

PROLOGUE

Berlin, 1944.

A wounded city bleeds rubble and takes a long time to die.

In the half-light of dawn two dusty military vehicles thread cautiously over and around the ruinous aftermath of another night's bombing.

SS Obersturmbannfuhrer Josef Hauptmann's large frame fills the passenger seat of the lead car and he hunkers down against the early morning cold, cocooned within the folds of his greatcoat, pulling hard on a Russian cigarette.

Hauptmann, recently withdrawn from fighting on the Western Front, still wears the effects of combat etched on his face and in his hooded eyes.

A well-worn dispatch case rests on the floorboard next to his feet. Every few minutes he reaches out with his boot to touch it, like a nervous man on a crowded streetcar checking to be sure his wallet hasn't been lifted.

Hauptmann snuffs out his cigarette between a calloused thumb and forefinger; places the butt behind his ear, wipes his hands across his coat, reaches down to unlatch the leather case and withdraws an envelope, one of many. He lets it rest on his broad palm, examining the graceful calligraphy of the address. The script is a personal touch, which Hauptmann feels is effeminate and at odds with the letter's serious content. The signature alone has the power to give the letter its authority.

He turns the envelope over and runs a thick finger across the hardened wax seal. It's deeply impressed with the official emblem of the Reichstag, a clear iconographic warning: None save the addressee should dare to break it.

The letter is short, a single page, and Hauptmann knows every word by heart.

He sighs deeply, almost reverently, then replaces the envelope with the others and secures the case, retrieves the cigarette from behind his ear and lights it.

There are twenty-four such letters, each addressed to a different Concentration Camp Commandant. Other than the address and salutation, their content is identical.

The letters direct each recipient to turn over to SS Obersturmbannfuhrer Hauptmann all the diamonds confiscated from arriving prisoners.

And to do so by order of Hermann Goering

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It takes Hauptmann three weeks to present the two-dozen letters.

The camp Commandants ask no questions nor do they have any reason to object. Hauptmann's credentials are in order, the letters, signature and seals, are recognizably authentic.

The order, written over the signature of Hermann Goering, Commander & Chief of the Nazi Luftwaffe, is beyond question.

After leaving the last camp, Hauptmann has collected a total of 66,000 carats of diamonds, weighing 39 pounds. He carries them in a three-foot-long, cylindrical metal map case. Their value, depending on the appraisal of individual stones, is anywhere from \$30 to \$50 million dollars.

His mission completed, Hauptmann directs his driver to head back toward Berlin. They ride in a Wehrmacht Schwimmwagen, a modification of the 1938 Volkswagen design, which can operate on water as well as land. The second car, carrying two soldiers, is a Kubelwagen, another military version of the Volkswagen design, this one shaped a bit like a kubel, a tub.

The Kubelwagen pulls a large, two-wheeled military trailer loaded with cans of spare petrol, equipment and rations for the three soldiers. It also holds Hauptmann's BMW motorcycle.

The boot of each vehicle is filled with assorted gear, including several hundred-pound bags of a dry sand and cement mixture.

The metal map case is never out of Hauptmann's sight.

On the outskirts of Potsdam, the two-car caravan halts for the evening.

Potsdam, like nearby Berlin, nestles in an intricate network of rivers and canals that criss-cross the Northern German plain, extending from the Baltic Sea to the Danube and Rhine rivers.

The next morning the soldiers locate a farm where they exchange a bottle of Cognac and a portion of their rations for a number of rusted tools, some wooden boards, 20 meters of rope and a broken tractor wheel, items Hauptmann had not bothered to bring from Berlin.

The SS officer consults a detailed military field map of the area, makes a choice, and directs his driver to one of the many lakes in the area. They motor along its perimeter until they come upon a grove of evergreen trees on its north shore, a site Hauptmann feels is suitable to make camp.

While the men organize the campsite, Hauptmann takes the Schwimmwagen and, using the field map, locates another lake, larger, about five miles from the campsite. He picks his way along the rutted cart path that traces its perimeter. The area is deserted. Most of the shore is covered with large trees and undergrowth growing right up to the water's edge. It takes some time but he finally locates a suitable space between the trees and launches the Schwimmwagen into the water.

He adjusts the levers that engage the propeller at the rear of the amphibian and cruises slowly on the water to a spot in the center of the lake that seems deep enough.

Using powerful binoculars, he carefully scans the shoreline looking for life, but sees no one. Then he ties rope to the steel wheel, which he lowers into the water until he feels it hit the lake bottom. He hauls the wheel back into the amphibian, measuring the rope by his arm-lengths; and calculates the depth to be 15 meters, approximately 50 feet from the surface.

Referring to the field map, he memorizes the coordinates for his location. He also notes his distance from several trees and rocks on the shore so that he can find the approximate spot when he returns. Those details attended to, he lights a cigarette, surrenders to the bright sun and enjoys the first solitude he's experienced in a long time.

An hour later he's back at the clearing with the others. He explains to the soldiers what he needs, scratching sketches in the dirt with a stick, to help them understand. They construct a wooden box, 50-inches long by 24" square, closed at one end, open at the other.

Once the box is completed, the men dig a pit in the earth and use the hole to mix lake water with the bags of cement and sand they've carried from Berlin.

Then, under Hauptmann's supervision, the soldiers shovel the mixture slowly into the box so that the cement surrounds the metal map case.

The men have no idea of what might be inside the tube but there are plenty of rumors, none of which is close to the truth.

Once the map tube is incased in the wet cement, a steel post ring salvaged from Berlin rubble is imbedded halfway into the cement on the open end of the box. With the cement dry, the exposed half-ring will function as a handle someday, when it's safe to haul the cement block to the surface.

It takes almost two days for the cement to set and harden. And for two days the soldiers sleep, eat the food they rustle up in the nearby village, smoke cigarettes and work their way through many bottles of wine, purchased from a tavern in a nearby town.

There is a case of Cognac – a gift from the commandant at Dachau – but other than the bottle used for barter with the farmer, Hauptmann is saving the rest for a farewell party.

When the cement is rock hard, the men lift the box into the Schwimmwagen. Hauptmann leaves the men and drives back to the lake he had visited several days before, enters the water and, using his visual benchmarks, motors out to the approximate spot where he measured the lake's depth.

It takes all his strength to struggle the box into the water. It sinks rapidly out of sight.

Satisfied, he returns to the campsite, distributes the rest of the Cognac and tells his men to build a bonfire.

He drives off for a short time and returns with two chickens. One of the men fashions a spit from green tree branches and cooks them.

Hours later, drunk and under extra blankets to ward off the night's chill, the soldiers fall asleep in the warmth of the campfire.

The surface of the lake is the color of pewter and the cold air smells of pending rain. Hauptmann, wrapped in his greatcoat, hunches by the fading fire and studies the sky. A meteor scribes an arc across the heavens. The taste of the chicken is still in his mouth and, like his sleeping men, he's drunk from Cognac, exhaustion and a sense of accomplishment.

He takes a deep breath, lets out a sigh of resignation, and stands. He removes a 5-inch long metal cylinder from a small pocket sewn to the inside of his right boot top, which he screws onto the barrel of his Luger. The attachment, precision made by Maxims Arms Company, claims to muffle the sound of a Luger to something not much louder than the pop of a soap bubble.

He soon discovers that their claim is greatly exaggerated.

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Hauptmann is a powerful man but he still has to struggle to load the three dead soldiers' bodies into the vehicles, two in the Kubelwagen and one in the Schwimmwagen. He tosses the tools and all the other gear into the two-wheeled trailer.

Using wire from the roll he'd packed in the boot, he secures the soldiers in sitting positions in the car seats. They will eventually be discovered but, given the tens of thousands of war casualties, he's certain that no one will make much of a few more dead bodies.

The Kubelwagen and the trailer take almost ten minutes to sink.

The amphibious car, its interior valves opened to the lake water, sinks more quickly. Hauptmann sits on his motorcycle, a blanket wound tightly around his shoulders, smoking a cigarette and watching as the car, with his dead driver securely wired upright behind the steering wheel, disappears beneath the black water.

He clears the campsite of all traces of their presence. Two remaining bottles of Cognac, too valuable to waste, go into the saddlebags on the back of his motorcycle, along with his gear.

It's raining lightly by the time he accelerates away from the campsite and barely dawn when he rides into Berlin. Fires from the night's bombing blaze all over the city.

Now it's time for Hauptmann to put the Jew back to work.

That is, if the poor bastard is still alive.

CHAPTER 1

Florida. The present

A SMILING MOE GREEN, LEANING LIGHTLY ON HIS ALUMINUM WALKER, stood in the small local branch of the Grand Western Bank.

He was telling a joke to the manager, a blonde young enough to be his granddaughter. Moe delivered the punch line, which detonated a little explosion of laughter from both of them.

Moe Green was a sprightly looking eighty-six, short, slightly

overweight and dressed in his signature outfit: a polyester jump suit, this one a lemon-yellow number, tan Mephisto walking shoes, and a New York Yankee's baseball cap worn at a rakish angle. Wisps of white hair flew out from the sides of the cap and covered the back of his neck.

Turning, he pushed his walker toward the front door, glancing up at the wall clock.

Good. I've at least twenty-minutes before the shuttle bus gets here. Enough time for that chat I've been meaning to have.

Moe maneuvered his walker along the sidewalk of the strip-mall.

It was already turning dark but the air remained mid-day hot and sticky. Night insects had plastered themselves to the storefront windows, drawn to the glass by the bright interior lights. Moving slowly, Moe passed by the establishments he'd become familiar with over the years: a laundromat, drugstore, dry-cleaner, coffee shop; the chiropractor with a larger-than-life plastic spinal column in the window and finally, the stamp and coin store.

Moe paused for a moment to catch his breath, then pushed open the door. The conditioned air felt good. A faint odor of lilac was not unpleasant. An old overhead neon fixture emitted a comfortable hum; Moe watched, fascinated, as a swarm of flying insects attempted to mate with the bulb.

He leaned against the glass top of a display case that did double duty as a counter, and examined the merchandise. There were dozens of stamps, each in its own plastic sleeve, tagged with relevant descriptions and prices. Coins were similarly displayed. He wasn't particularly interested in stamps or coins, but he did have a question he wanted answered.

A huge man materialized through a curtain from the rear of the store and, seeing Moe, took a step back.

"Hello! You startled me," the fat man said, breathing hard from the simple exertion of walking. "I could have sworn I locked the front door. I was just getting ready to leave. Unless it's urgent, maybe you could stop in sometime next week?"

The man wasn't just heavy; he was obese, with thinning red hair pulled back into six inches of ponytail, exposing a florid face screwed into an expression of confusion and surprise. Rimless, bottle-thick glasses exaggerated rheumy, red-rimmed eyes.

"I must have passed this place a million times," Moe said. "Always been meaning to stop in. Never saw anyone in here before." As the man got closer, the scent of lilac became stronger.

"Yes, well, truth be told, I don't get many walk-in customers," the proprietor said. "Most of my business is done by phone and over the Internet. How can I help you?"

"I've got a question about a stamp. I use the bank at the corner," Moe said, flicking his head toward the bank in an attempt to establish some level of bona fides. "The Palm Village shuttle bus drops me and picks me up just outside."

"Right, I've noticed the bus. Why don't you ask me your question?" Moe could see the dealer was anxious to leave.

"The stamp question. Right. Got it in the war. I'm hoping it has some value."

"May I take a look?"

Moe reached into his back pocket and pulled out a well-worn wallet. He rummaged through, methodically littering the counter top with a collection of credit cards, AARP and Medicare insurance cards, Lottery stubs, a bus pass, pictures, and an odd assortment of notes and numbers jotted on miscellaneous scraps of paper.

"*Damn*, I'd sworn I had it with me. Must have left it on my desk at home."

"Okay," the fat man said, trying not to show his impatience. "Maybe you can describe it? Tell me what it looks like?"

"What does it look like?" Moe shrugged. "It looks like a stamp. No, seriously, let's see...well, it's *German*, a German stamp." Moe closed his eyes for a moment. "There's a circle in the center. Inside the circle it has the head, a profile, of Hitler—may he rot in hell. On one side of the circle it's got like a sort of torch and on the other side I think there's a..."

"And on the other side there's a sword, right?"

"Yeah, a sword," Moe said, impressed.

"And it's a horizontal shape stamp."

"Right again."

"And under the circle it says, '*Deutsches Reich*'?"

"I think so. You're good at this."

"It's my business. Actually, the stamp you've got is a fairly common commemorative that was minted in the early 1940s to celebrate Hitler's fifty-fourth birthday."

"Really? His birthday? They should have one to celebrate his death day, the bastard."

"You're right. Anyway, there were six versions that were all alike except that each had its own postage price and each was a different color. Do you happen to recall the denomination or color of your stamp?"

"It's sort of bluish-green. With some numbers on the top. A six and a fourteen, I think. I guess that's the price."

"Correct. The color is called teal and the numbers indicate the amount of postage in Reichmarks. Was the stamp ever franked? Used for postage? I mean, is it cancelled? You know, with little black lines stamped across it?"

Moe thought for a moment. "I don't think so."

"I see. Well, Mr....?"

"Green," he said, extending his hand. "Moe Green."

"Well, Mr. Green, glad to meet you. My name is Carl Kunze. If your stamp is in really good condition and not cancelled, you might be able to sell it at retail – like, for example, if you ran an ad in one of the stamp magazines or put it onto the Internet, you'd probably get about \$30 or \$40 for it. Since I'd have to eventually sell it at a profit, I couldn't give you much more than half of that, contingent, of course, on being able to actually examine it."

"That's not very much, is it," Moe said, more as a statement than a question. He had hoped the stamp was valuable, something to leave to his son, Jake, or his granddaughter, Adrian. Over time the stamp's worth had grown in his imagination.

He turned away from the fat man and started his slow shuffle toward the door. "I got that stamp a long time ago," he said wistfully, over his shoulder. "It's always had sentimental value. But I figured it was worth something. Anyway, thanks for the information. I may bring it in for a look-see. Have a nice weekend. Sorry to have kept you."

Kunze lumbered around the counter and with one hand held the door open for Moe so he could navigate through with his walker.

"Thanks again." Moe paused. "There is one other question I have about the stamp, Mr. Katz,"

"Kunze. What's that?"

"Yes, Kunze. Sorry. The head inside the circle. Hitler's head.

Were all six versions like mine—with his head upside down?”