

Synopsis:

After a traumatic deployment in Afghanistan, twenty-three-year-old Army medic Blanca Hernandez is ready to leave the life of a soldier behind so she can help her younger brother Mateo start college. His orientation goes awry, though, when a secret university experiment malfunctions and sends Blanca, Mateo, and several others back in time to Nazi-occupied Poland in 1943. Just like that, Blanca is back in a war.

Matters are complicated further by the arrival of Otto Zimmer, a cocky Nazi fighter pilot who agrees to help them in exchange for his freedom. Now Blanca and the others must fight to survive the elements, avoid hostile soldiers, and keep the timeline intact – all the while never letting Otto know the truth of their origins.

EPOCH

Chapter 1

When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot in it and hang on.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

Damn, it's hot.

Blanca's eyes ticked over the large group of people waiting nearby. Most of them were disgruntled parents waiting on their kids, the moms in heavy costume jewelry and the dads in caps and sandals. Some of the women looked like they were trying to pass for college students, wearing too-tight blouses or heavy makeup that was already starting to melt and clump in the stifling Texas heat. Blanca watched disinterestedly, fingers twitching without something to do. She pulled out a large pocketknife and began toying with it.

One of the women standing nearby watched her for a few seconds, features twisted. "Knives aren't allowed on campus."

Blanca paused, knife blade on her fingertip. She clicked her tongue, but didn't say anything.

The woman—who almost certainly spent her days arguing with helpless cashiers over expired coupons—huffed and shifted closer, as if the new and improved proximity might make her point clearer. "The orientation leaders explicitly stated—"

"Are you security?" interrupted Blanca.

"Well, no—"

"Then mind your own damn business."

The woman bristled, but at that moment, the doors to the building opened and the newly minted college freshmen poured out in droves, separating the group of tired and cranky parents into tired and cranky families. With a huff, the woman left, and Blanca stretched up on her tiptoes to look into the crowd so she could watch for her brother.

Soon enough, a gangly eighteen-year-old shuffled over wearing the same unenthusiastic grimace he'd had all morning. Mateo was taller than his sister, able to see over the hordes of people, but stick-thin and with a floppy mess of black hair he refused to cut. A thick strand of it was stuck to his forehead with perspiration. He nudged it with his shoulder and scowled. "It's ho-o-o-t," he complained.

"Suck it up." Blanca pulled out a paper map and studied it. "Damn, I didn't know college campuses were this big. Okay, so if A Building is there, and the library is here, then – "

"Blanca," Mateo groaned, "let's just go, we've seen enough—"

"No, we're supposed to figure out where all your classes are!"

"I can find them *later*—"

"So logically, B Building should be...at least nearby, right? Wait, here it is. What the hell, it's on the other side of campus!"

"Can I just go buy my textbooks now?" Mateo cut in irritably. Blanca rolled her eyes and dropped the map.

"Yeah, sure, let's go and we can—"

"I can go by myself, god." He turned swiftly and marched off.

Blanca rolled her eyes. *Teenagers*. At twenty-three, Blanca wasn't far from her own adolescent years, but Mateo still seemed particularly young and immature for his age. Blanca worried for him constantly.

He'd fallen in with a bad crowd during school. It hadn't seemed too serious at first; there were a few detention visits, some skipped classes. Then it turned into smoking weed behind the cafeteria and mouthing off to teachers. When Mateo got arrested for stealing from a convenience store, Blanca finally had enough. She'd talked to his foster parents, and he'd finished his senior year online.

A few minutes later, Mateo reappeared, looking no less sullen than before. "These are heavy," he groaned.

"Did you get 'em all?" Blanca peeked in his hefty backpack.

"Just the English, Algebra, and History. All the others are back ordered," he explained wearily.

"Can we go now?"

“One more building.” Blanca pulled out the map again. “Your first class is in the...uh, let’s see...science lab. You’re taking Biology, so—shut up, stop complaining—let’s go in with those people there.”

The duo quickly joined a large group being led by a student worker. The poor guy was drenched in sweat and looked like he’d rather be anywhere else on the planet. *Mateo will fit right in around here*, Blanca thought wryly.

Moving along in a shuffling herd, the families followed the guide down a hallway and into the various labs. Most of the soon-to-be college students were on their cell phones, tapping away, but Mateo was staring dully out a window, a blank look on his face.

Blanca noticed some movement in the hallway. A small group of men in lab coats hurried by, and barely a minute later, two more followed, looking anxious.

Curious, Blanca shifted away from the group and peered out. Another cluster of people appeared, looking no less jittery than the first. They quickly vanished behind a set of double doors locked with a key card. Blanca narrowed her eyes. She didn’t like people bustling around, looking nervous.

The last person to appear was a freckled man in his thirties with sandy-colored hair and a blue button-up shirt. Blanca caught a quick look at his face before he, too, vanished down a set of stairs. Unnerved, she rejoined the group just as the student worker finished up his toneless monologue.

“Where were you?” Mateo whispered.

She shrugged. “Just scoping some things out.”

“Relax. Everything is fine.”

The group moved to leave, but their progress was halted by a loud mechanical *hiss*. Blanca and Mateo — now at the front of the retreating group — paused. The group leader urged them to keep moving, but the hissing rang out again, this time followed by a loud *POP* and *CLANK*.

The building shuddered, and the lights flickered before they turned off completely. Blanca’s eyes shot up to the ceiling, where the light fixtures rattled and swayed.

“Uh, let’s just go outside,” the student worker said uncertainly. “There must be a short—a lot of these buildings are old—”

Just then, the building trembled violently. Beakers and tubes fell from the shelves and crashed to the floor, creating a carpet of broken glass. Blanca snatched the corner of a table and gripped Mateo as people shrieked behind them.

“Earthquake!” someone shouted, but that didn’t make any sense, *not in Texas*—

A loud metal *crack* sounded, and Blanca’s heart stopped as she looked down to see the linoleum floor splitting beneath their feet. In the growing crevice, there was a heated glow, followed by a

humming noise, loud and mechanical. It sent shockwaves up their legs and locked their knees. Then the floor began to rise and fall with a throbbing pulse.

“Get out!” Blanca shouted, snatching Mateo’s shirtsleeve and shoving him toward the door. The walls cracked and crumbled, and the ceiling fractured under the strain of the vibrations below. Debris fell around their heads, crashing to the floor in huge chunks of stone and metal. The floor groaned and split apart completely, and screams rang out as people fell into the glowing light, which had swollen into an angry red fissure.

In the distance, sirens blared in a sudden, keening wail.

The sound hit Blanca like a punch to the gut, and she froze. Mateo was yelling at her, but she could only see the movement of his mouth. She was, in that moment, deaf to everything except the sirens. They invaded her senses like a poison.

Mateo leaped forward to grab for the door, but the floor heaved as if taking a deep breath, and the last thing Blanca saw right before it exploded was Mateo’s face, stricken with fear, as the entire building burst around them in a hellish blaze of energy.

“MATEO!” she screamed, jaw finally unlocking in a last moment of panic. Heat blasted her stomach, and the world around her became a pitch-black void. The air was ripped from her lungs, and her body lurched painfully as she tumbled out of control. In the very next moment, the world snapped back into place, and a flood of light engulfed her.

Then came a single, blinding moment in which she was flying.

She hit the ground and skipped like a stone on water, bouncing once, twice, and then a third time before colliding with a thin tree, which snapped under her weight. The ground rushed up to meet her, and Blanca crashed into the dirt under a storm of wooden shards. For a few agonizing seconds, she didn’t have the strength to open her eyes. When she finally managed to inhale, regret quickly followed.

“Argh, damnit,” she groaned, rolling over and clutching her side.

With a tight swallow, she pulled up her t-shirt and investigated a long, deep scrape that stretched across her ribs. Blood mingled unpleasantly with dark dirt and a few stray pine needles.

“What in the hell...” She dropped her shirt and forced her elbows into the dirt so she could push herself up. The scene around her slowly came into focus. She was outside. Blanca’s eyes widened.

Mateo.

She struggled to a stand and looked around wildly. Distantly, she registered people moving around her. Some looked as haggard as Blanca did; others looked far worse. A few feet away, a young girl cried hysterically as she tried to stir her motionless dad. Blanca looked away. She couldn’t worry about them just yet.

“MATEO!” she called out as she fumbled forward, hair stuck to her face and a smear of dirt on her cheek from the fall. “MATEO!” She stumbled into a tree and used it to hold herself up. “MAT—”

“Blanca!”

Blanca turned sharply and let out a cry of relief as Mateo appeared from behind a group of hysterical teens. He quickly jumped into her arms. “Oh my god, Blanca! What— What’s going on, what happened...”

Slowly, the pair turned in a circle, mouths gaping as they took in their surroundings. The campus they’d been on moments before was gone; now they were surrounded by a dark forest crowded with towering trees and damp undergrowth. Between the heavy branches, they could see glimpses of a dark-gray sky. The air, Blanca noticed at last, was quite cold. The sweat on her back from the sweltering July heat now felt ice-cold as it trickled down her spine. A lump formed in her throat.

“Your – your phone, Mateo.”

Mateo snatched his phone out of his pocket, but his trembling hands quickly froze. “It’s not working. There’s no signal.”

Around them, others were discovering the same thing.

“Call 9-1-1!” shouted a desperate mother whose son was sobbing and holding his ribs. Blanca gripped her head in frustration before forcing herself to take a deep breath.

“Okay,” she managed after a moment, “Mateo, keep trying to find a way to call for help. I’m going to see what I can do.” Blanca wiped at her face before dropping to her knees next to the boy with the broken ribs. “Okay, we need to get him here... I need something to wrap him with. Take this...”

One by one, Blanca moved between those with serious injuries, doing what she could. After nearly twenty minutes, nothing else had happened and all anyone had done was suffer.

Blanca wiped her bloody hands on her jeans and scanned the treetops listlessly. In that moment of pause, a terrible realization hit her: she couldn’t hear anything except the people from their group. There was no clatter of traffic, no far-off hum of civilization. Only the occasional distant chirp of a bird or shifting tree limb stirred around them. Everything else was unnaturally quiet.

Unnerved, she jogged away from the bleeding teenager and found Mateo. “Anything?” she asked quietly.

“No one can get any calls out, and no one’s gotten any messages either,” he reported grimly. “Where the hell are we, Blanca...”

Blanca put her hands on her hips and looked around. “No freakin’ idea,” she admitted at last, rubbing at her face with a dirty hand. “Do you think this is everyone who was with us in the lab?”

Mateo scanned the frightened group. “Most of them, I think.”

Blanca nodded. “Okay, stay here with the others. I’m going to go look around, see if I can figure out where we are.”

Mateo frowned. “Don’t go far.”

“I won’t,” she promised. Seeing Mateo’s worried look, she smiled and placed a hand on the back of his head, lightly ruffling his hair. “No worries, kid. We’re good.”

Mateo relaxed a little. “Okay,” he said softly.

She managed a tiny smile in return, then walked off and left the group behind, careful to note where the sun’s rays pushed through the misty clouds overhead. As she walked, pine needles and twigs crunched underfoot. A breeze stirred, and as she turned her head up at the sky to check her direction again, unease settled deep within her chest. No matter how she strained to listen, there were no sounds of civilization nearby.

The further she went, the heavier the pit of dread in her stomach became. *Where are we? What the hell brought us here?*

At last, she saw a break in the tree line. There didn’t seem to be any movement beyond the forest, but she reached for her knife anyway and flicked it open with a jerk of her thumb. After taking a deep breath, she edged away from the cover of the foliage and peeked out into the clearing.

In front of her was a dirt road, wide enough for just one vehicle and with recent tire marks near its edges. Anxiety swelled in her chest. They’d been in the city just minutes before. What could have brought them to such an isolated area? Texas had its fair share of dirt roads, but for whatever reason, Blanca didn’t find much comfort in that. This didn’t feel like home.

Unsettled, she looked around slowly, brows furrowed and knife in hand. She peered in one direction and saw where the road twisted and went further into the forest. Shifting on the loose gravel, she looked in the other direction and spotted what appeared to be the tail end of an overturned truck.

Blanca’s jaw locked, and her dark eyes darted around as she remained stock-still in her spot, unwilling to move. Distantly, she registered the flapping of fabric in the breeze.

The truck had the look of a military vehicle. Blanca’s eyes flickered up to the top, wondering what emblem was on the side that she couldn’t see. She moved a little closer, careful to watch for any signs of movement. There didn’t seem to be anyone around, but as Blanca approached the truck, she saw something that made her freeze once more.

This was a military barricade.

Heavy splatters of blood, partially obscured by debris and loose paper, came into view. More blood, faded to the color of rust, decorated the barricade itself. Some of the temporary panels

were riddled with bullets. The gate, smashed to the ground, bore track marks from heavy truck wheels.

Blanca turned in a slow circle and looked for bodies, but she didn't see any.

The wind picked up once more, and the flapping sound returned. Blanca's eyes snapped to the canvas-covered truck bed, but that wasn't the source of the noise. Finally, she caught sight of a metal pole next to the barricade railing.

Her eyes traveled up, up to the top, where a flag billowed in the wind.

Blanca stepped closer and squinted to see the flag in the dying afternoon light. This should, at the very least, tell her what kind of military detail was nearby. This could be their chance to get help.

But as the wind gripped the flag and unfurled it to its full length, stark and bright against the colorless sky, Blanca felt her heart sink. For a moment, her mind refused to register what she was seeing. And then it hit her all at once.

The waving banner above her was the flag of Nazi Germany.

This is impossible.

Blanca took a step back and reached up to grip her hair and look around, as if someone else might appear to tell her this was all some sick joke. Her throat felt dry, and she tried to swallow, but the effort only left a painful bubble in her chest. She looked back at the dark forest. *No*, she thought with conviction. *There has to be some kind of mistake. There's a reason for all this.*

Trembling, but staunchly refusing to give in to panic, Blanca reached for the long beads wrapped around her wrist and said a quick prayer. This gave her a small bit of peace, and her breathing steadied. After tucking the charm back into the beads, Blanca turned to the truck with renewed purpose and yanked the canvas back so she could peer inside.

There had to be a clue, a sign—anything to tell her where they were or what was going on.

Blanca stepped inside unsteadily and looked around. The truck was mostly empty. A few bare crates lay in various states of brokenness and decay. A glass bottle with no label sat motionless in the center.

Just then, she spotted a piece of paper jammed in the passenger-side door. Hopping up, she pulled on the crooked door until the paper came out in her hand. It looked like a newspaper.

Der Stürmer it read on the top, and below that, a blaring tagline in German: *Die Juden sind unser Unglück!*

After that was a grotesque cartoon featuring Jewish priests committing a god-awful ritual sacrifice. Blanca flinched. She didn't need to know the language to feel disgusted; the intention of the publication was brutally clear. Her eyes drifted to the top of the page.

2 Dezember

1943

Blanca's fingers tightened on the page. Panic overwhelmed her, hitting her right in the joints and making them feel weak. She sucked in a deep breath and folded the paper with unsteady hands.

This is wrong, this is wrong—you're wrong, Blanca! Don't be stupid! This can't be real!

She shoved the paper into the back pocket of her jeans and turned to head back to the others. A humming noise in the distance drew her attention, and she stopped. The hair on her arms stood up. Like the sirens, this noise was painfully familiar to her. Blanca shifted fearfully to look up at the dim gray sky.

A regiment of fighter planes, uniform as a flock of birds, sped through the northwest corner of the sky. Whipping her head around, she saw another group of planes flying right at them from the opposite direction. Her blood ran cold.

Blanca couldn't see their insignias, but it didn't matter. The two squadrons were about to meet right over the group of people she'd left behind.

"*Shit*," she whispered shrilly, before turning on her heel and sprinting into the woods.

Back at the clearing, Mateo struggled to comfort an elderly woman who was bleeding from her head. "Don't worry," he reassured the woman with a shaky smile. "My sister will be back soon. She'll find help for us." That was when he heard the smashing of twigs and branches underfoot, and Blanca's voice yelling out.

"Blanca!" Mateo turned to face her. "What's going on—"

Blanca flew into the clearing and started yanking people to their feet. "Come on, we've got to find cover, come on!"

The others protested.

"We can't!"

"I still haven't found my daughter!"

"Where are we supposed to go?"

Blanca waved her arms frantically. "DAMN IT, PEOPLE! JUST MOVE—"

The ground next to her exploded.

People screamed and ducked, and suddenly the air was filled with deafening gunfire from above. A whistling sound pierced the sky, and Blanca scrambled forward, shoving Mateo ahead of her as a great fiery plume burst near them and set the trees ablaze.

In seconds, the forest around them was burning, and crackling heat battered them from every side.

“GO, GO!” Blanca shouted as the earth erupted right in front of them. People jumped to their feet, running frantically in all directions as the warring squadrons above their heads met in a furious violent clash.

The group split, some people ducking behind trees and disappearing in bursts of glaring flame. A massive *boom* sounded from above, and Blanca looked up to see a fighter plane spinning wildly in the sky, cutting several trees at their tops before crashing to the forest floor in an enormous blaze. Heat blasted the group, knocking several people off their feet.

“NO!” screamed someone she couldn’t see. “DAD!”

Overhead, gunfire shattered foliage and pine needles and branches rained down on them. Trees cracked and fell, and the air filled with thick clouds of black smoke that stole what little oxygen they had. Blanca stumbled once but regained her footing just as a blood-splattered cockpit smashed into the earth to her left. The impact sent shockwaves up her legs.

A group of teens ran next to Mateo. In a split second, they were lost to a falling oak tree fully engulfed in flames. Mateo stared in horror and fell, hands waving wildly before he caught himself on the dirt. Blanca snatched him up.

“Blanca, those people!”

“JUST RUN!”

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” someone shouted, but no one knew, so they kept running, running until their bodies, already aching, began to slow down.

Blanca and the others burst out of the forest and into a clearing just as two planes raced at each other over their heads, diving in opposite directions at the last second and nearly touching wing to wing.

Blanca slid to a stop. “We—we have to stay out of the open,” she rasped, but a young couple nearby didn’t listen and tried to sprint across the field. A dive-bombing plane failed to pull up in time and crashed into the open meadow. The broken wings shattered, and the propeller went spinning, catching the young couple and killing them in a flash of steel and blood.

“Oh my god!” cried a young girl next to them.

Blanca tugged on the girl’s hand. “GET MOVING!” she shouted before shoving her forward. They ran back into the trees, but the aerial battle above raged on, and more gunfire broke through the thin protection of the branches and dogged their every step.

A boy running next to them caught a shot in the leg and went down. His brother went back for him and was killed just as Blanca looked over her shoulder.

“Blanca!” Mateo shouted. “Look!”

Another explosion burst overhead as the group hurled themselves through the doors of a forgotten barn and dove into an open crawlspace. Blanca didn’t see their faces, didn’t register their voices. All she knew was *Safety, safety, get everyone to safety.*

“GET IN!” she screamed, pushing them forward. After the last person fell in, she grabbed the rickety wooden door closed, and darkness fell around them.

Outside, explosions hammered the ground and rattled the hinges of the door. Their fragile shelter trembled under each blast, but hours later, it remained intact. Blanca held tight to Mateo’s hand, so much bigger than she remembered, and with the other hand she grasped for the beads on her wrist.

Please, God, she thought, letting a few tears escape under the cover of darkness. Help me. I can’t be here again.

Texas, USA

2008

Blanca did not like the Morrisons.

At first, she didn’t like the Morrisons because of their house. It was large and square, with windows all along the front and a strange plastic-looking door. Blanca didn’t like it because it looked like a dollhouse. Dollhouses were fake.

And the people there—the Morrisons—they were fake, too.

Mateo loved them, though. He was too young to understand the duplicity of people, but at the tender age of eleven, Blanca knew it well. She could spot the artificial smiles and empty eyes. She could feel the strain in the hugs and the hesitation in the praise. She had seen it in countless foster homes before this one.

One day, Blanca realized seven-year-old Mateo was not on the school bus home. When she arrived at the Morrison house, she found Mr. Morrison seated in a chair and holding Mateo in his lap. He was stroking Mateo’s hair, petting it lovingly, and then he patted and stroked lower and lower until his hand was on the inside of Mateo’s thigh.

When he reached in even further, Blanca knocked over a pile of books.

Mr. Morrison quickly ushered Mateo out of his lap. “Oh, Blanca. I didn’t know you were home.”

“Why wasn’t Mateo at school?” she asked suspiciously.

“He wasn’t feeling well,” Mr. Morrison said. “So, I went to pick him up. Isn’t that right, Mateo?”

“My tummy hurt,” Mateo explained, but he had a funny look on his face. Blanca watched him for a split second, then looked back at Mr. Morrison.

“Okay.” She took Mateo’s hand and led him out of the office. They played together the rest of the afternoon, and once Mateo was in bed, Blanca sat next to him all night without moving. The

next morning, they left for school together, and Blanca waved good-bye like she always did. In her own classroom, she sat at her desk and thought very hard.

Recess came. Blanca went out to the playground, and as soon as the teachers weren't looking, she ducked under an opening in the chain-link fence and hurried back to the Morrison house, which was only a few blocks away. Mr. Morrison worked from home, but Mrs. Morrison would be out.

Quietly, Blanca slipped in through a window and went to the door leading down to the basement. She opened it and peered into the inky blackness. Without turning on the light, she walked down each step, listening for the sounds they made. When she was satisfied, she went down deeper into the basement and found the metal baseball bat she'd seen Mateo play with. She placed it next to the cellar door, then climbed up on the railing and untwisted the lightbulb from its socket. Once she was done, she went back upstairs and peeked down the hallway in the direction of Mr. Morrison's office.

"HEY!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, loud and sudden.

"Wha— Who's there?" Mr. Morrison rushed out into the hallway. When he spotted her, he relaxed and let out a huff. "What're you doing home, Blanca?"

He began to march in her direction. Blanca turned and hurried back to the basement, little feet quickly scampering down the wooden steps. Before she reached the bottom step, she ducked under the railing and crawled back up, so she was hidden near the basement door.

Mr. Morrison appeared at the top of the steps, and he hesitated. Tentatively, he reached out for the string near the empty light socket. A tug, and nothing happened. He took one step farther into the darkness. "Blanca?" he called, straining to sound kind. Blanca could hear the tremor in his voice. "Where did you go, little one?"

Blanca narrowed her eyes, fingers gripping the railing.

Mr. Morrison stepped down further. "Blanca?"

Lips set in a tight line, Blanca pulled herself up and over the railing. Now behind him, she put her hands on the baseball bat.

Mr. Morrison saw her shadow fall over him, and he turned.

THWACK!

Blanca smashed the bat across his face with all her might. The blow landed squarely on his jaw, and though delivered with only a fraction of a grown person's power, it was enough to send Mr. Morrison flying down the stairs.

He tumbled blindly, limbs flailing as he fought to catch himself. When the concrete floor rushed up to meet him, it was his head that hit first.

Blanca could not see the fall, but she heard it—a thick, wet *crack*.

“Mr. Morrison?” she called, bat still in hand.

When she heard nothing, she hopped down the stairs, found a flashlight, and pointed the beam of light at Mr. Morrison’s lifeless body. Her pink shoe was near a growing pool of blood, and she carefully stepped back to avoid making tracks.

Blanca looked at him for a few seconds. Then she turned and went back up the stairs, leaving the basement door open, as she exited through the unlocked window. She kept the bat in her hand, pausing only to wipe off the small crimson streak on a sheet hanging on a clothesline in someone’s backyard.

Walking in no real rush, she made her way back to the school, stopping only to toss the baseball bat into a dumpster. Then she stepped back to watch as the garbage truck came by, picked up the dumpster, and crushed all the contents inside.

The garbageman waved at her. Blanca waved back.

She made her return to school just as recess was ending, and she climbed under the fence so she could go in with the others. At the end of that day, Blanca and Mateo returned to the Morrison house. The police were already there, as was the social worker.

Initially, the officers were very concerned about Mr. Morrison’s death. However, after looking through his office in search of evidence and, in the process, uncovering some hidden folders and encrypted files, they became much less enthusiastic about tracking down his killer.