

A Novel By

MICHAEL
KARPOVAGE



SKULL OF
DISGUISES



SKULL OF DISGUISES

MEMENTO MORI  TREASURE LIFE

PRAISE FOR SKULL OF DISGUISES

Michael Karpovage once again successfully weaves factual history into modern day fiction to create an intricate mystery of murder, mayhem, witchcraft, and lost treasure. His descriptive writing style gives the reader the impression they are right there in the scene of a movie. In SKULL OF DISGUISES, he presents two parallel plots that eventually intertwine with unexpected twists keeping the reader on the edge of their seat until to the very end.

—*Gene Conrad, reviewer, Berkshire, NY*

This book has Clive Cussler-like plot lines that make for staying up way too late reading page after page. The writing was so descriptive, the characters even found ways into my dreams. SKULL OF DISGUISES is a great read for fans of historical fiction and a special treat for all Brothers of the world's oldest fraternity.

—*Brother Billy Gould, reviewer, Cabul Lodge No. 116, Green Cove Springs, FL*

Another Karpovage masterpiece! He grabs you on page one and never lets go. Reading his book is like watching a movie.

—*Robert Brian Miller, reviewer, Alpharetta, GA*

Authors of genius create alternate universes that you never wish to leave. Karpovage's third book in his Tununda Mysteries universe is another that stays with you forever as the scenes replay on the screen of your mind. SKULL OF DISGUISES is a Rubik's Cube of betrayal, inhumanity, honor, bravery, and adventure set against the historical backdrop of WWII and a Freemason's legacy. For men of the Craft like myself, you'll be reminded why you first chose to walk as a Freemason as Karpovage exemplifies the core Masonic principle of brotherhood through his characters and plot. This book goes on my forever bookshelf!

—*Brother Timothy S. Yarbrough, reviewer, Northwest Lodge No. 1434, Spring, TX*

If you like stories that are so well written that you can't put the book down to go to bed or to work, start this when you have a day or two free! This is the third book in the series (be sure to read the first two to understand the backstory). Michael Karpovage has done it again – thorough research, terrific characters and storyline, which turns into a very believable tale. It will keep you guessing and cheering for the good guys right to the end!

—*Linda S. LeCroy, reviewer, Brandon, FL*

Warning: SKULL OF DISGUISES will grip you tight like the jaws of a gator. It will then consume you. Not every author has this ability. Michael Karpovage does it by weaving little-known facts with fiction to create a totally believable plot. This book is an absolute must-read. Definitely a 5-Star rating!

—*Paula Howard, reviewer, Indianapolis, IN*

MICHAEL
KARPOVAGE

SKULL OF
DISGUISES



/MichaelKarpovage

THE TUNUNDA MYSTERIES

Book 1: *Crown of Serpents* (2009)

Book 2: *Map of Thieves* (2014)

Book 3: *Skull of Disguises* (2018)



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.



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*To my mother, for giving me a strong foundation.
I miss you, RoRo.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Skull of Disguises is a work of fiction based on pure speculative narrative, and all present day characters are creations of my imagination. But some of the historical figures in this book are real people. They existed and left records of themselves, some more abundant than others. I tried to be faithful to their actions and encounters as best I could determine from historical sources. Some sources are recorded, others come through individual oral histories. These 'facts' combined with speculative 'fiction' are the basis for each book in *The Tununda Mysteries*.

There's also major theme that acts as the foundation to these novels: Masonic brotherly love and protection – especially in the heat of battle. Meaning: the loyalties of a Mason outweigh the loyalties to a country or an army. This core tenet of Freemasonry is time immemorial and the most fascinating aspect of Masonry for me personally. And also, by extension, for Jake Tununda. This unwavering rock solid foundation, a man-to-man oath, is what binds together the oldest universal fraternity in the world – a fraternity that has outlived armies, governments, and nations.

In *Skull of Disguises*, Jake's loyalties and inner convictions are put to that test once again: breaking the rules to do what's morally right versus following the letter of the law. What would you do if confronted with similar circumstances?

For a breakdown of the historical facts versus the embellished legends used as the backstory within this novel, be sure to read the end notes of this book under *Fact or Fiction?*

Visit **KarpovageCreative.com** for author interviews, book signing events, newsletter subscription, photos, and more.

— *Michael Karpovage*

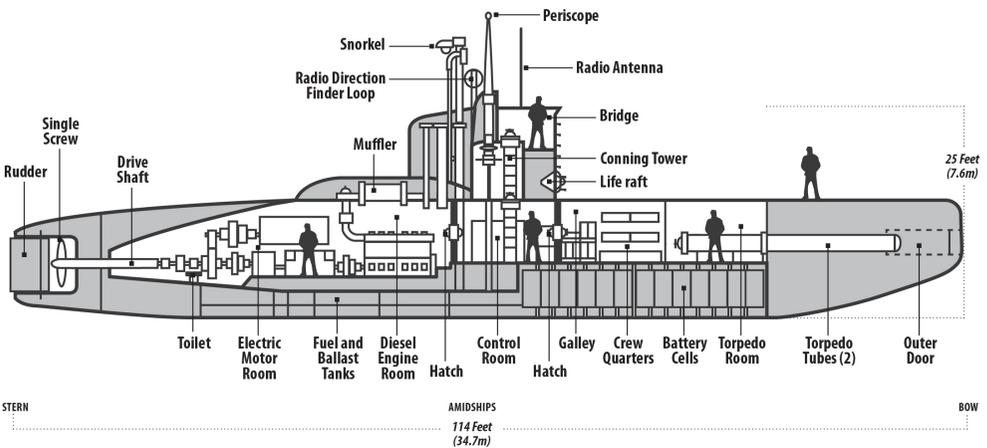
GEORGIA STATE MAP



U-Boat Type XXIII (*Elektroboote*)

Diagram by Michael Karpovage

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SAPELO/BLACKBEARD ISLANDS MAP

PROLOGUE

September 17, 1945. 7:15 a.m.

U-2370 Elektroboote

Blackbeard Island, Georgia

A SHARP CRACK JARRED GERMAN *KAPITÄNLEUTNANT* Werner Witte from his deep concussive slumber. His eyes fluttered open to semi-darkness as the penetrating sound echoed in the back of his skull. Somewhere far away, a strange man's voice pleaded over and over again: "*Outta da watah! Outta da watah!*" Another loud report followed. The captain flinched, blinking with heavy lids, head throbbing as he slowly swam back to the surface of consciousness.

A third blast. He squeezed his eyes shut, the pain ricocheting in his head. As a veteran of war, that sound was all too familiar: rifle fire.

A man then screamed in abject terror, followed by another crack of rifle fire. And another. *Must be a dream, a horrible dream*, thought Witte.

Then all went completely silent.

Captain Witte blinked and the darkness before him turned to blurry light. Sunlight, it seemed. Something he hadn't seen for days. The air he gulped was beyond the stench of oil, smoke, sweat, and vomit he had become used to. Focusing from blurriness to clarity revealed he was inside of a cylindrical tunnel dripping with water. He looked straight up at a curved ceiling with long, metallic condensation-caked pipes and a wafting gray haze of smoke. Clumps of smoldering electrical wire dangled from damaged conduit tubes. Handwheels, gears, valves, and smashed glass faces

of gauges lined the walls. As the cobwebs in his mind drifted away, it finally hit him.

He was still inside his U-boat.

Covered with splintered pieces of wood paneling and dressed in rain gear with a yellow life vest, he lay in a heap amidships near the crew quarters. Slowly turning his head, he glanced toward the bow. One of the two torpedo tubes was barely visible behind a torn curtain. Panning his eyes in the opposite direction, just past the open bulkhead hatch, he could see inside the control room, now basked in glorious rays of smoky sunlight.

But a strange feeling enveloped him: a complete lack of motion, as if he were floating.

Is this finally my iron coffin? he thought, unsure if he was alive or just another ghost crewman finally joining his fellow dead submariners of the *Kriegsmarine*.

Blinking to adjust his eyesight, feeling the numbness of his body slowly turn to pain, he soon realized he wasn't dead after all. He wasn't floating either. His U-boat was grounded.

But Witte had fully expected to go down with his ship – to share the fate of his comrades in service of the Fatherland. Every time he'd heard one of his sister U-boats was lost at sea, he felt that ever-present, agonizing survivor's guilt.

Of all German wartime forces, U-boat men suffered the heaviest casualties. Out of a force of fifty-five thousand, over thirty thousand didn't survive the war. Life expectancy was a mere sixty days on missions to the North American coast where his boat had operated in his last days.

Only tough-as-nails veterans like himself knew how to keep their crew – half of whom were on their first mission – alive during those last deadly days of the war. They were a *Schickalsgemeinschaft* – a group of men sworn to each other, dependent on each other, and bound by fate.

I beat the Gods. Again, Witte thought.

He now knew his desperate gamble of jamming himself inside the galley cabinet had saved his life when the sub wrecked. Ultimately, though, it was his tough little U-2370 that won the real battle; the U-boat he'd killed with and surrendered with under the German flag, but then was

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forced to commandeer under the enemy's flag.

But whose flag was the real enemy?

Closing his eyes, he flashed back to how he'd gotten here and the dreadful last death throes of his doomed sub.

At just 114-feet long, Captain Werner Witte's Type XXIII submarine was the shortest, lowest-profile U-boat in the German fleet. Only two bow torpedo tubes were fitted and there were no deck guns. Its small size meant it was so crammed with equipment that there was virtually no room for his crew. But all that technologically-advanced equipment gave them the edge they needed to win in battle.

With an operating complement of just fourteen compared to the more common Type VII's and their crews of almost sixty men, the Type XXIII was a sleek, agile, and highly stealthy killing machine – a 'miracle work' dubbed by German engineers. Because of its high-capacity battery cells fueling the electric motor for maximum undersea operations, it was officially called an *Elektroboote* by the *Kriegsmarine*. Mostly used in shallow, coastal patrols to interdict Allied shipping, she could rapid crash-dive in nine seconds.

At the end of the war, in a last-ditch effort to re-establish the U-boat offensive in the Western Atlantic; his U-2370 was assigned to *Gruppe Seewolf*, the last wolfpack of the Atlantic campaign. U-2370 was the only one in its class to make the unprecedented desperate journey across the north Atlantic from its Norwegian port. Refueled and resupplied along the way by larger class U-boats, once they reached the coast of North America, Witte and his crew went to work relaying information to other attack boats in their group.

Whenever his U-boat submerged to avoid detection, Witte would try to employ the revolutionary new snorkel system to circulate fresh air within the sub. Long gone were the days of running out of breathable air and having to resurface only to be pounded by enemy warships and planes. His crew survived fully submerged for unheard-of lengths of time. With the high-speed electric motor and a hull covered in an anti-sonar rubber coating, his sub easily outran the fastest warships the Allies threw at him.

While hunting together with U-546, a big war horse Type IXC/40

U-boat – Witte used that same quiet cloak of invisibility to help make the *Kriegsmarine's* last kill of the war. On April 24, Witte's U-2370 made contact with a destroyer off the coast of Newfoundland. He relayed the location to U-546 and together they attacked.

Witte launched both of his bow torpedoes. One missed, the other hit on the port side, forward, causing an explosion. U-546 fired a stern torpedo and made its mark amidship. The destroyer jackknifed in two and was sent to the bottom of the ocean with 115 men. It was the destroyer escort USS *Frederick C. Davis*, the last combat sinking of a U.S. Navy vessel in the Atlantic Theatre. Only 77 survived.

Five other destroyers then hunted the pair of U-boats down. After enduring ten bone-jarring hours of depth charge attacks, the deadly game of cat and mouse claimed a victim. A heavily damaged U-546 was blown to the surface and then stitched with gunfire. Only 33 crewmen escaped before the U-boat rolled over and went down, taking 26 men with her. Witte's U-2370 managed to escape in a southwesterly course at maximum depth running silent while using only its electric motor.

Soon after, on May 8, Witte received a radio transmission from *Kriegsmarine* Admiral Karl Dönitz with orders to surrender under a black flag to the closest Allied ship or port. Dönitz had been elevated to *Reichspräsident*, Hitler's successor as head of state, after the death of the *Führer* and in accordance with his last will and testament.

For Witte, the war was over. But his brutality had just begun.

On May 16, Witte surfaced his ship undetected just 600 yards from a completely surprised American destroyer 100 miles off the coast of Boston. He was the first one on the bridge hoisting a black flag. Being fluent in English, he shouted their surrender through a bullhorn as the destroyer closed in. His U-boat was immediately boarded, all of his crew off-loaded, and taken as prisoners of war.

Command of his sub was given to an American officer and a prize crew hand-selected from the destroyer. The destroyer escorted U-2370 west to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard island in the state of Maine, where it was placed in dry dock and studied by Navy engineers because of its treasure-trove of stealth technology.

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Witte and his U-boat men were then housed at the notorious Portsmouth Naval Prison, a Navy brig on the island. The German prisoners of war learned the brig was nicknamed the “Alcatraz of the East” because it was virtually escape-proof and housed the worst convicts of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. It also held several other POW U-boat crews who had just surrendered, too, including men of U-234, U-805, U-873, and U-1228.

Naturally, he and his crew were treated harshly. Hardened American inmates hurled every imaginable insult at them, along with urine, feces, and garbage. Muscular Marine prison guards, commanded by aggressive officers, manhandled the crewmen, some as young as eighteen. They were punched, slapped, kicked, and beaten with rubber truncheons. Their personal possessions were looted as souvenirs. Stolen were diaries, personal letters and photographs, watches, rings, badges, awards, binoculars, cameras, wallets, and almost 3,000 Swiss francs. One massive Marine guard even stole Witte’s captain’s hat. But these indiscretions were nothing compared to the private interrogation sessions.

The Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) had interrogators question the POWs to gain information about German weapons technologies. Anyone who didn’t comply was harshly beaten by the Marine guards – all behind closed doors. Captain Werner Witte learned the hard way after he endured a round of severe facial slaps by the same Marine who’d stolen his hat. A swollen black eye and busted lip brought him back in line to answer questions properly. That’s when he was forced to reveal he had helped sink the USS *Frederick C. Davis*. The Marine then gave Witte the worst beating of his life using a rubber truncheon. Witte ended up in the prison hospital for two weeks.

The captain of U-873 wasn’t so lucky. *Kapitänleutnant* Fritz Steinhoff was assaulted by the same burly Marine during another interrogation session. Two days later, after being transferred to a Boston jail, he bled to death from a sliced wrist, apparently self-inflicted from broken sunglasses. Suicide was the official cause, but a crewman from U-873 whispered it was the Marines. That crewman warned Witte he might be next.

After four months of brutal treatment and constant physical and mental abuse from the Marines and inmates, Witte’s luck finally changed when he

was snatched from his cell and made an offer he couldn't refuse.

The OSS wanted U-2370 back in service and for him to train an American crew as part of a secret mission.

As added incentive, his original thirteen crewmen of U-2370 wouldn't be beaten and tortured. If the German captain was a good Kraut, they had promised, then his sailors would be transferred to a POW camp where humane treatment under the Geneva Convention was honored. If not, they'd be beaten some more for good measure and then shipped overseas to a Russian POW camp instead. The choice was rather simple: Witte would do anything for the well-being of his crew to keep them out of the hands of the vengeful Russians, which would surely result in their deaths.

In early September U-2370, with an American skeleton crew of just eight men, including himself, went back into service, this time under the American flag. The man in charge of the operation was an OSS agent who went by the name of Mr. Baker. The hand-picked crew was made up of former U.S. Navy submariners who had been pulled directly from the prison as part of the mission.

All because they were expendable – especially Witte.

For the American convicts, each serving long prison sentences for heinous crimes, and for Witte, it would be their first mission of many as a clandestine U-boat crew – or so they were told. With his fluency in English and being a highly experienced submariner, Witte's role was the translation of the German-labeled machinery and the training of the American captain, first officer, and chief engineer on how to operate the technologically-advanced U-boat. A mechanic, helmsman, and radar operator rounded out the crew, all of whom were commanded by agent Baker.

The first leg of their mission was to get the sub from Portsmouth to Bermuda where they would receive new orders and take on cargo. Witte was initially treated like shit during those first few days. The American captain was undisciplined and the crew would have been uncontrollable if not for OSS agent Baker laying down the law. After several crash dives under Witte's command, running submerged and silent, the Americans soon respected the German as their de facto commander.

After all, their lives depended on him, for he was also tasked to show

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this crew how to avoid detection from their very own forces on patrol in the air and on the sea. Those hunter-killer groups of U.S. Navy and Civil Air Patrols included ships, planes, and even blimps – and they had gotten quite good at sinking U-boats over the course of the war.

Successfully arriving at the U.S. Naval Operating Base at Ordnance Island, Bermuda, U-2370 received her new orders and was subsequently stocked full with secret cargo destined for the United States. It departed with one new passenger who was introduced as Mr. Bosch, making for a total of nine men. Dressed in a neatly pressed black suit, the VIP was a slight, wiry, middle-aged German who also spoke good English.

The OSS agent and the American captain revealed to Witte only generalities in their orders so he could plot navigation. They were to transport the passenger and cargo to a small, restricted Navy airfield at Harris Neck on the Georgia coast, just beyond Sapelo Sound.

However, during the loading of the cargo, while sitting hidden on the toilet at the very aft of the boat, Witte unwittingly eavesdropped on the chief engineer and mechanic. Drunk already, their loose lips revealed key details about their new mission.

They said once the boat reached Harris Neck and off-loaded their goods, they'd refuel, reload, and smuggle back to Bermuda booze, cigarettes, chocolate bars, silk stockings, smut magazines, and any other contraband items of worth. From Bermuda, that cargo would then be flown to occupied Germany by OSS planes, and eventually sold on the black market. Apparently, it was all cover for their real mission, something they called *Operation Overcast*.

The two American crewmen even joked that once Witte sufficiently trained the crew, he wasn't going back to prison. He was destined for Davy Jones' Locker, they'd said. Witte had learned this phrase when he studied at an English college for an eight-month stint in 1937.

From Bermuda, the single-propeller, diesel-driven engine of U-2370 made great surface speed traveling at night, while running deep and silent during the day on battery power. It avoided all U.S. air and sea patrols because of its sophisticated *FuMO 65* radar and radar detection technology.

No matter; theirs was still a doomed mission to the U.S. coast.

Disaster struck just twenty miles off the coast of Georgia.

It was a moonless night with distant thunderstorms and increasing winds from a massive hurricane traveling north up the Atlantic coast of Florida. Although they'd heard radio reports that the hurricane had destroyed the Homestead Army Air Field down in south Florida, U-2370 was still due to beat the storm and take safe haven at Harris Neck.

The American crewmen and even agent Baker, though, had gotten utterly complacent, figuring those last miles would be a breeze. Below deck they were either drunk or dozing off at their stations. Witte himself had fallen fast asleep in a hammock, having been up for eighteen hours straight. But the most crucial crewman of all, the radar detection operator, was occupied on the head with a severe case of diarrhea. Without a full operating contingent onboard, no one could replace him. His absence was their Achilles' heel.

Up on the bridge, the American captain and first officer were scanning the skies and waters for contacts. With no forewarning at all, an undetected U.S. Navy PBM-5S2 Mariner bomber, using advanced microwave radar technology, dropped from the clouds at enormous speed. It drenched U-2370's bridge with daylight from its forward spotlight and blinded the two night watchmen. All they could do was duck behind the bridge shield.

Despite all U-boats having been ordered to surrender by German high command back in May, which the overwhelming majority did, Allied patrols still knew there were some that defied the order. Just the previous month, U-977, a Type VIIC U-boat, surrendered in Argentina after making a 99-day voyage to escape Europe.

The Mariner pilots visually identified this surface contact as a German U-boat, and with shoot-on-sight orders, had the nose turret gunner open up with his twin .50-caliber machine guns. The sub's bridge lit up in a rain of hot lead. The American sub captain and first officer were killed instantly.

Making its low level pass, the Mariner then simultaneously dropped two, 500-pound depth bombs. One of the bombs bounced off the starboard saddle tank leaving a dent. They were preset at a shallow depth of only 25-feet, so it was just seconds before they sank and detonated. One was a dud, but the other created an incredible blast.

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The underwater explosion lifted the small boat out of the water. Two more crewmen lost their lives in the engine room: the radar operator on the toilet and OSS agent Baker, who had been sifting through some cargo. Both died from blunt force trauma when their heads were bashed against machinery from the bomb blast's underwater concussive wave. Everyone else suffered severe migraines when their brains were rattled like Jell-O.

But the depth bomb failed to crack the tough hull and sink U-2370.

As quickly as it had appeared, the Mariner disappeared back up into the clouds. The bomber, previously suffering an engine malfunction and flying on nothing but fumes after a long-distance patrol, could ill afford to swing back for another attack. Instead, they radioed the sub's location for other coastal patrol units to follow up.

Scrambling up to the bridge, Witte found the shattered bodies of the American captain and first officer. The captain caught a round that had blown the top half of his head clean off. The first officer's body took several rounds and was torn to pieces. The periscope and snorkel up top were both shattered and useless, while the radio aerial was split in half. Witte immediately flew the American flag in the hopes it would deter any more attacks since now the sub was nothing more than a sitting duck. He left the bodies where they lay.

Below deck, floor plates were askew and covered with hand wheels, broken glass, and pipes that had been blown from their mountings. The mechanic reported that the hydroplanes had jammed, the ballast tank had split open, and the diesel engine was inoperable with severe oil and hydraulic leaks. Plus, the sub was taking on water in several places. All that remained functional was the electric motor powered by battery cells, which had already been depleted by three quarters before the attack.

Worst of all, they were unable to submerge to escape further attacks.

The civilian Bosch, trying to help, said the radio was so damaged there was no way to communicate to Harris Neck that their mission was now a bust and they needed rescuing.

With a severely damaged and hapless submarine, the five survivors, distraught from the air attack and deaths of four crewmen, begged Captain Witte to save them. Under his direction, they made as many repairs as they

could. It was frantic non-stop work. They exhausted themselves so much the chief engineer passed out from the effort. They were successful, however, in keeping the ship afloat and moving again under electric power.

But Hell had soon unleashed a new fury upon them.

They were now on a collision course with the oncoming hurricane.

Secured with a metal belt, clothed in rain gear, goggles, and a life vest, Witte tried his best to navigate the sub while up on the bridge. As the weather became violent, he called down gyrocompass bearings and orders to the acting helmsman below who made the proper rudder adjustments to keep up with the shifting winds. The electric motor was barely a match for the monstrous waves that soon overtook them. Keeping her headed in the right direction, let alone making any significant speed, was difficult enough. Once the batteries ran out, they'd be powerless and adrift.

Witte watched in dread as mountains of waves rose from the sea. The white-capped ridges seemed to rise to enormous heights as if meshing with the slate-colored pulsating clouds above. He had never been caught in a storm of such sheer magnitude. The constant flashing and bolts of lightning streaking to the sea and the heavy booms of thunder like an artillery barrage were never-ending. He remembered thinking it was like the fists of the sea god Poseidon smashing the fists of the sky god Zeus while everything in between was crushed in their wrath.

The boat pitched high in the air as it rode one towering wave after another, only to be swamped by tons of water as it descended deep in the troughs, losing all visibility between the breakers. Cascades of water poured over the bridge and down the open hatches below, drenching the remaining men in the control room. The nightmare never let up. They were literally stuck inside a bottle being violently shaken in every direction.

Long washed away in a massive wave were the bodies of the American captain and first officer. The boat shook, shuddered, and vibrated, seemingly ready to fall apart. Every man had lost his meal. The swinging and listing were constant, but Captain Witte had managed to keep her from going sideways and literally rolling over.

Sometime during the storm, Witte spotted faint lights he hoped were navigational markers into Sapelo Sound. If so, their final destination was

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close: Harris Neck Outlying Landing Field (OLF), a highly-restricted, remote, auxiliary anti-submarine air patrol base that had been transferred over to the U.S. Navy from the Army Air Force several months back. Closed to all air traffic except on prior approval, it was where the Mariner bomber that attacked them had made an emergency landing when her fuel ran out.

Harris Neck was located beyond Sapelo and Blackbeard Islands, across the deep natural harbor of Sapelo Sound, and just up the South Newport River where they were supposed to have been escorted in after radio contact. The tiny base was completely surrounded by salt marshes in an unpopulated area miles away from prying eyes. Witte felt he'd gotten his sub on the right course to Sapelo Sound, but it was down to pure luck if it would actually make it into the harbor refuge. Three times he desperately shot off red flares, but the hurricane gobbled them up within seconds.

Pressed against the metal bridge shield by 120-mph winds and thick sheets of sideways rain, he was overcome with sea sickness almost to the point of passing out while vomiting until he had the dry heaves.

The milky, frothy foam of whitecaps lashed him like whips in a torture chamber until he could take no more. Struggling to close the bridge hatch against the howling winds, he slid six feet down the ladder into the conning tower and fell exhausted to his knees inside the tight tube. More wind and rain entered this chamber as it, too, was riddled with holes by the air attack.

Climbing down through the conning tower hatch and clamping it shut above him, he slid the rest of the way to the control room. Under a red glow of light, he could not believe the sight before him. No one was there. The boat was pilotless, abandoned.

Witte clutched the ladder to hold himself in place. His feet lifted off the floor weightlessly, then slammed back down in ankle-deep water. Water sprayed everywhere from burst pipes and valves. The combined sounds of the outside storm and the destruction within were unbelievable.

Items not tied down became free-floating, banging against anything in their path. Anyone inside who had not secured himself in time was certain to be mangled to death. Witte caught a clipboard in the mouth that chipped a tooth. Soon he tasted warm, salty blood.

Something heavy slammed into his legs, almost knocking him over.

It was the chief engineer. His battered body was being tossed about like a rag doll, broken limbs flailing, twisting unnaturally into strange angles. The engineer's head repeatedly clanged against the deck plates every time the sub rose and crashed down, his neck obviously broken. Eyes wide open, face blanched, bloodied, and battered, he hadn't been dead that long. Witte realized he would end up the same way if he didn't take refuge.

The stern bulkhead hatch to the engine room was sealed shut, but the forward door was still clamped open. Where the helmsman, the mechanic, and Bosch were, he hadn't a clue since there wasn't much room to maneuver because of the amount of cargo crammed within. He yelled for the remaining crewmen over the high-pitched whistling of the winds outside. No response.

The battle was over, he realized. He had lost. The remaining men were either dead or fending for themselves. If the sub went down, that was that. He'd done everything he possibly could. He knew he'd die in a matter of minutes if he didn't find a secure spot to brace himself. That's all he could do at that point – take cover and pray. The Gods would make the final decision.

He knew exactly where to shelter: the galley cabinet right around the corner just fore of the open door. Pulling himself through the forward bulkhead door, he hung onto a handle to support himself for another rollercoaster ride on yet another tremendous wave. Next to the two-burner countertop stove, the five-foot high wooden galley cabinet had already ejected its inventory. Both doors banged open and closed.

Splashing about on the water-covered deck plates below it were broken porcelain dishes, utensils, pots, and pans along with provisions of flour, beans, bread, and bottles of wine. While still clutching the bulkhead door handle, Witte kicked at the shelving inside the cabinet until it broke free. Now he had room to crawl inside as soon as the boat leveled out.

A hammock supporting suitcases over the crew cots suddenly broke free and spilled luggage across the deck. One of the suitcases flipped open and spewed piles of foreign currency. When the sub dipped into the next trough, high denominations of Reichsmarks, French francs, British pounds, and American dollars floated about like confetti in a parade. Unsurprised,

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he realized the Americans were smuggling loot back to the States. Witte had no time to even care.

It took several lunges, but once inside the galley cabinet he was able to brace himself and hold on to ride out the storm.

But the nightmare refused to let up.

The last thing he remembered was feeling the sub caught in a powerful current. The boat surged ahead and the hull banged against underwater objects until the bottom seemed to suddenly drop out.

Witte felt a massive impact. The collision flung the entire cabinet from its wall mounts – with him inside – and smashed it to bits against the far wall. He suffered a severe concussive head wound and his world went black.

Another rifle crack outside his wrecked U-boat jolted *Kapitänleutnant* Witte from his memories and brought him back to reality.

His resurrection was about to begin.

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE

1

*Present day. Friday. Late October
Tununda's Military Menagerie
River Street. Savannah, Georgia*

RETIRED ARMY LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROBERT 'Jake' Tununda stood behind an empty, sawdust-covered lobby display case, its top strewn with construction tools. He was reading a surveillance system sales brochure on how best to monitor the old warehouse that would eventually house *Tununda's Military Menagerie*, his valuable military artifact collection.

A warm dusk breeze off the Savannah River swirled in from the front door left ajar from the last of the renovation crew who had kicked off for the weekend. Jake glanced up at the tourists passing by against the fading light, reminding him that he, too, needed to call it quits and lock up. Tossing the brochure aside, he skirted the counter and headed toward the entrance.

A black male teenager stepped inside.

"Sorry, but we're still under construction," Jake announced with a raised voice. "Probably open next month." The old battle scar on his left forearm tingled a warning that no state-of-the-art security system could ever pick up.

The five-foot-eight, well-built teen, dressed in denim shorts, a white t-shirt, and basketball sneakers, completely ignored Jake. Instead, he slammed the door behind him shut. Chest heaving, head down, a hand plunged deep into his front pocket, he now strolled toward Jake.

Already with a firm grip on his holstered firearm concealed under his

loose work shirt, Jake backed up behind the counter and was at the ready should things turn to shit. He wasn't about to be the next victim in the rash of armed robberies, assaults, and homicides plaguing Savannah's famous historic district.

Just last week, the shop owner of *Books 'N Booze*, right next door to Jake's place, had a gun put to her head. Luckily, she survived when a bibliophile with a concealed pistol intervened and shot the robber dead.

But so far this year, 50 people hadn't survived. Everyone in the city knew who the culprits were since most fit the same profile: young black males. Drugs, gangs, joblessness, poor education, and non-existent parents all contributed to the destructive cycle that created these lawless wolves. These predators were not only killing fellow blacks in their own neighborhoods, but they also targeted the wealthy downtown historic district, murdering its residents, business owners, and tourists that swarmed the streets.

It sucked that he had to racially profile these young men, for the vast majority were just the opposite, but Jake knew what the reality was if you wanted to survive in virtually every big inner city across the United States. He knew firsthand how dangerous these deadly gangbanger wolves could be when his own life was almost snuffed out in Atlanta's Historic Oakland Cemetery over a year ago.

"Something I can do for you, son?" Jake asked, focusing on the kid's hand as he pulled it out of his pocket. No weapon, just a closed fist holding a yellowed, folded piece of paper. Jake relaxed his pistol grip.

The boy looked up and took a deep breath. He had pleasant brown eyes and youthful chin hair. He unfolded the paper and read from it. "Yaas'suh. Are you Mr. Ton-Ton-oonnda?" he asked, struggling to pronounce Jake's American Indian last name.

Not ten feet away, an attractive woman with auburn hair, leaning against the wall texting on her phone, let out a little snicker.

Jake's eyes wandered over to her for just an instant before falling back on the teen. He replied with a smirk. "Close enough. Yeah, that's me."

The kid opened his hand revealing a thick silver ring. He delicately placed it on the counter top.

Jake raised his eyebrows, knowing instantly it was a WWII-era German

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SS *Totenkopf* or Death's Head ring. He leaned his five-foot-ten inch frame over the ring to get a closer view of the raised skull and crossbones in the center of the band.



The kid continued to read from his paper. “Can you please axe-axe-ssess the market value of this, um, this Toe-tin-cop ring, suh?” He said it in a strange, almost Creole-like accent mixed with a deep Southern drawl that Jake had trouble understanding. “I’d like to sell it because I read in the newspaper you’re a military art-art-artifact collector looking to buy stuff. Supposed to be worth a whole lot of money.” When he was finished, he looked up with nervous, pleading eyes.

Jake tried to summarize what he had heard just to be clear. “You’d like me to assess the market value of this SS *Totenkopf* ring?”

“Yaas’suh.”

“You think it’s worth a lot of money, and you’re offering to sell it to me, is that correct?”

“Yaas’suh,” replied the teen, still gathering his breath. Beads of sweat hung on his forehead. He stole a glance at the front door.

Jake couldn’t help but follow his gaze. It was a typical heavy wooden warehouse door with a small window full of iron bars. No one was there. He kept an eye on the teen’s hands, though. So far so good. He detected no threat from the youngster.

Jake picked up the ring and rolled it between his fingers. He’d only seen these in a select few collections over the years. These rare rings were, hands-down, the most-sought-after item of the Third Reich and most certainly were

worth a lot of money, especially if you could match the ring bearer's name engraved on the inner band with that of the history of the SS officer who it once belonged to. This ring *looked* authentic and had the correct rune markings, but he wasn't taking any chances. He needed to compare it to other genuine assessment photos found on the internet. Plus, he had met a military expert from Charleston he could compare notes with, too.

On the flip side, he knew full well there were tons of fakes out there and it seemed strange that a teenager even possessed one of these rings in the first place. "How old are you, young man?"

"I'll be eighteen in two days, suh," the boy said, proudly.

"That's great. Now I need to know where you got this from," Jake held the ring up. "Who had ownership of it, how you obtained it? It's called provenance and it adds to the overall value of an artifact like this."

"I understand pro-ven-ance," said the teen. "You're talking about its history of possession. My great-grandpa gave it to me. All's he said was he got it way back in 1945 at the end of the big war. He was one of them Buffalo Soldiers. Told me it'd be worth good money, suh. You see, I'm trying to raise capital funds for investment, suh."

Jake cocked his head, impressed. In the corner of his eye, even the woman raised her eyes from her phone. The boy was obviously very well-educated. And certainly respectful, too, in using the term "sir," Jake thought appreciatively. Simple manners went a long way and now he was feeling like a dolt at profiling the kid in the first place.

Still, it was kind of difficult to decipher the way he pronounced his words. It definitely wasn't the trashy Ebonics, ghetto talk the local thugs used. The boy's language was more of a French, sing-songy tongue with a tinge of West African if he wasn't mistaken.

"Buffalo Soldier, huh? Happen to know which division that was and where your great-grandpa fought?" asked Jake, as a test, knowing full well the history of this segregated, all-black unit being the only one of its kind to see combat in Europe during the war.

"The 92nd, suh," replied the boy. "Fought in Italy along the Gothic Line, he told me."

Jake pursed his lips, pleased at the right answer. "Correct."

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While he inspected the ring closer, he heard the boy blurt out, “Oh shit!” He looked up and followed the kid’s line of sight to the front door. He was staring at the silhouetted figure peering in with cupped hands from outside the little window.

The boy flinched. As if on cue, the door flew open and a tall, muscular black man with a ponytail of dreadlocks entered. The scowl on his face meant he was pissed. He wore a stylish pork pie straw hat and was dressed rather nicely in casual, yet expensive-looking clothes. Jake couldn’t help but notice an oversized gold and diamond Rolex watch on his wrist. And what he thought looked like a thin branch from a tree clutched in his hand.

In a gruff voice, the man barked out some indecipherable angry words in the same dialect as the kid’s while making a beeline to the youngster. Before Jake knew it – and hardly even saw it – the man cracked the boy on the back of his bare legs with the switch.

The boy gritted his teeth, absorbed the pain, and stood his ground. “Two more days and I’m done with you,” he defiantly spat to the man,

“What the fuck are you doing?” yelled Jake, dropping the ring on the counter, fury in his eyes.

“Stay the fuck out of my business, bro,” the man replied, pointing the switch at him, the tip of it not a foot from Jake’s aquiline nose. “Dis boy be *my* property. I’m his guardian and dis be *discipline*.” He then wound up and whipped the kid again in the same spot. This time the boy howled in pain. The man grabbed the kid by the neck and shoved him toward the door.

Jake scampered from behind the display case and followed. “You okay, little man? That true what he said? He’s your guardian?”

“Leave it alone, bro,” warned the guardian.

The kid turned and nodded, embarrassed, eyes wide and teared-up. “Yes, he is. He’s my uncle. I gotta go. Sorry to bother you, suh.”

“Get back on the boat, little *beeatch*,” the uncle growled. He smacked the kid in the back of his head, then pushed him toward the door again. He turned to say something to Jake, but found a finger in his face.

“Touch him again and I’ll shove that stick so far up your ass you’ll be tasting bark.”

“Try it muthafucka,” snarled the brute “and I’ll shove six up yo’ ass.” He

lifted his shirt to show Jake a silver revolver tucked into a waistband holster.

An authoritative woman's voice erupted from behind Jake. "And I'll shove seven up yours, *muthafucka!*" It was the woman who had been texting – Jake's new bride, Rae – a force to be reckoned with when a threat loomed, especially against her new husband.

She had pulled her Glock 42 .380 pistol out of her concealed carry purse and now clutched it in the firing position. Dressed in jeans, knee-high boots, and a button down blouse, she advanced on the target.

A restroom door near the front entrance then kicked opened behind the stunned man. "And I'll add eight more, *bitch!*" another woman yelled.

Dreadlocks, already shocked at the sight of the white woman with the pistol bearing down on him, turned around to face the new threat. She was a heavysset black woman in a white dress. He couldn't believe his eyes. She was aiming a compact pistol at his chest at point blank range.

That was Becky Holden, Rae's closest friend in Savannah. They were headed out for happy hour drinks, but she had become rather preoccupied in the bathroom due to a stomach illness.

"Now get the fuck outta here!" ordered Jake, his 1911 pistol at the ready, about to put two .45 ACP rounds in the face of his target.

Dreadlocks immediately dropped his switch and raised his hands. "Y'all just chill now, ya hear? Crazy-ass, mo-fos. We're leaving. We're leaving." He slowly backed away toward the open door, hands still up. But then he paused as he was just about to exit. He stared at Jake, nostrils flaring.

"Go ahead, trip my fuck-it switch," Jake challenged.

But the kid grabbed his guardian's shirt and pulled him outside.

Jake jumped at the door, slammed it shut, and bolted it. He, Rae, and Becky watched through the window as the man and boy ran across the famous cobblestone River Street. They reholstered their weapons, the threat now gone.

"What in the hell was *that* all about?" Becky asked in her deep Southern drawl as her eyes followed the fleeing pair cross the tourist-filled plaza.

"The kid wanted me to assess a ring," said Jake, eyes focused on the duo while they jogged beside the old electric power plant, now turned into a luxury hotel. In an instant, they made it to the river's edge at the newly-

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built docks, ran down a gangway, and jumped onto a black-painted, hardtop antique speedboat.

“And then his guardian uncle comes in and whips the boy like he’s his damn runaway slave or something,” Rae added. “Said the kid was his *property* and he was disciplining him. The kid didn’t do a damn thing wrong. I saw the whole thing.”

“I heard that poor boy pitchin’ a fit out here,” said Becky.

“I know,” said Jake. “The piece of shit then flashes his piece at me when I warn him to stop beating the boy.”

They all watched as the kid was whacked hard in the back of the head as he struggled to release the boat’s mooring lines. Jake shook his head and sighed. Dreadlocks planted his ass in the rear seat of the boat as if he were some VIP, while the boy manned the helm and fired up the boat. It pulled out into the main channel then headed down river. Quite noticeable was a black flag on the stern. When it unfurled in the draft, it displayed a pirate’s skull and crossbones.

“Christ, I need a drink,” mumbled Jake, turning from the window. He grabbed the discarded switch, snapped it in half, and shoved it in a trash bin. Back behind the display counter, he reached underneath for a hidden flask.

“Thanks for covering me, ladies,” he said. “I swear to God, I had less attempts on my life when I was deployed overseas in war zones. Maybe this River Street location was a mistake? Probably should have picked a quiet spot down near Tommy’s place.” He unscrewed the flask and took a shot of High West whiskey, his latest favorite spirit. He offered the flask to the ladies. Rae shook her head, but Becky’s eye’s lit up.

“Gimme some of that,” Becky said, nodding. “I ain’t never done that before, taking my gun off safety, and aiming it at someone. Bout shit my drawers.” She took a long swig. “Again.”

Jake and Rae burst out laughing, the nervous tension from the near-shooting dissipating like a balloon losing air.

“Jake,” said a still smiling Rae, hands on hips. “This is Savannah’s main strip. We’ve got the river literally out our front door. We landed a gold mine location here the day we bought this little warehouse and started renovating. And we paid a pretty penny for it, too. High public visibility is what your

collection requires to be successful. We're going to meet veterans, history lovers, and fans from all over the world. Plus, with my office right upstairs, it's a great location for what I'm doing, too."

"Don't let them bad apples turn you off," agreed Becky. "*Tununda's Military Menagerie* would be lost down near ol' Tommy's place. Besides, y'all are popular here in Savannah. Kinda like celebrity status. And with all them fans from your old TV show, y'all got a really unique brand name in Tununda. You'll make a killin' at this location."

"Yeah, I know," conceded Jake.

'Ol' Tommy's place,' that Becky referred to, was the late Tommy Watie's Cherokee Rose Manor near Forsyth Park, a primarily residential area on the southern edge of Savannah's historic district. The home and all of Watie's possessions had been willed to Jake and Rae upon his passing over a year ago for them helping Tommy fulfill his lifelong dream. Unselfishly, the couple then immediately sold the manor to Becky for \$1.00 since she was Tommy's caregiver in his last years. To honor Tommy's legacy, Jake kept the old man's Civil War collection that once filled a room in that house, and was planning on featuring it as one of his main exhibits in his new museum. Since then, he and Rae had made some serious life decisions back up North in their home states of New York and Pennsylvania.

Jake requested and was released from the Army with an honorable discharge, full pension, and benefits. He still kept close ties, though, to the staff at the Army's Military History Institute where he had worked as a field historian. But given the amount of publicity – good and bad – he had generated in his various exploits, the army he had served in for well over twenty years of his life couldn't wait to part ways.

Top Pentagon brass never liked Jake's notoriety with his and Rae's now defunct *Battlefield Investigators* show on the American Heroes Channel, nor their hero celebrity status for acting in self-defense and gunning down an assassin in broad daylight in Savannah. Jake had, in turn, tired of the brass's politically correct bullshit under the hold-outs of the previous liberal administration anyway, so his retirement had been a divorce of mutual agreement.

But it was his link to the death of a Congressman from Atlanta who was

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connected to the widely-publicized theft of the West Point Museum items last year that became the final nail in the coffin of his military career. One of those stolen items – a Civil War general’s hat – Jake had even recovered to return to the museum. The other two items were still missing, though: the famous Lilliput golden pistol of Adolf Hitler and an ivory baton of Hitler’s second in command, *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring.

The very first thing he did after leaving the Army was propose marriage to Rae. They tied the knot at a romantic, all-inclusive, adults-only resort in Costa Rica. Their close friends, Alex Vann and Marissa Morgan, were also married that same day, each couple acting as each other’s witnesses. No family, no drama, no drunken bachelor or bachelorette parties with strippers, no big gaudy weddings. After what the four went through last year, and their near-death experiences, they all knew what they wanted and cherished. They wasted no time in locking up their partners for the rest of their lives.

With an incredible amount of wealth bequeathed to them from Watie, plus vast treasures safely hidden away both in Georgia and New York, and recently becoming silent partners in the Vann’s new mining company, Jake and Rae decided to pursue their dreams in better climates. They kept Rae’s small cottage in the Finger Lakes region of New York so they could have access to their underground secret bunker in the Seneca Army Depot, and also as a summer retreat from the humidity of the South. Since they both fell in love with Savannah, her eccentric and friendly people, her history, and the fact that they were sick and tired of the long cold winters up North, they decided to make their permanent residence in the Savannah coastal area.

Jake’s dream of having a military artifact collection and research office came to fruition when his Savannah lawyer contacted him wanting to sell an old abandoned two-story warehouse dating back to the early 1900s. He’d always wanted a large exhibit room for his relics after seeing *Highlander*, one of his favorite boyhood movies, when the lead character Connor MacLeod strolled into his own antique military trophy room. And this warehouse fit the bill.

When the Tunundas discovered its prime location on the far west end of River Street in the new Plant Riverside District under the shadow of the Talmadge Memorial Bridge, they snatched it up before it even went on the

market. Not only was it a keen real estate investment, but Rae also saw her dreams fulfilled with a new upstairs office for her private detective business. She quickly earned her private investigator license in Georgia and had already solved cases for several prominent Savannah clients: two involved cheating spouses, the other an embezzlement case. But her hottest job now involved contracting with the U.S. Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) out of Hunter Army Airfield, not a half hour away south of Savannah.

While Becky, a registered nurse, both lived and worked at Cherokee Rose Manor – her new assisted living business – Jake and Rae chose to make their residence out on quiet Skidaway Island, one of the coastal barrier islands not twenty minutes southeast of Savannah.

Skidaway was home to the exclusive golf resort community called The Landings. It was the largest gated community in America, comprising some 7,000 residents living in homes ranging from modest on up to massive mansions. They even had their own security department. The Tunundas purchased a 5-bedroom, Spanish style, 7,000 sq. ft. villa on five acres of land fronting the Moon River side of the island. It was their dream home come true. They even had a private dock where Jake captained a brand new 32' offshore power catamaran. Sometimes their work commute consisted of boating up through the river system and docking right in front of their new building.

Jake and Rae lived the good life in Savannah: everything they owned was top quality, money was no issue, and their dreams had just begun.

Life was completely grand – until that teen walked in.

Jake grabbed the flask from Becky and threw his head back for another shot of the fine straight rye whiskey. Looking back down, he rolled his eyes. “Dammit! The kid forgot to take his ring. I don't even know his name or where to return it.”

“You gonna do as he asked? Find out how much it's worth?” asked Becky.

“Yeah, I need to. Immediately,” said Jake. “I owe the boy that much for making the effort to come here and getting his ass whooped for it. I'll get online tonight and consult with Erhardt Hoffmann. He's a military historian Rae and I just met in Charleston. One of the foremost experts in Third Reich militaria. Plus, he's a fellow Freemason. If the ring proves to be a

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fake, then I'll confiscate it, but if it's the real deal, then I need to return it to him somehow."

"Hmm, what's this?" whispered Rae as she bent down to pick up a folded piece of paper by the display case. She unfolded it and noticed it was rather aged with yellow and green stains. It was no bigger than a typical 3 x 5" index card. But it had some newer scribbling in pen on one side. She read Jake's surname – her new last name – and a sentence asking for an assessment on the market value of a ring.

She flipped the page over and a startling graphic of an elaborately designed skull stared back at her. The strangely mysterious black and white design had an immediate powerful impact. The symbol on the forehead especially caught Rae's attention. Her eyebrows furrowed. "Hon? You may want to take a look at this." She handed Jake the paper.

Jake first read the kid's practice speech on the back, then flipped it over.



The swirling hypnotic design within the raccoon-like eyes sucked him right in. He then shifted focus to the large symbol centered on the forehead. At first he saw two Xs, then he squinted and saw something else: the Freemasons square and compasses, the symbol of the oldest fraternity in the world.

Of which he was a member.

"Lemme see that," said Becky, snatching the old paper from his hand. Her eyes widened, her lips smacked, and in a low voice she muttered, "Oh

Lord, I haven't seen this skull in a long, long time." She went for the whiskey flask sitting on the counter.

"Huh?" said Rae as she watched Becky tip the flask to take a pull.

As the alcohol slid down the back of her throat, she closed her eyes and shuddered. "Y'all don't want no part of this. Uh uh. No, siree," she warned, holding up the paper.

"Do tell," demanded Jake.

Becky glanced at Rae with wide eyes and received a nod of approval. "Alright, but I'm warning y'all." She took a deep breath.

"This here is a *skull of disguises*," she said, touching the image on the paper. "It has many hidden meanings, they say. On the surface, it was used as a label for some legendary moonshine called *Doctor Blackbeard's Elixir of Life*. The skull's black beard gives it away."

"Moonshine?" interrupted Jake, head tilted. "*Elixir of Life*? And they use a skull as its logo, the symbol of death?"

"Uh-huh. That's right," said Becky. "Part of the disguise. My grandma said it was the best-tasting, purest, white lightning corn whiskey she's ever had in her life! And trust me, she's emptied many a jar of the stuff over the years, let me tell you."

She winked and smiled. "I remember one of her sayings: *Make your eyes twirl 'round like they was on fire, like they was full of life*. My family is Gullah-Geechee from Shellman's Bluff in McIntosh County and that 'shine is legendary down there. The whiskey you got, sugar," she gestured toward his flask, "is really good, but Doctor Blackbeard's stuff is tons better. They say it had some secret ingredients in it that made it so powerful. And why it was in such high demand. But expensive as hell and almost impossible to get. Yup. Best quality liquor around these Lowlands for many, many years. Some tried to imitate it, but if you didn't see that skull of disguises, then you know the stuff you was getting was shit. Or worse – poison."

Rae snickered. "Sounds like this was probably a family tradition, huh? That you might have had a drop or two of this moonshine yourself?"

Becky's smile was all teeth. "Girl, I've been known to partake in a shot or two. Or three. Or four. And then I'd hit the floor!"

Laughs all around again.

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In his best English pirate accent, Jake tried to add to the humor, “Arrrrr, matey, where exactly was this *Doctor Blackbeard’s Elixir of Life* made? On a pirate ship?”

Becky didn’t bite. She instead gave Jake the eye.

Rae cracked Jake on the arm. “She’s being serious, let her finish.”

Jake felt like a dope at the failed joke. His eyes rolled, embarrassed.

“Nobody ever put a label on moonshine because it was bootlegged and illegal. Word-of-mouth and a handshake was trust enough. But after some forty poor blacks died in Atlanta in one week back in 1951 from drinking poison, disguised as moonshine, then some of the makers started adding a stamp or a secret mark or a label to their glass jars and kegs. This guaranteed the customer was getting the best quality ‘shine, and not that shit poison that left people dead, dumb, blind, and paralyzed so they could make a fast buck off poor blacks.

“Another disguise,” she continued, “is in all the skull’s symbols pointing to where the ‘shine was made. It’s like a code. Supposed to be some secret, well-protected location near Blackbeard Island. Sand dollars, starfish, and a nautical star. Also notice the alligator teeth instead of human teeth? Notice the snakes around the border? Signs to keep away.”

Jake and Rae looked at the label again. Becky was right.

“Doctor Blackbeard was an ol’ Saltwater Geechee, but he’s not the kind of doctor you’re thinking of, I bet?” Becky locked eyes with Jake.

“This doctor could put a hex on you. He was a root doctor, doing all that ancient magic Hoodoo stuff brought over with the slaves from West Africa. Supposedly, that was part of his secret ingredients. That’s what I’m warning you about. That shit is real, y’all. You don’t mess with Hoodoo.”

Jake’s face grew serious. He knew exactly how real and deadly the paranormal world was – that spiritual realm that exists beyond our physical, material forms. It’s a realm he wholeheartedly believed in.

And feared.

“If I remember some of the history correctly,” said Becky, “my grandma said this ‘shine dates all the way back to the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. The recipe and the process was a closely guarded secret and handed down through many generations of Doctor Blackbeards. Like a

family inheritance. But then through the Prohibition years . . .”

“1920 to 1933,” Jake chimed in.

Becky nodded. “Yup, when it was being bootlegged along the coast is when the demand for whiskey skyrocketed. It was a favorite of both the poor, Gullah-Geechee black folk, and the rich white folk in all their posh private resort clubs in Savannah and the Sea Islands. That’s where America’s wealthy elite came down to play. Grandma said that the politicians and celebrities, and even some Presidents who visited down here, all loved Doctor Blackbeard’s brew.”

Becky directed her eyes back to Jake. “And then during World War II the military boys really started getting a knack for it. Grandma told me stories that it was even being shipped overseas to Europe! Crazy. Some connection about that ol’ military base out in the middle of nowhere down the coast. Umm, what’s it’s name?” She tapped her foot and it came to her. “Harris Neck. Yeah, that’s it. It’s just across the sound from Blackbeard Island. Well, lots of corruption happened down there. Anyway, not even the law caught up to the Doctor. Ever. He had special connections it was said. People protecting him.”

“Perhaps it was Freemasons?” asked Jake. “That symbol on the forehead is very Masonic in nature.”

Becky shrugged. “Looks like two Xs to me, Jake. Might simply advertise how good quality the ‘shine was. Two Xs usually means double-distilled whiskey.”

“You know your whiskey,” Jake smirked.

“It is a *hobby* of mine.” Becky replied with a wink while wetting her lips. “Like I said, there’s lots of disguises and everyone sees things differently. You might see something on the surface, but once you go down deeper then you get the real meaning.”

She sighed before talking again. “His ‘shine just stopped flowing one day. Just up and disappeared altogether. That was back in the late 1980s, I reckon. Some say Doctor Blackbeard died and he had no one to pass his secrets on to. Some say Doctor Blackbeard never dies, that he’s like a zombie wandering the island looking for his lost moonshine still. Who knows for sure? Y’all just take this here skull as a warning is all I’m sayin’, okay?”

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“Where’s this Blackbeard Island anyway?” asked Jake. “Is it near here?”

Becky wagged her head. “Kind of. It’s down next to Sapelo Island, where there’s a marine college and where that rich, tobacco magnate Richard Reynolds Jr. once had his big ol’ mansion and estate.”

Jake and Rae both shook their heads, unaware of the place.

“I’d say it’s about an hour boat ride south from your home on Skidaway.” Becky instantly knew she said too much and glanced at Rae apologetically.

“Hmmm,” murmured Jake, with a raised, mischievous eyebrow. “That’s it? Might have to do some exploring Sunday when the Vanns arrive. Alex and Marissa will love the trip.”

“No, Marissa and I already have our day booked at the spa. Why, Jake?” asked Rae with an edgy tone. “What for? Why do you need to go *exploring*?”

“To return the kid’s ring to him, if it’s real. I just can’t keep it.”

“What’s the rush?” asked Rae, getting a little snappy. “Just let him come back for it. He’ll know he left it here soon enough. Just wait for a phone call. It’s none of your business trying to find him. Didn’t you hear what Becky just said. This skull is a warning.” She pointed to the label.

“Listen, Rae . . .,” said Jake.

“No,” interrupted Rae, “don’t *listen* me. I’m not an idiot. I know you. You’ve got that fever again. You’ve been bored and frustrated lately with all these renovations. Your curiosity is piqued. You take these risks all the time and it almost gets us *killed*. Like that damn tornado we were in last year!”

“And it led us to a tunnel of freakin’ gold!” countered Jake. “Besides, Alex and I already had plans to go out fishing tomorrow down near St. Catherines anyway. Talk some business, too. We’ll just do a little recon to those islands and see if we can spot that speedboat is all. Just pinpoint a location. Nothing more. Don’t worry about us.”

“Don’t worry about us. Pfft!” said Rae. “Last words.”

Becky made a noise with her throat to break the tension. “Jake, those islands are totally remote. Sapelo is off-limits to the public without special permission from the college or from one of the island residents. Last I heard there’s only about 35 people that even still live there and it’s like the size of Manhattan! And Blackbeard is nothing but a big wildlife refuge with some trails. If you don’t know those waters around it, the tides, the currents, the

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE

shoals, then you're in for trouble.”

“I'll do my homework before I go. I won't go off half-cocked.”

Rae angrily sighed and stormed off toward the rear entrance, hands flailing, knowing full well Jake was going to do what Jake was going to do. “Come on Becky. I'm the one who needs a drink now!”

2

Saturday, late morning
Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport
Anchorage, Alaska

NATHAN KULL, AKA PHOENIX, HAD STRUCK AGAIN. This latest theft was on a luxury cruise ship in Alaska and one of his easiest scores yet over an exceptionally prolific career as a master thief. And one of his most lucrative. Since the age of seven when he stole his first bag of Gummy Bears because his mother refused to buy them, he had spent his entire lifetime refining his craft of *wealth redistribution*, as he liked to call it.

Redistributed into *his* deep pockets, of course.

The 38-year-old multi-millionaire was playing at the top of his game, bursting with narcissistic self-confidence. Although very successful running his own legitimate security consultant business under his real name, he favored his alter ego as a thief much more. It was the challenge of the next score that had him hooked. So much so that he had long since rationalized his habit of stealing from others as completely acceptable behavior – and without the slightest bit of remorse.

He knew he had a high-level addiction as a kleptomaniac and embraced every facet of it: how no two jobs were the same; the intense patience and logistical planning involved; the vetting and manipulation of people; the thrill of the break-in, the action, the adrenaline-rush at the moment he pocketed his stolen goods; the mental challenge to elude capture, outwit security, and law enforcement; and most importantly, how it all fed his

enormous ego. His many talents and skills got him to where he was today, but he also knew he was becoming a bit complacent with every successful new job, that he needed more and more self-discipline to counteract his abject cockiness.

A master of disguises, an exceptional actor, and a convincing con man – not to mention his Brad Pitt-like blue-eyed, shoulder length blond-haired GQ model looks – Kull sometimes thought of himself as a Batman-like character, but for all the wrong reasons. Sure he was selfish and shrewd, but he also knew how to own a room with charm and poise as if playing one of Pitt's lead roles in a movie. It was that self-gratification of defeating every obstacle thrown at him which kept him going back for score after score.

Operating out of his luxury New York City condo as a much sought-after thief-for-hire, the whole world was his playground for crime, adventure, and the good life. But he kept his criminal life completely separate. No physical evidence of any kind linking him to his illegal activities was left in his home. Instead, he kept his tools of the trade and stolen goods in a handful of storage lockers, three in the U.S. and two overseas.

He was the epitome of a criminal who got away with it all. Never once arrested, never working with a team, and never opening his mouth to brag to strangers, Nathan Kull would have been one of the top ten most successful thieves in history if anyone could ever Google his name.

Except he used a slew of fake identities, some stolen, some backed by official paper records even in other countries. No one knew this thief by his real name. Not his nefarious clients, nor their brokers who hired him for jobs. Not even the FBI. All they had in their Next Generation Identification (NGI) database were fingerprints he unwittingly had left behind at several high profile, unsolved burglaries. If they ever connected an actual name to those prints, it would be his almighty undoing.

Early in his career, he had been dubbed “Phoenix” by investigators because of his ability to seemingly disappear and rise again with a different criminal modus operandi. Whether it was stealing irreplaceable heirloom jewels or rare works of art, he baffled detectives on the details about how he pulled off his scores. After reading of the nickname in a newspaper, he vainly adopted it as his for-hire brand name on the black market of the Dark

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Web. It made him legendary and in high demand.

In fact, Phoenix was the man responsible for the widely publicized theft of a Civil War general's hat and two Nazi trophies at the West Point Museum over a year ago. He conceived, reconned, and flawlessly executed that notorious heist in just two days time. But it was the delivery in Atlanta where things went off the rails and he almost got caught.

The general's hat had ultimately been recovered by a U.S. Army military historian named Jake Tununda, who had stolen it back from the client who commissioned the job: late Georgia congressman Tom Black.

Phoenix's cunning, though, allowed him to escape Atlanta with the remaining two Nazi items after framing another man to take his fall. An FBI task force took the bait. After a SWAT house raid, they insisted they had terminated Phoenix for good.

In reality, that dead man was an illegal alien Sureños-13 gang enforcer whose crew took his stolen Nazi items after Phoenix was carjacked in Atlanta. To regain his loot, he had to cross the line of being a non-violent criminal all of his career. He had to meet violence with violence. And he did it with flair.

First, he kidnapped, then brutally interrogated, and ultimately stabbed to death a 14-year-old gang member as part of his scheme. Then he firebombed one of the gang's drug labs in a residential neighborhood killing a man inside after the house blew sky high. Once he regained his Nazi relics, he subsequently buried the two artifacts in a south Georgia cemetery.

Since the West Point job, both FBI and Army investigators had frozen their cases, deeming the culprit neutralized, and the recovery of the two remaining World War II-era items not high enough on their priority list to pursue further leads.

In the end, Phoenix had gotten away with it. As he always did.

Having just pulled off another great theft, he leaned back in his seat at the American Airlines departing gate, ran his hands through his long hair, and crossed his arms behind his head. Closing his eyes, he recapped the last 24 hours. A wry grin stretched across his face.

The firm he was hired to target was the Compass Fine Art Gallery, a mainland-U.S. based gallery which catered to the wealthy onboard a luxury

cruise ship of 3,000 people. Little did anyone know, their operation was one of the most notorious scams afloat.

Compass's onboard art gallery shared a percentage of their sales income with the cruise ship in a special concession contract. Both entities targeted ignorant retired couples with excessive amounts of disposable income. It was very well known in the industry that fleecing guests while they were onboard the ship brought in more sales revenue than the mere cruise ticket fee itself. It's why 24-hour casinos, all-day games of bingo, and onboard shopping malls chock full of glamorous wares were now the norm for every cruise ship.

With round-the-clock, all-you-can-eat buffets, high-end specialty restaurants, endless entertainment, and bottomless alcoholic drinks abounding, guests easily parted with enormous sums of cash as they were taken in by the luxurious atmosphere. Repeat VIP guests were even mailed special invitations, their cruise ticket prices comped, just to get them back onboard. They received a tour of the bridge from the captain himself and preferred dining at his head table in the ballroom. They were also hounded the whole trip to attend the art auctions because the cruise company and the gallery both knew those pampered guests would be spending tens of thousands of dollars on the artwork. One elite VIP even racked up sales of over \$500,000 in art purchases alone during her 10-day cruise.

Compass held an art auction every day, advertising one-of-a-kind originals they claimed were purchased from galleries and estate liquidations all over the world. Their main show room was strategically located adjacent to the high traffic, grand spiral staircase in the middle of the cruise ship. Beautiful, colorful paintings of all sizes and styles, framed in gold, silver, and black, lined the red-draped walls of the auction area, while even more stunning artwork sat on easels throughout the room.

Rows of more artwork were stacked upright, frame-to-frame, in the gallery's storage room one deck below. When it was locked, a keypad code allowed entry to the windowless room. There were no surveillance cameras inside or outside the door at all.

Before the auction began, the charming auctioneer, a scholarly looking middle-aged man with a lovely British accent – and one of the three owners

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of the gallery company – would work his magic. Along with his four-person staff of college-age, attractive males and females dressed in expensive suits, they made their attendees feel like royalty. The staff and auctioneer doted on would-be art collectors with special attention in creating an unforgettable experience.

They poured free champagne, chit-chatted, stroked egos, and gave away free raffled gifts of watches and necklaces to keep their guests occupied. Typically, the younger staff members were just revolving-door seasonal help, there as eye-candy to schmooze, to pre-sell the artwork, and to lug the framed pieces up and down the stairs. They had no idea of how the company's scam really worked.

The pre-auction highlight and the “wow” moment of the company's operation was showing off their half dozen, *real*, one-of-a-kind, original paintings that were truly purchased direct from big name contemporary artists, other galleries, and art auctions all at top market value. These were the real-deal, premiere offerings of the auction and the most valued investments of the company.

However, besides the real paintings, there were a good seventy five pieces of other artwork on display that were nothing but elaborate prints or forgeries the owners purchased on the black market. The auctioneer and his cohort partners had, in some cases, even forged artist's signatures themselves. Plus, they added thick brush strokes of paint that gave the paintings a three dimensional effect. By adding these nuances to the artwork they could claim, if a guest asked, that the art was truly a one-of-a-kind original since an embellishment was indeed made.

Buzzed on champagne, the guests gawked at the mix of originals and so-called originals with dreams of grandeur in possessing them. Since no photography was allowed, no video, no jeweler's loupes, and no touching of the artwork, detection of the forgeries was guaranteed to be missed. All guests could do was place their trust in the gallery company's convincing promises. And that's exactly the kind of gullible customer Compass preferred.

Once everyone was seated, the auctioneer would take his place behind the podium. At the sound of the gavel, the Compass Fine Art Gallery scam

commenced.

To provide provenance and authenticity to their artworks, the three principals of the company had pre-forged Certificates of Authenticity. They even falsified appraisals with fake company names based on real experts' reputations. Sometimes the other two owners even sat in the audience to place fake bids to falsely increase prices and hype the excitement.

As the auctioneer began opening bids, he seduced the attendees with his keen knowledge of art styles and techniques. Lesser art pieces started at a mere \$500 and went well up into the high tens of thousands as artwork flew off the auction block at remarkable speed. Fast-talking and gaveling behind his podium, he plied the high pressure and sold one piece after another at exorbitant prices. What his customers didn't know was that he was nothing more than an extremely talented salesman who obtained his knowledge of art history from several junior college courses. His real skill was in preying on ignorant people who wanted entry into the special world of owning art so they could vainly show it off to their friends back home. Some were even suckered into thinking they were making a financial investment that would reap them a huge profit in the years to come.

As soon as the auction ceased, the final con was put in motion. After paperwork was finalized, credit card payments authorized, and delivery within four weeks assured, all purchased artwork was taken a deck below and put back in storage for so-called security purposes. The customer never saw it again for the duration of their cruise. Instead, they turned into giddy braggarts, unable to contain themselves until receiving their artwork back home once their dream vacation had ended.

Some 4-6 months later, when, and if, their artwork arrived, it was usually damaged, the cheap replacement frame broken or chipped, the protective glass usually cracked. Customer service, through phone calls or emails, was virtually non-existent, and refunds or repairs were all but impossible.

The icing on the con cake was that the artwork they purchased wasn't even the genuine originals the gallery advertised and displayed. Instead, they were mostly Giclée (zee-klay) reproductive digital prints made on canvas with a very expensive 12-color inkjet printer back at the gallery's mainland office. They were mere high resolution copies of the real original

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works of art the gallery owned, and also of its many forgeries. They could be sold again and again, endlessly generating profit with every new cruise.

The Giclées were of such amazing technological quality that without a microscope to detect the inkjet spray pattern of almost imperceptible droplets, a layperson couldn't tell the difference between a real painting and a forgery. There was no other reproduction method or printing process resulting in such fine color accuracy in the world. Even some of the best art experts and auction houses had been fooled.

The customer was none-the-wiser, too, when they received their art. And the gallery and the cruise line that much richer in the end. For in reality, each Giclée print was worth a mere \$75 to produce. It was a classic, bait-and-switch con.

If somehow the customer did detect that the artwork they had purchased was just a copy, as many had, they had very little legal standing for retaliation because the gallery covered their asses in the fine print on the invoice. When the customer purchased the artwork onboard the ship – signing the paperwork associated with the sale, and of course never ever reading it – they doomed themselves legally. The barely readable small print said: *“I further state that no verbal representations have been made or relied upon by me in connection with my purchase.”* That statement alone absolved the gallery of any fraudulent sales misconduct made during the pre-selling process before the auction began, and while the auction took place.

In the five years the gallery had operated, the three owners had taken in over \$12 million dollars in illicit sales based on their scam.

As it happened, several months ago, one of the seasonal female staffers, an attractive, savvy, fine arts student from the Rhode Island School of Design, got wind of the scheme. She had worked the summer cruise ship auctions and thought the claims of originality the auctioneer made to guests during pre-sales quite peculiar. She was hired based on looks alone and not for her technical art knowledge. Her education is what did the company in. She had a wealthy aunt in the art business back in New York City, in whom she confided her doubts.

That aunt's name was Maya Levana, aka Mona Lisa – Phoenix's top fence for his art and jewelry thefts.

And the only woman whom he got close to in a serious relationship.

Phoenix had dated many other women for a fling here and there, but Mona was more than just a friend with benefits. Her independence and cunning attracted him as much as her sexual prowess. He found himself coming back to her time and again, even confiding in her during pillow talk the details of some of his biggest scores and how he pulled them off, including the West Point Museum theft. The very attractive cougar, in her mid 50s, was so much on his mind that he even thought about revealing his true name to her, a risk that excited and petrified him at the same time.

With the intelligence gained from her niece, Maya, an art and antiques expert herself, had then sailed on her own cruise specifically to attend one of Compass's auctions as a test. Her reputation and credibility preceded her once the gallery owners knew she was onboard and looking at artwork to purchase for her own gallery. Knowing in advance what painting she would bid for, she made deliberate gestures in hyping her desire for it. It was the gallery's most valuable investment: a 14 x 22" painting that was a one-of-a-kind original by the French Cubist artist Fernand Léger. It had a starting price of \$250,000. Online research conducted before the auction showed Maya that the value of the painting was legit.

Her niece was still one of the auction staffers on the cruise, but never let on about their relationship. Acting in her role of a mere assistant, but secretly Maya's lookout, she gave up the keypad code and allowed her aunt private unfettered access to the storage room where she knew the Léger painting was stored. The gallery's other most valuable legitimate paintings were also in the same room. While the auctioneer and the rest of the staff were several decks away having lunch, Maya went about her business.

Armed with knowledge of unique distinguishing features of the Léger painting itself based on provenance, and closely examining the front surface as well as the reverse of the canvas with her high powered jeweler's loupe, Maya determined it was the original and not a forgery or a Giclée print. All was in order. She then made a secret scratch mark in a corner of the painting with her fingernail, and took a cell phone snapshot of that same mark.

At the actual auction a day later, Maya was one of a handful of people to bid on the costly painting. Another man that her niece had pointed out

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as one of the silent partners of the gallery also bid the price up on purpose. He backed down and Maya ultimately purchased it for \$350,000. With \$50,000 down on her own credit card and the rest financed in a two-year payment plan, she signed the proper papers and ecstatically pranced away. The rest of the cruise she was treated with celebrity status once word had gotten out of her purchase.

Upon receiving the painting in the mail – some six weeks later after repeated phone calls – she inspected it again, this time under a microscope. She found the distinct Giclée droplet pattern instead of real texture and brush strokes. Her secret nail scratch was missing from where it should have been. On the reverse side of the canvas, along the edges where the painting brush strokes had bled over in the original, she instead found a clean straight edge further indicative of the print process.

As expected, the gallery had sent her a fake.

Revenge and repayment was now her mission. The niece, having already gone back to college, told her aunt the company never changed the keypad code to the storage room in all the time she had been employed. That's all Maya needed. That laziness proved to be the company's Achilles' heel.

Maya's next act – now as Mona Lisa – was to call upon Phoenix to steal her the original Léger she was entitled to. She passed the keypad code onto him, but now it was his mission to work out the details of the actual theft.

When Phoenix arrived on his cruise not two months later, lo and behold, the gallery had the audacity to display the same original Léger painting up for auction again. They figured in a fresh set of cruise guests another one would play the sucker role. Sure enough, a wealthy older businessman from Japan purchased the same Léger painting that Mona did – for much less even – and the gallery placed it back in storage until the cruise ended.

After observing the auctioneer and his staffers' work and off-work habits over several days of the cruise, he made secret entry in the storage room late at night to inspect the Cubist painting. Under a flashlight, he found Mona's scratch mark in the exact same place as her cell photo indicated. The painting was the authentic one.

He then found and secretly marked each of the other five original paintings owned by the gallery that the niece and Mona also had identified.

The actual theft one night later was laughable by Phoenix's standards.

On the last morning of the cruise, while everyone onboard was still sleeping, Phoenix slipped back into the storage room with his duffel-style luggage bag, found the Léger, and removed it from its frame. He did the same with the other five originals, then rolled them up and stuffed them in the bottom of his bag.

Pulling out three bottles of 100-proof vodka he had purchased at the ship's duty-free store, Phoenix poured the contents of each bottle over the remaining rows of framed forgeries and Giclées stacked upright on the floor. He made sure the surface of each painting was thoroughly doused. The empty bottles went back into his duffel bag.

Quietly exiting the room and checking to see if anyone was about, Phoenix lit a piece of paper soaked in the alcohol. He tossed it back into the room and it instantly ignited in a wall of blue flames. By using alcohol, the room didn't explode at once like other flammable liquids, but merely spread quickly enough to give him time to shut the door and scamper off.

Message from Mona Lisa sent. She was not one to be played with. Ever.

While the contents of the room burned behind the locked door, Phoenix was already outside on the deck in the darkness dropping the three empty vodka bottles to the sea below.

He then nonchalantly made his way back to his room to await the inevitable fire alarm. Ten minutes went by before the ship's alarm sounded and the captain made an announcement that a fire had broken out in the art gallery, but that it was already contained by the crew with fire extinguishers. As a precautionary measure, all guests were asked to remain in their rooms until further notice when the ship docked at their final port in Anchorage.

A couple of hours later, as Phoenix was lined up with the other guests to depart the ship, duffel bag slung over his shoulder, the crew had moved the crowd back to allow the onboard doctor and his medical staff to push a gurney through. Strapped on was a blanché-faced, middle-aged man that Phoenix recognized as the auctioneer/owner for Compass Fine Art Gallery. Someone murmured he had a heart attack after learning his entire stock of art had gone up in flames.

Phoenix's thoughts snapped back to the present as he heard the First

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Class pre-boarding announcement for his flight back to New York. He opened his eyes, got up, had his boarding pass scanned, and walked down the ramp to enter the plane.

By that night he was in bed with Mona at a posh New York City hotel, champagne on ice, and the canvasses of six valuable original paintings spread across their bed sheets.

By the end of the week, the originals were slated to be sold on the black market to a businessman who lived on Long Island. Secretly, he was a member of the *Vory v Zakone*, or Thieves in Law, an organized crime group based in Russia. As one of Mona's long-time customers the "Vor" would have the paintings shipped overseas to Europe to resell to even wealthier private art collectors. As the mastermind of the plot, Mona stood to pocket a majority of the two million dollar profit, and Phoenix would get a commission of \$800,000. Even Mona's niece was slated to bag \$80k in cash for her role.

Mona and Phoenix lived the good life in New York City: every hotel they hooked up at was top notch, every meal they shared was gourmet, money was no issue, and the future of their adventurous thievery and fencing saw no end.

Life was completely grand – until Mona's phone chimed a notification.

She touched the screen and took a minute to privately read a new email from her secret Dark Web account. Only select trusted individuals knew her in the circle of black market contacts. One of them was now expressing interest in the two Nazi items Phoenix had stolen from West Point Museum.

After several promising inquiries over the last year – but none ever advancing beyond a few back and forth emails – this one looked like pay dirt. And she liked who sent it: the broker who commissioned the museum job in the first place.

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE

3

Sunday morning
Atlantic Ocean
South of Ossabaw Island, Georgia

WITH FELLOW RETIRED ARMY BUDDY, NOW business partner, Alex Vann, onboard, Jake accelerated his new ArrowCat 32RS offshore power catamaran up to 35 knots or 40 mph and softly sliced through the Atlantic Ocean paralleling Ossabaw Island. He named his boat *Lizzie* in honor of his Seneca tribe clan mother Miss Lizzie Spiritwalker. She had a profound influence on his life a few years back just before she finally ‘ate her strawberries at sunset’ at the age of 103. On the stern of *Lizzie*, Jake flew a yellow Gadsden flag, the coiled rattlesnake shouting out his famous phrase of ‘Don’t Tread On Me.’

They had departed from Jake’s Skidaway Island home and were headed south some 20 nautical miles following the shorelines of several remote, unpopulated sea islands. Their destination: Blackbeard and Sapelo Islands. Their mission: recon for the pirate-flagged speedboat of Dreadlocks, but do not make contact.

Though still early in the morning, both men had cracked open a cold beer while Jake explained the purpose of their trip. Alex, tossing the skull ring up and down in his hand, was all game as expected. The guy thrived on spontaneous adventure as much as Jake.

After a GoToMeeting session with famed Germania military collector Erhardt Hoffman, and comparing a genuine SS ring in his own collection

against the one left in his shop, Jake felt confident in the authenticity of the boy's ring. To play devil's advocate, though, Hoffman logged onto a well-known internet forum on SS honor rings and learned what signs to look for in fakes. They uploaded close-up pictures of the ring and heard expert opinions from all across the world that the boy's ring was definitely the real deal. Many of the members even made offers on the spot. Hoffman finally appraised the ring's worth at seven to ten thousand dollars, not knowing the original ring bearer's engraved name nor its provenance. He showed Jake the rarest ring ever on another collector's website. It belonged to Josef "Sepp" Dietrich, the infamous SS officer responsible for the Malmedy Massacre. His ring alone was priced at \$235,500.

At the very least, Jake's goal was to return the boy's valuable *Totenkopf* ring and present his findings. He was excited about its authenticity and wanted the boy to share in the thrill of the discovery. He was totally prepared to offer him cash, too, having taken from his home safe a stack of crisp Benjamins totalling \$10k. And he wanted to find out more about the Buffalo Soldier great-grandfather who obtained the ring in the first place. The story behind this rare object was essential to its value. He was hoping to make this a win-win all around. The kid could invest his money and Jake could land yet another rare battlefield artifact for his growing collection.

Finding Dreadlock's black speedboat with his pirate flag would be the key to finding his nephew in order to return the ring. But Jake knew he needed to avoid a confrontation with the man and to keep the boy's ring a secret. It was obvious that's why the abused kid had separated from his uncle to seek Jake out in the first place. Dreadlocks had him on a short leash. However, just in case things truly went south, Alex was there as his back up. Both men were licensed by the State of Georgia to carry personal sidearms. In fact, they packed just about everywhere they went – the smart thing to do in a world with people perpetually at each others' throats.

Inside the closed cockpit of *Lizzie*, the two men chatted while tracking the boat's progress through both an in-dash GPS navigational system as well as a laminated nautical chart. The time it would take to reach Sapelo and Blackbeard Islands had also allowed them to catch up on recent business decisions. Past events had unexpectedly pulled them together a year ago up

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in Atlanta. Ever since, they had turned into the best of friends.

Both men had strong Native American blood coursing through their veins: Jake was of Iroquois ancestry, specifically of the Seneca Nation, having grown up on the Tonawanda Indian Reservation in western New York; while Alex was from the Eastern Band of Cherokee in western North Carolina. Alex was also a direct descendant of the famous Chief James Vann, one of the richest men in the early 1800s.

In past lives, Jake and Alex would have been arch enemies from two of most powerful American Indian empires in all of North America. Or perhaps they might have fought against each other in the American Civil War. In fact, generations of men and women from their respective families fought in most of America's wars since the inception of the nation. Their shared pride in their military service to their country strengthened their trust in one other even more.

They were muscular men with chiseled features sculpted from a lifetime of physical activity in their combat careers. They were warriors in every sense of the word, having experienced war up close and personal. Both had meted out various forms of justice that could never be discussed publicly – especially Alex, a former Delta Force operator deployed around the world doing Jason Bourne shit and capping dudes for Uncle Sam.

In Jake's case, back in his younger days as a U.S. Army infantry officer with the 10th Mountain Division, he had engaged in a hand-to-hand fight to the death with three armed Taliban in a blown-out prison basement in Afghanistan. Jake smashed in the first soldier's face with his rifle butt, knocking him unconscious. The second, he popped three rounds into the man's chest at point blank range. The third sliced Jake open with a combat knife, but then Jake wrestled it away and thrust that same knife into his enemy's heart. And then, in an act of adrenaline-filled loss of self control – as if a past Indian warrior had possessed his body – Jake let out a blood-curdling Indian war whoop and had scalped both dead men. The legend of Jake Tununda, Seneca warrior, was born on that dark day. The army awarded him a Silver Star – officially for the prisoner he dragged out, who turned out to be an American Muslim traitor.

To these men, there was no glory or romanticism in war, only carnage,

confusion, horror, and survival. After seeing bodies literally blown to pieces, and innocent men, women, children, even infants, beheaded by human monsters, it was difficult to keep their own heads on straight. Fighting off their personal demons was tough enough. It's why they liked each other's company in case things got muddy in their minds. They had no intention of ever stepping back onto the battlefield and all the ugly shit that came with it. It's why Jake spent the last years of his service working as a field historian for the Army's Military History Institute before finally retiring.

As diehard, patriotic Americans, Oathkeepers of the U.S. Constitution, protectors of all they cherished and who they loved, they truly believed that their sheepdog mentality was what kept the wolves at bay in an ultra-violent world. They despised weak-kneed, snowflake extremists on the left of the political spectrum who got their rocks off burning American flags and kneeling for the National Anthem. Instead, Jake and Alex supported the military, police, firefighters, and medics – those who risked their lives and made sacrifices every day so the rest of the law-abiding, hard-working citizens could live in peace and safety. Jake and Alex were men's men, badass to the core, and respected by many.

Jake still wore a close-cropped, military style haircut now tinged with gray at the temples. He was dressed in shorts and a black t-shirt with 'Army' stenciled across his chest. A necklace with a small silver and wampum shell medallion-like brooch sat on his chest. It was his protection amulet. He and Rae both wore them after becoming secret guardians of the *Crown of Serpents* hidden back in New York deep under the Seneca Army Depot.

The younger Alex, also dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, had long, shoulder-length, raven-black hair pulled back into a braided ponytail. A black hat with a white Punisher skull logo sat atop his head, backward.

Both men also had several tattoos up and down their thick arms with one in particular they now shared. This tattoo was inked as a badge of honor and marked entry into a secret society that a rare few men even knew existed. This tattoo was of a golden eagle, wings spread. A shield on its chest depicted a skull crest. This was the mark of a Witch Killer, a warrior who destroyed one of the most evil spiritual entities in American Indian lore: the feared Raven Mocker.

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Jake and Alex had hunted down, battled, and ultimately destroyed one of these murderous beings in north Georgia. Their reward was discovering a secret Cherokee Indian tunnel filled with gold bullion along the Etowah River that the witch was protecting. One of the most prized possessions inside that tunnel was a book of Spanish maps that pinpointed ancient lost mines of rare earth metals dating back to the 1500s. This *Map of Thieves*, as they dubbed it, was what old man Tommy Watie had been after all of his life. Upon his passing, the map formed the impetus for the formation of Alex Vann's new mining company near Blood Mountain, Georgia. Jake and Rae agreed to become silent partners and capital investors.

The conversation soon switched to Alex updating Jake on mining operations he and his wife had undertaken in the last year.

"All in all, we're on track with our short-term objectives," said Alex. "Marissa and I have discovered six out of the nine ancient mine sites on Blood Mountain so far. Three of these sites are on private property adjacent to the Federal lands, so we've managed to persuade the owners to sell – at highly inflated prices I might add. Next time you guys come up we'll give you a tour of the new properties. Our prospects are looking good, my friend. It's all looking very good!"

"Incredible! Great news," Jake replied, standing at the wheel, guiding the boat. He was protected inside from the wind and a light rain shower that peppered the helm station windows. "We're gonna have to start deciding on mining and extraction equipment next, I would think? Whether to lease or purchase. Can't believe how fast this is moving. I honestly thought this would take years before we actually started moving dirt."

Alex took a swig from his beer. A coolie with the beaming face and signature blond hair of the president was wrapped around it. A slogan underneath the image said: *'Make America Great Again.'* "With the President's pro-business, America-first agenda, everything has changed. I'm anticipating our mining permit will be approved in just three months time since he stripped all regulations. It used to take fifteen years under the fucking enviro-Leftists running the shop. I meet with Commerce Department officials in D.C. on Tuesday and then Interior on Wednesday. If we can get the mining sites on that Federal land, then we are good to go."

“Helluva job you’re doing Alex. I can’t stomach politicians. No patience.”

“We’ve been busy beavers up in them thar hills getting things ready once we get the go-ahead.”

Jake caught Alex’s reference to the famous saying of finding gold in the hills up in north Georgia. “Speaking of which,” said Jake. “Did the melting furnace get delivered yet?”

Alex nodded. “Sure did. Two days ago. And that’s the last thing I was going to report. Meant to call you but got sidetracked. It’s sitting on a pallet in the warehouse on the Etowah River property. We’ve got to schedule a weekend to get her all set up. I really need your help. And don’t worry, Marissa and I have got that tunnel at maximum security, concealment, and even booby-trapped. So, we’re all good until you get up there.”

“Cool,” agreed Jake. “The sooner the better. Mine and Rae’s three hundred and fifty pounds of gold bars still sitting in that tunnel has *got* to melt and disappear. Into our bank account, that is.”

“Tell me about it,” nodded Alex. “Marissa and I have hardly even touched our portion of the treasure. Been so damn busy. We’ll get her done, though. Don’t worry.”

“What’s she been up to? I heard she’s got a nice speaking gig in D.C. when you’re up there.”

“Marissa is a non-stop ball of energy,” Alex chuckled. “While I’ll be busy meeting with *bureaucrats*, she’ll be speaking at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian on the subject of my Cherokee ancestor James Vann. Then she’s staying up there the rest of the week doing research at the Library of Congress and the National Archives.”

Alex’s phone chimed with a new text and attached photo. He looked at it and grinned like a big Cheshire cat. “Speak of the devil! Dude, check this out.” He showed Jake the message.

It read, “See what you’re missing, boys? Cum back soon,” and showed a picture of their wives, Rae and Marissa. The beautiful women were dressed in white spa robes with white towels bundled around their hair. However, both their robes were deliberately and provocatively parted, teasing their oiled nakedness underneath as they each displayed a long slender leg, bare hip, and cleavage. On Rae’s chest, Jake glimpsed her matching necklace and

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silver amulet.

“Holy shit!” said Jake, zooming in on the photo. “Man, I gotta tell ya, we hit the lottery with our brides.”

“You ain’t kidding. They look like spitting images of Maria Menounos and Halle Berry. Fucking hot. What should I write back?”

“Here, get a picture of this,” Jake said with a shit-eating grin. Placing the boat on autopilot, he stepped out of the cabin to the rear deck and grabbed a fishing rod. Holding it up against his crotch with two hands, he pretended to reel in a fish. Alex snapped a photo.

“Type in: ‘See what you’re missing, girls?’” said Jake.

“Perfect,” Alex laughed as he hit the send button.

The men definitely cherished their wives. Certainly drop-dead gorgeous and physically fit, both women were also highly independent and intelligent, humorous, self-confident and financially astute, while wholeheartedly passionate about what they did. They also knew how to throw a punch, pull a trigger, and take a shot – of whiskey.

As *Lizzie* motored further south and caught the tip of St. Catherines Island, the rain petered out, the clouds parted, the sun came out, and blue skies opened up. Jake switched off the windshield wipers and their field of vision ahead improved tremendously. They spotted a massive container ship many miles out to sea, headed north, in their opposite direction, on its run to the Port of Savannah. Some sailboats, luxury yachts, and smaller fishing boats were out and about, too.

A pod of bottlenose dolphins suddenly appeared on their port side and decided to tag along for the ride. He cut the speed down of his twin 250 horsepower engines so the dolphins could catch up. Four of them leapt out of the water, dove, and skirted around both sides of the dual-hulled boat. The men cracked open two more beers and watched as the slick beasts played. It was a great feeling to be out on the water in such nice weather, detached from the rest of the crazy world. No cell phone service. No news distractions. It was an escape they needed from the fast-paced events that dominated their lives. Silence soon took over, each man lost in his serenity.

“I’ve got something to tell you, man,” said Jake, a few minutes later as he watched a pelican cut across his vessel’s wake. “It’s about the stolen pistol

and baton from the West Point Museum.”

“Really? The friggin’ media coverage on those artifacts is nonstop, over-the-top, sensationalized. What, did you finally find them?”

“I wish, I wish,” said Jake, sitting down in his captain’s chair. “But things are getting hot. Sergeant Marco D’Arata caught a witness break and persuaded Criminal Investigation Division brass to reignite the case.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, the witness was that airplane pilot,” nodded Jake, adjusting the throttle to a higher speed. “He was the very last one to see Phoenix, the real thief – the one who Marco thinks is still alive and got away with it – not that Sureños-13 gangbanger the FBI killed in their raid in Atlanta.”

“Really?” said Alex.

“You see, Marco took surveillance pictures of the pilot and Phoenix together when they flew out of Atlanta after the BOLO went out on him. But of course when the Air Force boys forced the plane down in Florida, this Phoenix guy had already disappeared. Remember, the pilot claimed he never even had a passenger?”

“Oh, I remember.”

“After that he lawyered up.”

“This whole time?” asked Alex. “What’s it been, well over a year?”

“Yup,” said Jake, eyes glued on the waves ahead. “Until just last week when the pilot shows up out of the blue at CID headquarters over at Hunter and meets with Marco.”

“Whoa. So, what happened? What did the pilot say?”

“Marco said all of the Nazi media hype out there finally got the best of him,” replied Jake. “Go figure. That he had to get his story off his chest. Was making him physically ill, the guilt of being an unwitting accessory to the crime. Plus, living in pure fear. He came out and admitted he *was* transporting a passenger as a last-minute favor to the late Congressman Black, but had no idea who the guy was and asked no questions. And then he said he was basically hijacked in midair.”

“Wow!”

Jake turned his gaze toward Alex. “Yup. And get this: he said Phoenix pulled Hitler’s gold pistol on him and stuck it in his ribs while they were

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flying. The pilot begged for his life and said he had kids and grandkids. That was his first mistake. Guy was scared shitless and said too much. Phoenix then threatened to hunt down his family one by one and kill them if he didn't follow orders."

"Ah, so that's why he's been shittin' bricks this whole time."

"Yup. It was Marco's smoking gun, though. Literally. Having this witness placing Hitler's pistol there with Phoenix vindicated his supposed fuck-up when they forced an empty plane down." Jake placed the boat on autopilot again, sat back in his captain's chair, and swiveled to face Alex. His face was a knot of seriousness.

"Even though it's still hearsay evidence and not definitive proof – one person's word against another – it's the first time we clearly have Phoenix in possession of the stolen items. He then forced the pilot to land at a remote airstrip in some tiny, south Georgia town called Fitzgerald. Rips out all of his radio cords so he has no communication. The pilot said a car was waiting at the end of the runway with a dark-haired, white female and Phoenix jumps in. The pilot then takes off and flies on to Florida as he was ordered before the Air Force caught up to him. That's it. That's the last he saw of our thief. In Fitzgerald, with some woman." Jake took a long slug of beer and emptied his can.

"Another?" asked Alex, holding his beer can up.

"No, I'm good for now."

"So that's how the fucker got away," Alex said, scratching his chin. "Had it all planned out, even his extraction."

"Oh, he's a clever one," nodded Jake. "Fucking brilliant, in fact." He swung back to the dash board to check the nav system. Still on course, he turned back to Alex. "The pilot gave Marco a great description and made a positive ID that it was Phoenix who he departed with back in Atlanta on Marco's surveillance photos. Plus, he also matched Phoenix to the guy they caught on camera at West Point, from the hotel he left. Great detective work. It was Phoenix all along, the original prime suspect, a true professional master thief who's made a career of it and who's never been caught. This guy is a legend. Not that dead Sureños-13 illegal alien. We still don't know the connection there. Perhaps a fence gone wrong? Who knows?"

“Okay, so where’s the case going from here?” asked Alex, standing up, arms crossed. “Knowing that Phoenix still exists and the Nazi trophies are with him. Or at least *were* with him. Hell, they could be long gone by now, tucked away in some neo-Nazi’s private collection never to be seen again.”

“But,” said Jake, shaking his head. “They’re not. Let me explain. Marco has already brought in and interrogated the guy who dropped Phoenix off at the airport in Atlanta.”

“Really? He’s moving quick,” stated Alex.

“Yup, Antoine LaMar. Attorney from Atlanta. The dude immediately cut an immunity deal once Marco showed him all the charges he’d face. Sang like a canary. Admitted he drove Phoenix to the airport to escape. Marco has already used him undercover as a point of contact in the same role he performed for the actual theft: being the broker.”

“Broker?”

“Yeah, it’s kinda complicated,” Jake explained, waving a hand. “But think in layers. Layers of deniability to cover your ass, as Marco explained it to me. Congressman Tom Black of Atlanta wanted the Civil War general’s hat stolen. He was the client who funded the op. He ordered his chief-of-staff to find someone who could make that happen. The chief-of-staff called on this corrupt attorney LaMar who acted as the broker. He, in turn, called on his contacts and found an art dealer from New York City who trades in the black market. She is known as Mona Lisa. She, in turn, hired Phoenix, who executed the job. All parties earned their cut when the Congressman paid up in the end. The problem is Phoenix was supposed to steal *only* the fucking hat. He broke protocol and shit spiraled out of control.”

“The guy went rogue,” said Alex.

“Right. LaMar told Marco that when he spoke to Phoenix as he delivered the hat to him in person at the Congressman’s party in Atlanta, that he asked him why he stole the two Nazi items, too. Phoenix said this: *‘A man’s gotta have insurance if you’re messing with Uncle Sam. If you’re going big, might as well go over the top.’*”

Alex pursed his lips. “Insurance? Against what? Getting caught?”

“I think so,” nodded Jake. “He was stealing from the Federal government, so if you’re gonna do the job for a freakin’ hat, then why not grab the crown

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jewels in the process, is what it sounds like. I mean Hitler's pistol is now estimated to be worth \$60 million alone!"

"Okay, okay, so you've got this broker LaMar now working for you . . ."

"Right. LaMar has turned. He already made contact with Mona Lisa just this last Friday afternoon via the Dark Web and we've already confirmed the two items have *not* been sold yet!"

"Ahhh, so that's how you found out."

"Exactly," said Jake. "LaMar told Mona Lisa he was representing a client who is a descendant of Göering and offered three hundred grand in upfront cash for a no-return deposit. Counterfeit of course. That's the bait we dangled and she bit on the hook. Next step is to reel her in and turn her, too, not spook her. Then hopefully we land the white whale of Phoenix. Essentially, Marco wants to con the cons."

"Nice. Give 'em a taste of their own medicine," scoffed Alex.

"And to show them that our so-called client is serious, we're bringing in a real military artifact expert to inspect the Nazi items and confirm their authenticity. We don't want to be conned ourselves by the cons." Jake winked. "If all goes well, we'll get our trophies back and arrest Mona Lisa and Phoenix red-handed."

"Are you gonna be that military expert?"

"I can't do it because my face was all over the news. They'd recognize me and pull out instantly. But Rae spoke to a retired senior FBI investigator who worked on their Art Crime Team. He, in turn, recommended a guy they've used in the past for authentication jobs like this. Marco, Rae, and I already did a face-to-face in Charleston a few days ago and he's good to go undercover for us. This expert is a big time German militaria collector. One of the legends in the business. Like an Obi Wan Kenobi. Name is Erhardt Hoffmann. Same guy I consulted with to verify the skull ring."

"Is Rae in on this?" Alex asked.

"Actually, it's a CID show. They want the credit to rub the FBI's faces in it, but she's under contract assisting Marco," said Jake, glancing at his friend. "She's jacked up. Wants this as much as I do. Misses cases like this when she was a state police investigator back in New York. I'm in the loop, but staying mostly at arm's length because I know I tend to get a bit aggressive

and impatient, I guess you could say.”

“Noooo, you don’t say? Kinda like when you pitted the cock maggot Congressman’s limousine?”

“That was a brilliant move,” said Jake. “We got the hat back didn’t we?”

“Yes,” Alex admitted begrudgingly. “And then you fucking stabbed him in the ass with a pen!”

Jake guffawed at the remark. “Yeah, well I had to make my point, huh? Any way, it’s happening tomorrow afternoon – the big sting in Charleston. That’s the proof of life meeting when the two trophies are supposed to be revealed. Marco’s got everything under control. He needs this after everyone thinks he fucked up in Florida.”

Jake checked his nav system again and saw they were located in the middle of Sapelo Sound. The wind had picked up and the boat started bouncing on larger waves. He switched off the autopilot, regripped the wheel, and cut back on the throttle for a smoother ride. A large shrimp boat, nets down, was the only other traffic in the sound.

“Okay, task at hand,” announced Jake, eyes glued to his navigation system. “We’re just a couple of miles away from Blackbeard Island. That’s it over to our starboard side.” He pointed to his right. “I’ll swing in close to shore once I skirt past some shoals. Here’s your job, mate: I want a briefing of what this brochure say about the islands.”

He picked up a rack brochure on his cockpit dash and handed it to Alex. Jake had grabbed the literature at the Delegal Creek Marina on Skidaway Island when he fueled up, and barely had any time to skim it over.

While Alex flipped the brochure open, scanned the map as to their location, and started reading, Jake turned the boat to port on a new heading out to sea to avoid the dangerously shallow Concord Shoal that jutted out from the northern tip of Blackbeard Island.

“Blackbeard Island National Wildlife Refuge,” started Alex, reading from the publication, “has over 5,600 acres of forest, ponds, savannahs, beaches, and marshlands. Got its name from Edward Teach, alias Blackbeard the Pirate, in the early 1700s. Legend has it that he buried his treasure on the north part of the island near a place called The Boneyard. Apparently, he wrapped a heavy chain around a large oak tree to mark the spot.” Alex

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paused, read to himself for a minute, then smiled.

“Gotta love this shit, man: he claimed he was the Devil’s own brother and only he and the Devil knew where his treasure was buried. And the one who lived the longest could have it. Blackbeard’s life ended in battle with the British Royal Navy. A brutal death. He had five bullet holes in him and over 20 stab wounds after hand-to-hand combat. The Brits then lopped off his head and stuck it on the bowsprit of their sloop as a warning to other so-called *evildoers*. Alex let out a low chortle. “You could say he was well-despised.”

“The Islamic State would have been proud of those Brits,” said Jake, facetiously.

“And listen to this,” said Alex. “His skull was later ornamented with silver and used as a rum punch cup. This trophy is still supposed to be in existence today.”

“Would be a lovely addition to my collection,” said a still flippant Jake.

Alex continued. “But not a single coin of his treasure has ever been found on the island. Guess only the Devil knows where it is now. Oh, and you’ll love this: wildlife refuge visitors are *reminded* that artifact hunting is a federal violation. That means you, Captain Tununda.”

“Who me?” said Jake, clicking his tongue. “I’ve never gone artifact hunting. Don’t know what you’re talking about, young man.”

Alex read on, more serious now. “Between 1880 and 1910, the island was the South Atlantic yellow fever quarantine station for the government. All ships entering the Georgia ports needed to be fumigated with sulfur gas to kill any mosquitoes, which transmitted the disease. If anyone was infected, their ships would be turned back. Facilities included: a surgeon’s hospital and twelve buildings along Blackbeard Creek on the south end of the island. At the north end, some eight miles away by boat, was the main disinfecting dock, cleaning station, storage facilities, and a crematorium. A big hurricane and a massive tidal wave in 1898 totally destroyed every single building except the crematorium. It can still be seen today just off a hiking trail at the north tip. Apparently, that’s all that’s left.”

“Burn the dead,” mumbled Jake. “Make ‘em disease-free.”

Alex took a sip of his beer, inspected the map some more, and finished

reading the brochure overview about the island. “Blackbeard’s been in federal ownership since 1800 when the Navy Department took it over to lumber the live oak trees for shipbuilding, but there are portions where it’s still virgin forest. It’s run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but there’s no permanent Ranger on duty at the information booth dock on Blackbeard Creek. Says here it’s open to the public seven days a week, sunrise to sunset only; no overnight use or camping is allowed, no fires, leave no trace, watch out for alligators, and bring vast amounts of insect repellent. Did we bring any?”

“Yes,” said Jake. “Vast amounts. One thing about living here on the coast is the bugs are brutal. I should buy stock in the manufacturer of Deep Woods Off.”

Alex spoke again. “Umm, also says here that access to the refuge is by private boat only. Basically, the island is popular with birdwatchers, wildlife photographers, and hikers. That’s about it.”

“Okay, and what about Sapelo Island. What’s the story there?”

Alex read in silence for a minute. “Sapelo’s the opposite. Has highly limited access. Prior arrangements must be made for planned visits. The public can’t just come over on the ferry or their private boat. You need to make an appointment, pre-register, and get approved by the ferry captain. We’re pretty much screwed from mooring and making landfall.”

“Damn! Becky was right,” said Jake, smacking the steering wheel. “She said there’s some college there, some old mansion, and only like 35 residents left on the island.”

“Yup, pretty tight,” said Alex, perusing the list of restrictions on the brochure. “Only way to get on the island is to book a sightseeing tour with the University of Georgia’s (UGA) Marine Institute or one of the private companies run by residents. Or you can make reservations for a group stay at the Reynolds Mansion or at the Cabretta campground.” He glanced at the map to find their locations, then read some more. “The other option is being a visitor of one of the residents where you can rent a room at one of the small lodges that cater to tourists. Or if you’re doing business with the State or one of those private residents.” Alex paused to finish his beer then cracked opened another from the ice cooler.



“Well, that’s what we’re fixin’ to do. Some business with the kid.”

“Fixin’?” asked Alex, incredulously. “Man, didn’t take you long to acclimate to the South.”

“A Yankee has to fit in or else get eaten alive,” Jake chuckled.

“Correction. You’re a damned Yankee. Know what that means?”

Jake shook his head with a smirk, waiting for Alex’s wise-ass reply.

“A damned Yankee is one who makes a permanent residency here in the South. Damn you, Yankee!”

“Don’t make me bitch slap you,” Jake retorted.

“Pfft!” Alex snickered, looking back down at the map brochure. “Looks like Sapelo is a helluva big island. Some 18,000 acres. 11 miles long and 4 miles wide. Says here it’s bigger than Manhattan Island. But 97% of the land is owned by the State of Georgia and enforced by the Department of Natural Resources. They have arrest power for trespassers. Armed DNR Rangers.”

“Ooh, I’m shaking,” Jake deadpanned.

Alex read some more from the brochure. “The remaining 3% of the island is owned by private land owners mostly clustered in a tiny black community named Hog Hammock near the south end. The residents are Gullah-Geechee, one of the last island-based communities of its kind in America. They’re direct descendants of the indigenous West African slaves who lived and worked on the Thomas Spalding plantation dating back to the early 1800s when he brought 385 slaves over. After the Civil War they became freedmen and land owners. Says here Hog Hammock and Behavior Cemetery were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996.”

“Maybe Hog Hammock is where the boy lives?” Jake speculated. “If all the residents live close to one another, then surely Dreadlocks would stick out like a sore thumb with his flashy boat and pirate flag. We just gotta look around, discreetly, that is.”

“Problem is,” countered Alex, “looks like Hog Hammock is land-locked. I don’t see any direct boat access according to this map.” He showed Jake the map inside the brochure. “See? It’s located over four miles inland from the main ferry dock at Marsh Landing. We don’t have ground transportation, let alone permission to even step foot on the island. The only other docks I

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see on this map that he might have access to are along the Duplin River on the west part of the island. And it looks like all those creeks and salt marshes are owned by the state, too, under the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve System.”

“Crap,” uttered Jake.

“Says here the northern two thirds of this island is all just one big wildlife refuge. Used to be the hunting grounds for R. J. Reynolds Jr. when he owned the island. I think we’re pretty much gonna be confined to the boat today with our dicks in our hands.” Alex tossed the brochure back on the dashboard.

“Shit,” said Jake, just as frustrated. “Maybe we’re just on a wild-goose chase. Maybe Rae was right. What’s my rush?”

“Don’t tell her that, though,” Alex laughed.

“Yeah, she’d lop off my head and fly it from this boat!”

“I’d treat your skull right, though. I’d have it ornamented in gold and would drink Doctor Blackbeard’s moonshine from it in your honor.”

Jake shook his head with a grin. “Ha! In my honor.”

After a minute, he sighed. “Sounds like all we can do is circle the islands and do some sightseeing.”

“Yup.”

“We’ll take a slow ride all the way around Sapelo, hit as many docks as we can find, then turn around. Just keep the beer low in case the DNR Rangers are out and about. So, mate, grab the binoculars, kick back, and let *Lizzie* reveal the way.”

“Copy that, man.”



Sunday. 2:00 p.m.
Blackbeard Creek

Some three hours later, having boated all the way up the Duplin River, deep into the salt marshes through the 6,100-acre Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve, Jake and Alex still hadn't spotted Dreadlock's boat, let alone any other watercraft. They went up the river as far as they could before the tall *Spartina* grass-filled marsh narrowed in on them and they almost bottomed out in a muddy shoal. Not even the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Ranger vessel was out on patrol. It had been still moored at Long Tabby with a few other smaller boats when they ventured down a tributary to check out that dock. If not for the slew of wildlife flying and swimming all around them, it was rather an uneventful tour around the west side of the island as far as their objective was concerned.

They hadn't spotted a single soul along the shoreline either, even at the passenger ferry dock facility and pier at Marsh Landing. All that was visible when they approached was a small parking lot with a handful of rusted old cars and pick-up trucks from the island's residents who had presumably taken the morning ferry over to Meridian.

Sunday was a time for residents to get their grocery shopping done on the mainland, or worship at one of the two churches in Hog Hammock. The few businesses on the island were closed, along with the college, the post office, even the gas station. The ferry wasn't due back until 4 p.m., so activity at the dock was non-existent. The already isolated island was down to virtually no visitors this time of year anyway as public island tours weren't even offered on Sundays, let alone in November, the start of the off-season for tourism.

The only thing alive at Marsh Landing was their cell phone service when *Lizzie* pattered near the docks. Having been out of range the entire time since leaving Skidaway, their respective iPhones kicked in with dings, beeps, and pings of various notifications. In fact, it was one of the rare locations on the island that their AT&T service provider was even available. Having texted their wives that all was going well on their day trip, they started

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on their last leg of the recon swinging past the lighthouse and around the south end of the island to head back north along the beaches. They would be making a detour up Blackbeard Creek, the tidal river separating the two main islands, before returning to Skidaway.

Just past Cabretta Beach, Jake swung his boat into the mouth of the creek, then cut his speed for more controlled maneuverability. He stayed in the middle of the channel as the creek curved around like a massive water serpent. They soon passed the highest section on Sapelo Island on their left: Raccoon Bluff.

Once a thriving inhabited section of the island before all of the residents were moved down to Hog Hammock, all that remained now of Raccoon Bluff was the original First African Baptist Church. Some fifteen feet above sea level, the bluff was a dense wall of loblolly pine, cabbage palms, and gnarled live oak trees dripping with long festoons of Spanish moss. The undergrowth looked to be an impenetrable barrier of bright green palmetto and rust-colored resurrection fern. The few sections that were visible through this bank of forest only revealed a shadowy black world beyond.

As the main creek curved away from the bluff and took them back into the salt marsh, they spotted a narrow tributary off to their left. Like many other spidery channels through this marshland, they wouldn't really have paid it much notice except for a pole sticking above the golden *Spartina* grass. Attached to the pole was a limp, sun-bleached, tattered black flag. Next to the pole was a large white sign with the image of a surveillance camera.

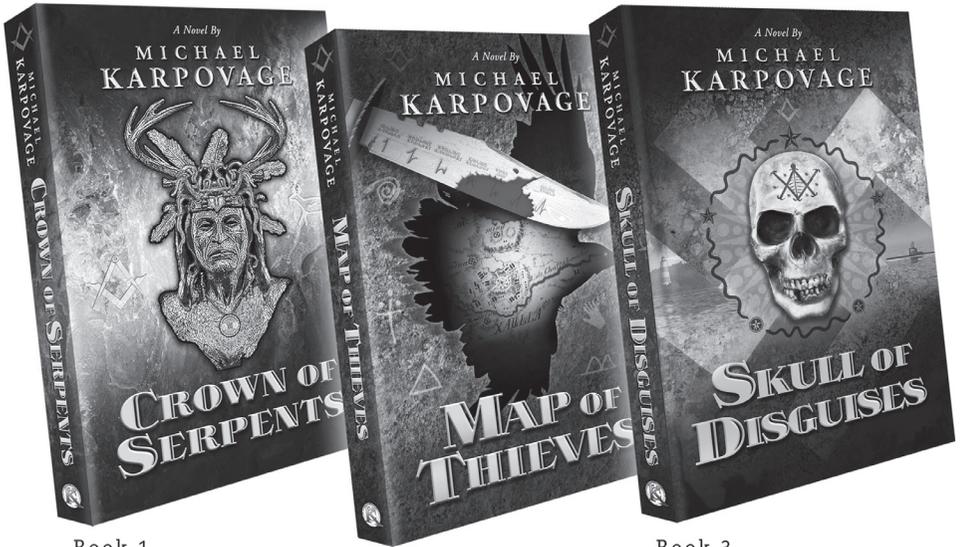
In bold red letters, a warning read: *No Trespassing, Private Property Protected By Video Surveillance, Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted*. A quick look around and they didn't see any cameras.

Must be bullshit, Jake thought. Another smaller sign showed the symbol of a gun, indicating the property was also well-armed against unwelcome intruders. Further back was a rusty old gate across the entrance to the tributary, with a faded wood sign in hand-painted capital letters reading: *GREENHALL LANDING – PRIVATE*. The gate stood open.

A gust of wind suddenly caught the black flag. When it unfurled it revealed a skull and crossbones.

“Dirk Pitt meets Jack Reacher!”

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