

*After the End*  
*A Novel*  
by Kelli Christiansen

## Chapter 1

He handed her a small piece of soap, and, after a brief moment of wonder, she burst into tears.

It had been years since she'd even seen a piece of soap, much less had one of her own, had anything of her own. It had been years since anyone had given her anything new. It had been years since an authority figure had been kind and generous, giving her something instead of taking something away.

She stared at it in awe, her dry, cracked hands, rough with callouses, turning it over and over, her fingers rubbing it, as though making sure it was real, not her imagination playing tricks on her again. She gazed at the man who bestowed it upon her, taking in the youthful face hidden behind the scratches and scars and layers of dirt. She took in his dark brown eyes, his wavy brown hair, his perfect white teeth and broad smile. She looked at the name on his chest, read the name, rolled it over and over in her mind, committing it to memory: Lehmann. And the red, white, and blue patch on his shoulder: AA—Airborne Army.

“I thanks you,” she said, barely more than a whisper, trying out her limited English, not her first or even second language. She brushed away the tears and attempted a smile.

“Hey, hey,” he said, reaching out to comfort her, to put a hand on her shoulder.

She recoiled. She recoiled from years of habit, from years of being beaten, from years of being treated worse than an animal. Then she shook her head in apology. “I am sorry,” she said.

“Thanks you.”

She backed away, offered another weak smile, and left the line, holding the unscented soap up to her nose as she inhaled. It smelled like heaven. Like freedom. Like liberation.

As she kept walking, she tucked the piece of soap into her sleeve, rolling it into the cuff of her ragged striped dress, afraid someone might steal it from her. Not that she wouldn't share it, maybe with Renate or Helena. Or Leah, of course. She would have shared it with Leah. If Leah had made it.

Sarah couldn't think about that right now. She pushed aside the sadness, the despair, the agony of losing her sister on the march to Wöbbelin, a subcamp of Neuengamme. Leah was so weak, so tired from the slave labor. She couldn't make it. Sarah had carried her as far as she could, Leah all but being dragged along by her shoulders, but when Leah could no longer walk at all, not even a little bit, and when Sarah tripped and they both fell, the guard shot Leah in the forehead before Sarah could pick her back up.

Sarah closed her eyes and shook her head at the memory, but she couldn't stop a tear from escaping, forging a salty, wet path through the dusty grime on her cheek. She continued walking, aimlessly, hugging herself against the chilly wind. It felt cold, even though it was May. But everyone was cold. Everyone was so thin, so gaunt that it could have been twenty degrees warmer and they still would have been cold.

Even so, she relished the freedom of being able to walk around the camp without being threatened, without being frightened. She was cold and hungry and tired, but she was free. She wandered about, past the long brick barracks, around the fenced perimeter with its upright timbers and rows of barbed wire, over by Building 59 and Building 60, across to the main gate. She steered clear of the dead, the emaciated corpses of inmates who lay where they died, whether in the middle of the yard, in the barracks, or in the infirmary. A thousand of them scattered

about, more inmates starving and sick. She was lucky to still be relatively healthy. She had escaped tuberculosis, which plagued so many others, like Leah. She was covered in lice, she was fighting dysentery, and she stank to high heaven, but she was alive. Alive and free.

Near the edge of the camp, she spotted a gaggle of inmates surrounding a soldier, a tall boy, clean shaven. As she approached, she could see that he was working next to his Army truck, handing out something to the prisoners who weren't exactly prisoners any longer. She joined the gaggle, curious, excited, wondering what was going on. She stood on her tiptoes, straining to see what was happening, trying to get a good look over the crowd, three rows deep, encircling the soldier. Finally she saw: oranges. He was handing out oranges.

Her heart skipped a beat. A piece of soap and an orange, both in the same day! It was too much. She covered a smile with her hand, stifling the giggle that rose in her throat. Another tear forged another path down her dirty face.

It was May 5, 1945. Three days earlier, the 82nd Airborne and U.S. 8th Infantry Division had liberated the camp, just one day after having crossed the Elbe River. In just a few days, she had gotten her freedom, a piece of soap, and an orange. And a smile. A smile from a soldier: Lehmann.