they were headed, Lale dressed in his usual attire: a pressed suit, clean white shirt, and tie. *Always dress to impress.*

He tries to assess the dimensions of his confinement. The wagon is less than ten feet wide. But he can't see the end to gauge its length. He attempts to count the number of men on this journey with him. But with so many heads bobbing up and down, he eventually gives up. He doesn't know how many wagons there are. His back and legs ache. His face itches. The stubble reminds him that he hasn't bathed or shaved since he boarded two days ago. He is feeling less and less himself.

When the men try to engage him in conversation, he responds with words of encouragement, trying to turn their fear into hope. *We stand in shit but let us not drown in it.* Abusive remarks are muttered at him for his appearance and manner. Accusations of hailing from the upper class. "Now look where it's gotten you." He tries to shrug the words off and meet the glares with smiles. *Who am I trying to kid? I'm as scared as everyone else.*

A young man locks eyes with Lale and pushes through the scrum of bodies toward him. Some men shove him on his way through. *It's only your own space if you make it yours.*

"How can you be so calm?" the young man says. "They had rifles. The bastards pointed rifles at us and forced us into this . . . this cattle train."

Lale smiles at him. "Not what I was expecting, either."

“Where do you think we’re going?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just remember, we are here to keep our families safe at home.”

“But what if—?”

“Don’t ‘what-if.’ I don’t know, you don’t know, none of us knows. Let’s just do as we’re told.”

“Should we try to take them when we stop, since we outnumber them?”

The young man’s pale face is pinched with confused aggression. His balled-up hands box pathetically in front of him.

“We have fists, they have rifles—who do you think would win that fight?”

The young man returns to silence. His shoulder is wedged into Lale’s chest, and Lale can smell oil and sweat in his hair. His hands drop and hang limply by his side. “I’m Aron,” he says.

“Lale.”

Others around them tune in to their conversation, raising their heads toward the two men before lapsing back into silent reveries, sinking deep into their own thoughts. What they all share is fear. And youth. And their religion. Lale tries to keep his mind off theorizing about what might lie ahead. He has been told he is being taken to work for the Germans, and that is what he is planning to do. He thinks of his family back home. *Safe*. He has made the sacrifice, has no regrets. He would make it again and again to keep his beloved family at home, together.

Every hour or so, it seems, people ask him similar questions. Wearying, Lale begins to answer, “Wait and see.” He is perplexed as to why the questions are directed to him. He has no special knowledge. Yes, he wears a suit and tie, but that’s the only visible difference between him and the next man. *We’re all in the same filthy boat*.

In the crowded wagon they can’t sit, let alone lie down. Two buckets substitute for toilets. As they fill, a fight breaks out as men try to get away from the stench. The buckets are knocked over, spilling their contents. Lale clings to his suitcase, hoping that with the money and clothes he has, he might be able to buy himself out from wherever they are headed, or at the very least buy himself into a safe job. *Maybe there’ll be work where I can use my languages*.

He feels lucky to have found his way to the side of the wagon. Small gaps in the slats provide him with glimpses of the passing countryside.

Snatched breaths of fresh air keep the rising tide of nausea at bay. It might be springtime, but the days are filled with rain and heavy clouds. Occasionally they pass fields ablaze with spring flowers and Lale smiles to himself. Flowers. He learned from a young age, from his mother, that women love them. When would be the next time he could give a girl flowers? He takes them in, their brilliant colors flashing before his eyes, whole fields of poppies dancing in the breeze, a scarlet mass. He vows that the next flowers he gives to someone he will pick himself. It has never occurred to him that they grow wild in such large numbers. His mother had a few in her garden, but she never picked them and brought them inside. He starts a list in his head of things to do “when I get home . . .”

Another fight breaks out. Scuffling. Yells. Lale can't see what is going on, but he feels the squirming and pushing of bodies. Then there is silence. And from the gloom the words, “You killed him.”

“Lucky bastard,” someone mutters.

Poor bastard.

My life is too good to end in this stinkhole.

* * *

THERE ARE MANY STOPS ON THE JOURNEY, SOME LASTING MINUTES, some hours, always outside a town or village. Occasionally Lale catches a glimpse of the station names as they speed through: Ostrava, a town he knows is close to the border of Czechoslovakia and Poland; Pszczyna, confirming that they are indeed now in Poland. The unknown question: where will they stop? Lale spends most of the time on the journey lost in thoughts about his life in Bratislava: his job, his apartment, his friends—his female friends in particular.

The train stops again. It is pitch-black; clouds block out the moon and stars completely. Does the dark portend their future? *Things are as they are. What I can see, feel, hear, and smell right now.* He sees only men like himself, young and on a journey into the unknown. He hears the grumbling of empty stomachs and the rasping of dry windpipes. He smells piss and shit and the odor of bodies too long unwashed. The men take advantage of not being thrown around to rest without the need to push and shove for a piece of turf. More than one head now rests on Lale.

Loud noises come from a few wagons back, gradually creeping closer. The men there have had enough and are going to attempt an escape. The sounds of men throwing themselves against the wooden sides of the wagon, and the banging of what must be one of the shit buckets, rouses everyone. Before long every wagon erupts, attacked from within.

“Help us or get out of the way,” a large man screams at Lale as he throws himself against the side.

“Don’t waste your energy,” Lale replies. “If these walls could be breached, don’t you think a cow would have done it?”

Several men stop their efforts, turning angrily toward him.

They process his comment. The train lurches forward. Maybe those in charge have decided movement will stop the unrest. The wagons settle down. Lale closes his eyes.

* * *

LALE HAD RETURNED TO HIS PARENTS’ HOME, IN KROMPACHY, Slovakia, following the news that Jews in small towns were being rounded up and transported to work for the Germans. He knew Jews were no longer allowed to work and that their businesses had been confiscated. For nearly four weeks he helped around the house, fixing things with his father and brother, building new beds for his young nephews who had outgrown their cribs. His sister was the only family member earning an income, as a seamstress. She had to travel to and from work in secret, before dawn and after dark. Her boss was prepared to take the risk for her best employee.

One evening she returned home with a poster her boss had been asked to put in the shop window. It demanded that each Jewish family hand over a child aged eighteen or older to work for the German government. The whispers, the rumors about what had been happening in other towns, had finally come to Krompachy. It seemed that the Slovakian government was acquiescing further to Hitler, giving him whatever he wanted. The poster warned in bold type that if any family had such a child and did not surrender them, the whole family would be taken to a concentration camp. Max, Lale’s older brother, immediately said he would go, but Lale would not hear of it. Max had a wife and two young children. He was needed at home.

Lale reported to the local government department in Krompachy, offering himself for transportation. The officials he dealt with had been his friends—they'd gone to school together and knew each other's families. Lale was told to make his way to Prague, report to the appropriate authorities, and await further instructions.

* * *

AFTER TWO DAYS THE CATTLE TRAIN STOPS AGAIN. THIS TIME there is a great commotion outside. Dogs are barking, orders are yelled in German, bolts are released, wagon doors clang open.

“Get down from the train, leave your possessions!” shout the soldiers. “Rush, rush, hurry up! Leave your things on the ground!” Being on the far side of the wagon, Lale is one of the last to leave. Approaching the door, he sees the body of the man killed in the skirmish. Briefly closing his eyes, he acknowledges the man's death with a quick prayer. Then he leaves the wagon, but brings with him the stench—covering his clothes, his skin, every fiber of his being. Landing on bent knees, he puts his hands on the gravel and stays crouching for several moments. Gasping. Exhausted. Painfully thirsty. Slowly rising, he looks around at the hundreds of startled men who are trying to comprehend the scene in front of them. Dogs snap and bite at those who are slow to move. Many stumble, the muscles in their legs refusing to work after days without use. Suitcases, bundles of books, meager possessions are snatched from those who are unwilling to surrender them or simply don't understand the orders. They are then hit by a rifle or fist. Lale studies the men in uniform. Black and threatening. The twin lightning bolts on the collars of their jackets tell Lale who he is dealing with. The SS. Under different circumstances he might appreciate the tailoring, the fineness of the cloth, the sharpness of the cut.

He places his suitcase on the ground. *How will they know this one is mine?* With a shiver, he realizes that it's unlikely he will see the case or its contents again. He touches his hand to his heart, to the money hidden in his jacket pocket. He looks to the heavens, breathes in the fresh, cool air, and reminds himself that at least he is outdoors.

A gunshot rings out and Lale jumps. Before him stands an SS officer, weapon pointed skyward. “Move!” Lale glances back at the emptied train. Clothing blows away and books flap open. Several trucks arrive, and small

boys clamber out. They snatch up the abandoned belongings and throw them into the trucks. A heaviness settles between Lale's shoulder blades. *Sorry, Mama, they have your books.*

The men trudge toward the looming, dirty pink-brick buildings with picture windows. Trees line the entrances, flush with new spring growth. As Lale walks through open iron gates he looks up at the German words wrought from the metal:

ARBEIT MACHT FREI

He doesn't know where he is or what work he will be expected to do, but the idea that it will set him free has the feeling of a sick joke.

SS, rifles, dogs, his belongings taken—this he'd been unable to imagine.

"Where are we?"

Lale turns to see Aron at his side.

"The end of the line, I'd say."

Aron's face falls.

"Just do as you're told, you'll be fine." Lale knows he doesn't sound terribly convincing. He gives Aron a quick smile, which is returned. Silently, Lale tells himself to take his own advice: *Do as you're told. And always observe.*

Once inside the compound, the men are corralled into straight lines. At the head of Lale's row is an inmate with a beaten face, sitting at a small table. He wears a jacket and trousers with blue and white vertical stripes, with a green triangle on his chest. Behind him stands an SS officer, rifle at the ready.

Clouds roll in. Distant thunder claps. The men wait.

A senior officer, accompanied by an escort of soldiers, arrives at the front of the group. He has a square jaw, thin lips, and eyes hooded by bushy black brows. His uniform is plain in comparison to those guarding him. No lightning bolts. His demeanor shows that he's clearly the man in charge.

"Welcome to Auschwitz."

Lale hears the words, spoken by a mouth that barely moves, in disbelief. Having been forced from his home and transported like an animal, now surrounded by heavily armed SS, he is now being welcomed—welcomed!

“I am Commandant Rudolf Hoess. I am in charge here at Auschwitz. The gates you just walked through say: ‘Work makes you free.’ This is your first lesson, your only lesson. Work hard. Do as you are told, and you will go free. Disobey, and there will be consequences. Now you will be processed here, and then you will be taken to your new home: Auschwitz Two-Birkenau.”

The commandant scans their faces. He begins to say something else but is interrupted by a large roll of thunder. He looks skyward, mutters a few words under his breath, flicks a dismissive hand at the men, and turns to walk away. The performance is over. His security presence hurries off after him. A clumsy display, but still intimidating.

The processing begins. Lale watches as the first prisoners are shoved forward to the tables. He’s too far away to hear the short exchanges, can only watch as the seated men in pajamas write down details and hand each prisoner a small receipt. Finally it is Lale’s turn. He has to provide his name, address, occupation, and parents’ names. The weathered man at the table writes Lale’s answers in a neat, looping script and passes him a piece of paper with a number on it. Throughout, the man never raises his head to meet Lale’s eyes.

Lale looks at the number: 32407.

He shuffles along with the flow of men toward another set of tables, with another group of striped prisoners bearing the green triangle and more SS standing by. His desire for water threatens to overwhelm him. Thirsty and exhausted, he is surprised when the piece of paper is yanked from his hand. An SS officer pulls off Lale’s jacket, rips his shirtsleeve, and pushes his left forearm flat on the table. He stares in disbelief as the numbers 32407 are stabbed into his skin, one after the other. The piece of wood with a needle embedded in it moves quickly and painfully. Then the man takes a rag dipped in green ink and rubs it roughly over Lale’s wound.

The tattooing has taken only seconds, but Lale’s shock makes time stand still. He grasps his arm, staring at the number. *How can someone do this to another human being?* He wonders if for the rest of his life, be it short or long, he will be defined by this moment, this irregular number: 32407.

A prod from a rifle butt breaks Lale’s trance. He collects his jacket from the ground and stumbles forward, following the men in front into a large brick building with bench seating along the walls. It reminds him of the

gymnasium at the school in Prague where he slept for five days before beginning his journey here.

“Strip.”

“Faster, faster.”

The SS bark out orders that the majority of the men cannot understand. Lale translates for those nearby, who pass the word along.

“Leave your clothes on the bench. They will be here after you’ve had your shower.”

Soon the men are removing trousers and shirts, jackets and shoes, folding their filthy clothes and placing them neatly on the benches.

Lale is cheered at the prospect of water but knows he will probably not see his clothes again, nor the money inside them.

He takes off his clothes and places them on the bench, but outrage threatens to overwhelm him. From his trouser pocket he removes a slim packet of matches, a reminder of past pleasures, and steals a glance at the nearest officer. The man is looking away. Lale strikes a match. This might be the final act of his own free will. He holds the match to the lining of his jacket, covers it with his trousers, and hurries to join the line of men at the showers. Behind him, within seconds, he hears screams of “Fire!” Lale looks back, sees naked men pushing and shoving to get away as an SS officer attempts to beat out the flames.

He hasn’t yet reached the showers but finds himself shivering. *What have I done?* He’s just spent several days telling everyone around him to keep their heads down, do as they’re told, don’t antagonize anyone, and now he’s gone and lit a fire inside a building. He has little doubt what would happen if someone pointed him out as the arsonist. *Stupid. Stupid.*

In the shower block, he settles himself, breathes deeply. Hundreds of shivering men stand shoulder to shoulder as cold water rains down on them. They tilt their heads back and drink it in desperately, despite its rankness. Many try to lessen their embarrassment by covering their genitals with their hands. Lale washes the sweat, grime, and stink from his body and hair. Water hisses through the pipes and hammers the floor. When it ceases, the doors to the changing room reopen, and without command they walk back to see what has replaced their clothes—old Russian army uniforms and boots.

“Before you dress, you must visit the barber,” a smirking SS officer tells the men. “Outside—hurry.”

Once again, the men fall into lines. They move toward the prisoner standing ready with a razor. When it is Lale's turn, he sits on the chair with his back straight and his head held high. He watches the SS officers walk the length of the line, assaulting the naked prisoners with the ends of their weapons, offering insults and cruel laughter. Lale sits straighter and lifts his head higher as the hair on his head is reduced to stubble, not flinching when the razor nicks his scalp.

A shove in the back by an officer indicates that he is done. He follows the line back into the changing room, where he joins the search for clothing and wooden shoes of the right size. What is there is dirty and stained, but he manages to find shoes that more or less fit and hopes the Russian clothes he grabs will do. Once dressed, he leaves the building as instructed.

It is getting dark. He walks through the rain, one of countless men, for what seems like a long time. The thickening mud makes it difficult for him to lift his feet. But he trudges on determinedly. Some men struggle or fall to their hands and knees and are beaten until they get back up. If they do not, they are shot.

Lale tries to separate the heavy, sodden uniform from his skin. It rubs and chafes, and the smell of wet wool and dirt brings him back to the cattle train. Lale looks to the heavens, trying to swallow as much rain as he can. The sweet taste is the best thing he's had in days, the only thing he's had in days, his thirst compounding his weakness, blurring his vision. He gulps it down. Cupping his hands, he slurps wildly. In the distance he sees spotlights surrounding a vast area. His semidelirious state makes them seem like beacons, sparkling, dancing in the rain, showing him the way home. Calling, *Come to me. I will provide shelter, warmth, and nourishment. Keep walking.* But as he walks through gates, this time bearing no message, offering no deal, no promise of freedom in exchange for toil, Lale realizes the sparkling mirage has gone. He's in another prison.

Beyond this yard, disappearing into the darkness, is another compound. The tops of the fences are lined with razor wire. Lale sees SS up in the lookouts pointing rifles in his direction. Lightning hits a fence nearby. *They are electrified.* The thunder is not loud enough to drown out the sound of a shot, another man falling.

"We made it."

Lale turns to see Aron pushing his way toward him. Drenched, bedraggled. But alive.

“Yeah, looks like we’re home. You look a sight.”

“You haven’t seen yourself. Consider me a mirror.”

“No thanks.”

“What happens now?” says Aron, sounding like a child.

* * *

GOING WITH THE STEADY FLOW OF MEN, THEY EACH SHOW their tattooed arm to an SS officer standing outside a building, who records the number on a clipboard. After a forceful shove in the back, Lale and Aron find themselves in Block 7, a large hut with triple bunks down one wall. Dozens of men are forced into the building. They scramble and shove each other out of the way to lay claim to a space. If they are lucky or aggressive enough, they might share with only one or two others. Luck isn’t on Lale’s side. He and Aron climb up onto a top-level bunk already occupied by two other prisoners. They’ve had no food for days and there isn’t much fight left in them. As best he can, Lale curls up on the straw-filled sack that passes for a mattress. He pushes his hands against his stomach in an attempt to quell the cramps invading his guts. Several men call out to their guards, “We need food.”

The reply comes back: “You’ll get something in the morning.”

“We’ll all be dead from starvation by morning,” says someone in the back of the block.

“And at peace,” a hollow voice adds.

“These mattresses have hay in them,” someone else says. “Maybe we should continue to act like cattle and eat that.”

Snatches of quiet laughter. No response from the officer.

And then, from deep in the dormitory, a hesitant “Mooooooo . . .”

Laughter. Quiet, but real. The officer, present but invisible, doesn’t interrupt, and eventually the men fall asleep, stomachs rumbling.

* * *

IT’S STILL DARK WHEN LALE WAKES, NEEDING TO TAKE A PISS. He scrambles over his sleeping companions, down to the floor, and feels his way to the back of the block, thinking it might be the safest place to relieve himself. Approaching, he hears voices: Slovak and German. He is relieved to see that there are facilities, albeit crude, for them to shit. Long ditches

run behind the building, with planks of wood placed over them. Three prisoners are sitting across the ditch, shitting and talking quietly to each other. From the other end of the building, Lale sees two SS approaching in the semidarkness, smoking, laughing, their rifles hung loosely down their backs. The flickering perimeter floodlights make disturbing shadows of them, and Lale can't make out what they are saying. His bladder is full, but he hesitates.

In unison, the officers flick their cigarettes up into the air, whip their rifles around, and open fire. The bodies of the three who were taking a shit are thrown back into the ditch. Lale's breath catches in his throat. He presses his back against the building as the officers pass him. He catches the profile of one of them—a boy, just a kid.

As they disappear into the darkness, Lale makes a vow to himself: *I will live to leave this place. I will walk out a free man. If there is a hell, I will see these murderers burn in it.* He thinks of his family back in Krompachy and hopes that his presence here is at least saving them from a similar fate.

Lale relieves himself and returns to his bunk.

"The shots," says Aron, "what were they?"

"I didn't see."

Aron swings his leg over Lale on his way to the ground.

"Where are you going?"

"A piss."

Lale reaches to the side of the bed, clutches Aron's hand. "Hold on."

"Why?"

"You heard the shots," says Lale. "Just hold on until the morning."

Aron says nothing as he clambers back into bed and lies down, his two fists curled against his crotch in fear and defiance.

* * *

HIS FATHER HAD BEEN PICKING UP A CUSTOMER FROM THE train station. Mr. Sheinberg prepared to lift himself elegantly into the carriage as Lale's father placed his fine leather luggage on the seat opposite. Where had he traveled from? Prague? Bratislava? Vienna, perhaps? Wearing a fine woolen suit, his shoes freshly shined, he smiled and spoke briefly to Lale's father as he climbed up front. His father encouraged the horse to move on. Like most of the other men Lale's father ferried around with his taxi service, Mr.

Sheinberg was returning home from important business. Lale wanted to be like him rather than like his father.

Mr. Sheinberg did not have his wife with him that day. Lale loved to glimpse Mrs. Sheinberg and the other women who traveled in his father's carriages, their small hands encased in white gloves, their elegant pearl earrings matching their necklaces. He loved the beautiful women in fine clothing and jewels who sometimes accompanied the important men. The only advantage of helping his father came from opening the carriage door for them, taking their hand as he assisted them down, inhaling their scent, dreaming of the lives they led.