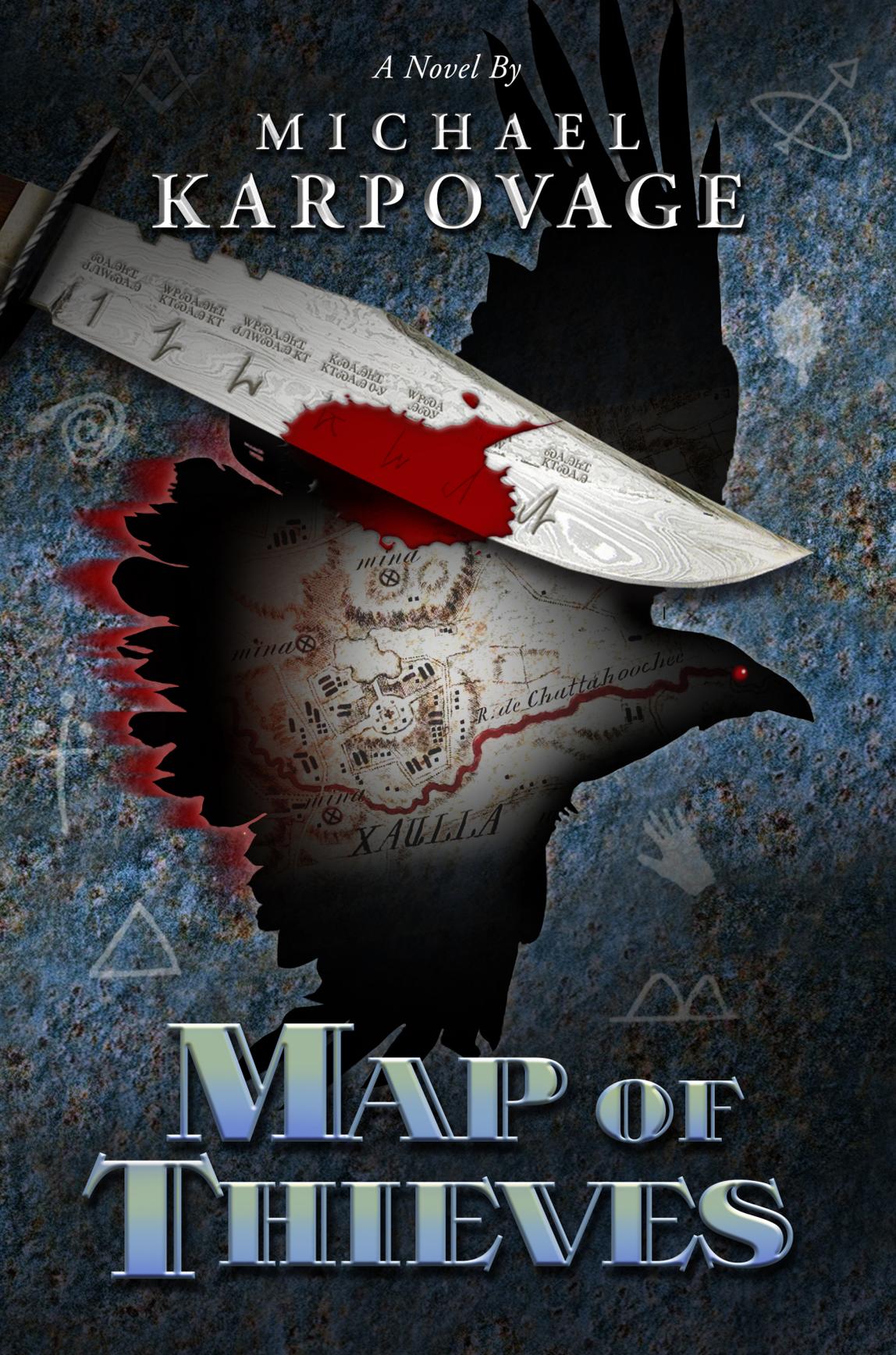


A Novel By

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE



MAP OF THIEVES

MAP OF THIEVES



PRAISE FOR MAP OF THIEVES

A great mystery with an ingenious plot, MAP OF THIEVES reminds me of Dan Brown and Steve Berry thrillers. This is the latest novel I've read by Karpovage, and his best to date. The book is a real page-turner, packed with action and suspense. At the same time, it does an amazing job of weaving in mysterious artifacts, historical information about the Civil War, and Native American lore. I particularly liked Jake Tununda and the sexy Rae Hart. I hope they'll be back for another book.

—*Lee Gimenez, bestselling author of eight novels, including Blacksnow Zero, Atlanta, GA*

Karpovage's new book has all of the ingredients for success. Betrayal, suspense, and historical fact, brilliantly mixed with present day fiction, make MAP OF THIEVES an intriguing read that is extremely hard to put down. The flow of writing propels you into the story as if you are part of the events and not just a bystander. And when you do have to go back to reality, you'll find yourself still absorbed and wanting nothing more than to immerse yourself once again in the fiction world of a treasure hunt.

—*Paula Howard, reviewer, Indianapolis, IN*

MAP OF THIEVES weaves history, mystery, murder, a master thief, a crooked politician, and a hidden Cherokee treasure into a spell-binding fabric that's fast-paced and filled with surprises. A stand-alone sequel to CROWN OF SERPENTS, this is Michael Karpovage's second, must-read mystery thriller that combines historical fact and fiction in a page-turning adventure. MAP OF THIEVES also continues to follow Jake Tununda and his partner Rae Hart, but this time in Georgia against the backdrop of true Civil War history. As with Karpovage's previous book, I couldn't put this one down. His works have played in my mind like a movie as I'm reading them.

—*Gene Conrad, reviewer, Berkshire, NY*

Karpovage's thrilling new novel is yet another exciting adventure that makes the hidden past come alive. With Native American legends, Masonic traditions of honor, and a roller coaster ride of emotions, you'll enjoy your sleepless nights as much as I did!

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

MAP OF THIEVES is another great, action-packed adventure by Karpovage. The story takes Lieutenant Colonel Jake Tununda and Rae Hart on a harrowing quest in search of stolen, priceless WWII artifacts once owned by Hitler and Göring. They are unexpectedly exposed to a secret code hidden in a Civil War general's hat that reveals clues to a vast hidden treasure from the once proud Cherokee nation. The characters are confronted by an unscrupulous and ruthless U.S. congressman who will stop at nothing, including murder, to secure the treasure for himself. MAP OF THIEVES is a must-read for those who like jarring suspense and fast-paced adventure.

—*Alex Walker, author of Toltec and Cuzco, action/adventure novels, Atlanta, GA*

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE

MAP OF THIEVES

www.MapofThieves.com



[/MapofThieves](#)

THE TUNUNDA MYSTERIES

Book One: *Crown of Serpents* (2009)

Book Two: *Map of Thieves* (2014)

MILITARY THRILLER

Flashpoint Quebec (2003)



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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 father, for bringing out the explorer in me.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although *Map of Thieves* is a work of fiction based on pure speculative narrative, and all present day characters are creations of my imagination, 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.

The great thing about handing down history, though, whether oral or written, is it generates legends. And legends—such as the Cherokee Tunnel treasure cache or even the *Map of Thieves*—typically start with a grain of truth, then become immortal. Generation after generation then stretch that truth through embellishment, thus keeping the story alive and partially believable, or better yet, attainable. Countless men and women have been sucked into obtaining that dream, sacrificing untold days, years, finances, and careers to make it a reality. It's a vicious cycle of hope and disappointment—even craziness. The results may end in broken relationships, betrayal, theft, or even worse; murder. In the end, the legend will still live, for it's that irresistible draw of sheer adventure that keeps it alive.

So what if you had one last shot at proving the legend real? That the dream does exist, that finding treasure *can* come true. That all the time, effort, and burned bridges along the way could finally be vindicated? Would you pass up that chance?

I bet you wouldn't.

Jake Tununda sure doesn't.

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.

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

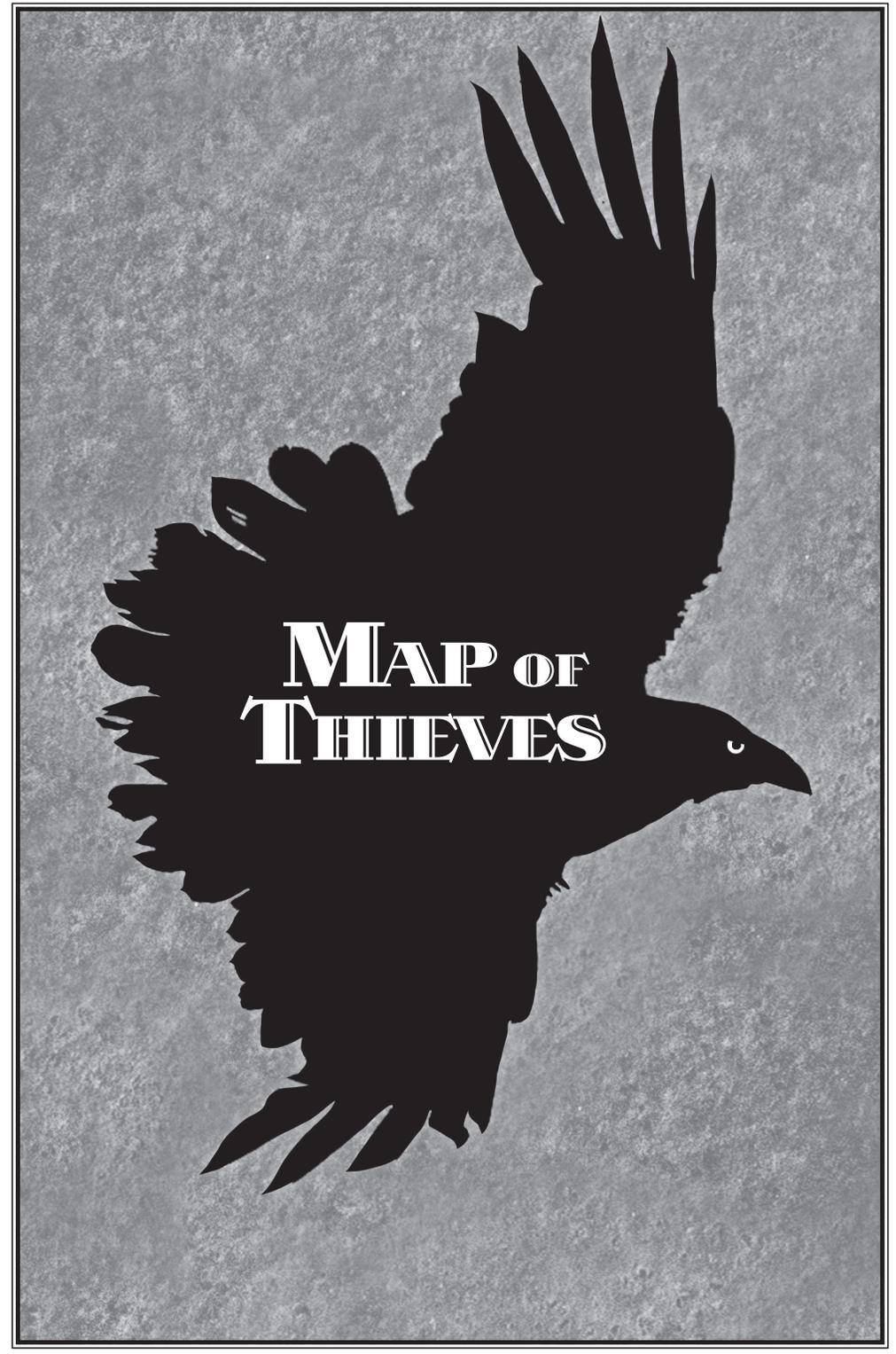
— *Michael Karpovage*

GEORGIA STATE MAP





NORTH GEORGIA MAP



**MAP OF
THIEVES**

PROLOGUE

July 22, 1864. 2:02 p.m.

Battle of Atlanta

Atlanta, Georgia

THROUGH THE TELESCOPIC SIGHT OF HIS COVETED Whitworth sniper rifle, Confederate Corporal Thomas Black Watie Jr. immediately recognized the galloping target coming down the little wagon road through the thick woods. His heart pounded. He blinked several times and tried to clear the sweat that had dripped into his eyes. It's actually him, the twenty year-old Cherokee rebel thought. Union Major General James Birdseye McPherson was finally within his deadly grasp.

Trigger finger twitching, young Watie aimed for McPherson's handsome, black-bearded face. But then his long sought-after prey suddenly checked his horse so sharply it slid on its haunches. Watie panned his scope and noticed a Confederate officer had jumped from the shrubbery alongside the road and had raised his sword demanding surrender of the general. We've got him prisoner, Watie thought, easing his finger off the trigger.

From behind the officer, a group of gray-clad infantry skirmishers also emerged from the underbrush. Even from his far away, elevated tree position, Watie could hear their distinct shouts of "Halt! Stop there! Halt!" echo through the dense woods east of Atlanta, Georgia.

The rebel officer stepped forward and continued to point his sword at the general. Watie adjusted his aim behind the general where two of his staff aides also came to a stop, one of them raising his hands in

surrender. McPherson then did the unexpected. He lifted his hat to the Confederate officer, as gentlemanly as if he were saluting a graceful lady, and unexpectedly wheeled his horse's head directly to the right and galloped off at full sprint back up the narrow forest road.

Watie panicked. His hands shook trying to regain his target. McPherson's two staffers followed the general's lead and drove their steeds as fast as they could in retreat, too.

The Corporal would now have to shoot the general in the back. *So be it.* This was the best opportunity he had been waiting for—killed for—since McPherson confiscated his coveted waybill and deposited it inside his hat almost two months prior.

As sweat streamed from his brow, Watie exhaled and focused his aim on the moving target. It would be a mere 40-yard shot, made easier from his roost in a loblolly pine tree. *Damn him for making me do this.* McPherson bent over his horse's neck as he sprinted off the road into a thicket for cover.

Watie pulled the trigger.

With a deep, bellowing boom and heavy recoil, a deadly, hex-shaped bullet sliced its way through the air. The infantry opened up with their own volley not a second later.

Through his scope Watie watched McPherson spring upright, hit in the back. His hat became entangled in the overhead branches as his horse passed between two pine saplings. He then rolled from his horse and bounced off the ground, knees and face first, yet still clutching the reins. His two escorts also went down; both horses shot out from under them. The last Watie saw, before gray smoke obscured his scope's field of vision, was McPherson's black horse standing over his body.

Time to get his hat. And my waybill.

As the thunderous sounds of battle escalated further up ahead through the woods, Watie slung his Whitworth across his back and extracted himself from his sniper's perch. On his way down he heard the skirmishers give their distinctive, high-pitched rebel yell in delight of what they undoubtedly thought was their kill. It didn't matter to him. He had killed so many Yankees in the last two months of fighting he didn't care who claimed the shot that brought down the well-liked general.

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Lowering himself onto the last branch, he jumped to the soft pine needle covered ground and removed his gray slouch hat. With a forearm he wiped away sweat on his well-tanned, copper-colored face. On top of his hat he made sure the black raven feather plume was firmly secure inside the head band. Placing the hat back on his head, he adjusted the turned-down brim over his brown eyes.

Relief overtook him. He sighed loudly. He could now finally fix his mistake of getting intercepted by McPherson's cavalry two months ago at Barnsley's Woodlands mansion in Adairsville, Georgia. Now he could continue on with his secret mission for which he had been dispatched from Indian Territory. It was time to live up to what he had lived his entire life in preparation to fulfill.

He hoped the spirit of his father, Thomas Black Watie, was proudly watching him now. He hoped all of the executed kinfolk of the Western Cherokee were watching from beyond their graves. Payback for their political assassinations, carried out by Principal Chief John Ross's henchmen as far back as 1839, would bring harmony and balance back into their spirits so violently taken. Once that revenge was exacted—including his father's heinous murder in 1845—only then would their drifting souls be released to enter the darkening land.

Thomas's secret mission had been conceived by his well-known uncle back in Indian Territory: Cherokee Chief Stand Watie. Stand had risen to become an important political rival and Ross's lifelong nemesis in the tumultuous early years of the new Cherokee Nation in the West. Marked by brutal internal feuds, peace among the Cherokee people meant carrying a pistol or a knife, and always watching your back. Stand did just that in thwarting two assassination attempts on his own life by Ross's men.

When the War Between the States broke out in 1861, real peace between the Watie and Ross camps was finally realized: they stood united under the Confederate cause. Stand had created the Cherokee Mounted Rifles and had been fighting a successful hit-and-run guerilla campaign against Union forces in the West. His young nephew, Thomas Jr., had enlisted, as well, and soon became one of the unit's most lethal sharpshooters.

But when Ross, the elected leader of the Cherokee Nation, became

a Federal turncoat in 1862, as predicted he would, Stand made a shrewd opening move of renewed revenge. Before Ross and his band of followers could flee Cherokee Territory with the nation's treasury under guard of the Union Army, Stand ensured the traitor's two most important personal possessions went missing.

Stolen by a Watie spy, a Cherokee staffer inside Rose Cottage—the home of Ross and the council house at the capital Tahlequah—the two inseparable items couldn't function without the other. One was a waybill, the other a Bowie knife. The knife's blade, engraved with Cherokee runes, acted as the key to decipher the symbols on the waybill.

The waybill pinpointed the location of the legendary Cherokee Tunnel; a huge, 200-foot-long gold depository hidden back in north Georgia near the small village of Ball Ground on the Etowah River. This secretly carved tunnel held John Ross's personal gold inventory as well as those of many of his most trusted followers and the elite families of the nation.

Unable to transport any of their gold possessions during the infamous 1838-39 Trail of Tears when the last of the Cherokees were forcibly removed from the state of Georgia, the depositors had made a pact to secretly carve a tunnel from a steep cliff face to stash their gold and valuables in until they could come back and retrieve them at some future date. But most of the depositors perished along the 2,200-mile journey to Indian Territory, including John Ross's wife. Over 4,000 ended up dying in total. More depositors died over the subsequent years during resettlement in the West. Several clandestine attempts were made by remaining heirs; but none could ever get close enough to the location due to trigger-happy white Georgians who had since possessed their former lands. In the end, the secret treasure had remained untouched in the heavily concealed tunnel for over twenty-five years: not one depositor having ever breached the entrance.

Confined to Indian Territory and waging some of his most incredible victories to date, Stand could personally do nothing with the stolen waybill and knife. As the new leader of the Cherokee Nation, he was actively engaged with fighting the Union and providing for his people. To Stand, the cache location was supposedly still safe inside Confederate territory. Any pursuits would have to wait until after the war ended.

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All that changed in May of 1864. As a newly promoted brigadier general in the Confederate Army, Stand had learned of the massive Union offensive penetrating Georgia from Chattanooga, Tennessee. He needed to act immediately before the enemy compromised the tunnel cache, or worse, Ross being given access to search for it from the Federals whom he now aligned himself with. And so, Stand called on his twenty year-old nephew to race to Georgia before the Union Army overran the state.

Thomas Black Watie Jr. remembered his uncle's words clearly: "The blood of our kinfolk and the father you never knew—my younger brother—needs to be washed away with the blood of John Ross. Your time to act is upon us."

Thomas's north Georgia mission was threefold.

First, after finding the Cherokee Tunnel from the waybill clues, locate the most valuable of all the treasure hidden inside and steal it. Many years ago Ross was overheard bragging about one of the last deposits made before the tunnel was sealed up. Called the Golden Horse, it was a highly-prized trophy depicting a magnificent Spanish Andalusian. Made of solid, 24-carat gold by an ancient Cherokee goldsmith, it marked the ousting of Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto's expedition during the 1540s. Stand said to Thomas that whoever possessed that trophy could shoe every horse in the Cherokee Nation with solid gold, alluding to a secret within.

Second, inventory the rest of the tunnel's contents, take what he needed for expenses, but conceal the entrance once again upon exiting. He was then to go directly to General Joseph E. Johnston himself, who was fighting Union General Sherman, to request a party of troops to transport what was inside so they could use it in the treasury of the Confederacy.

And the third, most important part of Thomas's mission?

Assassinate John Ross.

Eye-for-an-eye vengeance—a basic human instinct the world over—was necessary for a family's or a tribe's strength and survival. To let a murderous act or an insult go unavenged would only bring further suffering and humiliation. Doing nothing was a sign of weakness and thus encouraged further attacks. Thomas was told that after he found the tunnel he should then pursue Ross at all costs using any means necessary.

Ross had to be assassinated, not only for personal family revenge, but for Cherokee Nation redemption. He was the head of the snake who now openly cavorted with the enemy. Rightfully so, he was a murderous conspirator, a devious traitor, a conniving hypocrite, and a power-hungry dictator.

Squinting through the smoke-filled woods in the direction where he had shot McPherson, Thomas Black Watie Jr. encountered a wall of dense underbrush. Further complicating matters were stray minnie balls slicing through the trees from the main assault up the hill. He found a trail of trampled underbrush the infantry had made during their initial advance and headed out.

That advance had met early success despite bad execution. Confederate General John Bell Hood had ordered an exhausting 12-mile night march from Atlanta to what was supposed to be a morning surprise attack on Union General Sherman's left flank east of the city. Watie had advanced into the woods with his 1st/15th Arkansas Infantry Regiment and captured the entire Union 16th Iowa Infantry Regiment and eight artillery pieces. But now it was past two o'clock and their mid-day attack was marred by rugged terrain and the overpowering heat of a Georgia July.

During the chaotic ebb and flow of battle, Watie had taken in with a severely depleted unit of Memphis Irishmen from the 5th Tennessee. They also picked up some stragglers from the dismounted 24th Texas Cavalry. Soon they stumbled upon a wagon road deep in the woods. Being the best sniper in the brigade, Watie was ordered to provide cover from his tree position at the rear of the skirmishers as they paused to reload, regroup, and make another push forward. Plus, they could ill-afford a Whitworth getting into the hands of the enemy.

Now stepping through the brush, Watie unholstered his ivory-handled Colt Navy .36 caliber revolver as close-in protection. It was given to him by his 1st Arkansas Regiment colonel during last month's brutal Union assault on their lines at Cheatham Hill south of Kennesaw Mountain. The Yankees lost 1,000 men in less than an hour with no penetration of the defenses. It had been his most horrific combat experience of the war. On that day of June 28th, he had lost track of how many men he personally killed in front

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of their entrenchments near the infamous Dead Angle. Scores more were trapped in the burning woods, screaming and dying in front of them. But it was Watie's role in the humanitarian cease-fire rescue of those same enemy wounded being burned, that earned him his Colt pistol.

In his other hand he slid out the stolen Ross blade from its leather sheath. He called it his Arkansas "toothpick." The beautifully custom-crafted Bowie knife was the only weapon General McPherson had unwittingly allowed him to part with upon his release in Adairsville. This same blade—serving as the legend key to his lost waybill and ultimately to the tunnel—now guided him to his victim as he hacked away at foliage among the thickets and trees.

As the smoke from the skirmishers' volley drifted away, he could see the wagon road ahead through the dense brush. A busted wagon wheel stood leaning against a tree. Broken ammo crates, discarded clothing, and other sundry items of battle debris lay scattered about from the Union retreat. He watched as the gray line of rugged, veteran Confederate soldiers disappeared into the woods across the road to make their final ascent on the enemy breastworks. Cannonading commenced and rifle fire cracked as their attack was met. Soon Watie heard their frightening rebel yell blend with the ungodly sounds of a ferocious assault.

Movement to the left caught Watie's eye. Union blue in the brush. A tall, older man with a salt and pepper, handlebar mustache emerged as Watie centered his Colt on the man's chest. He was unarmed, head bowed in defeat, eyes covered by his dark blue, Kepi-style hat. An insignia on top of a gold infantry bugle marked him as an officer.

A gaunt looking Union soldier, face drained white, limped behind the officer. Behind them a Confederate soldier prodded the prisoners with his bayoneted rifle. Watie gave a short owl's hoot and raised his revolver to the sky in a non-aggressive manner so his fellow soldier wouldn't drill him.

The rebel soldier immediately recognized him. In an Irish accent he asked, "You're the sharpshooter, right? They call you the Raven?"

Watie nodded. He picked up the nickname when he joined the Army of Tennessee back in May asking to serve with a unit from Arkansas. Proving himself an expert marksman, he shot a flying raven from an

incredible distance while two important fellow Arkansians watched—brigade commander Colonel Daniel Govan and division commander Major General Patrick Cleburne. They rewarded Watie with one of their rare, smuggled British Whitworth rifles after the previous owner was shot through the head. Watie wore the slain raven's feather in his hat ever since.

The overly excited, fast-talking, rebel infantry skirmisher gestured with a thumb over his shoulder. "We bushwhacked the Yankee general, McPherson, back there up on the road. Corporal Coleman shot him."

"In the back, right?" Watie asked flatly.

"Yup. Coleman's headed back to our lines with the general's horse. I'm taking these here prisoners back, too. They're part of his staff. Lucky bastards both got their horses shot out. This here is a colonel," he said, pointing his thumb at the prisoner. "Scott is his name, I do believe. Not even a scratch on him. The young one says he's McPherson's orderly. Named Thompson. Escaped with a knock on his head."

Lowering his revolver to his side, Watie walked up to the prisoners.

The orderly cried openly, his shoulders shaking. A trickle of blood seeped from somewhere on the top of his sweat- and dirt-matted hair. He looked up slowly. His red glassy eyes grew wide as he and Watie recognized each other from Adairville.

"You?" the Yankee soldier asked in a concussive daze. "Thomas Watie?"

"Yup," Watie snipped. The orderly was A. J. Thompson, the general's personal assistant, who had been especially harsh on him the night he was detained. Watie angrily pointed his Bowie knife at the man. "I warned the general there'd be consequences if he took my property. Didn't I?"

Thompson merely stared back with lost eyes.

"Didn't I?" Watie barked, his Bowie knife inches from the man's face. This time the orderly nodded and Watie lowered his blade.

"When your cavalry took me prisoner I wasn't fighting this goddamn war," Watie lamented, changing his tone. "I told the general the truth. I was a civilian then. My business was Cherokee business only. I told you both that. But you took my waybill anyway! I had no other choice but to rejoin and hunt him down to get it back." He raised his blade to the man's neck. "Now you tell me this, is it still inside his hat?"

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“As far as I know it is,” Thompson said, eyes wide.

Getting the answer he was hoping for, Watie sighed with relief and immediately turned to leave.

“You have killed the best man in our army,” the orderly mumbled.

Watie pretended he didn't hear those last words. Instead, he scampered off toward the road and reached it in less than a minute. To his right were two freshly killed, bullet-riddled horses. To the left of the saddled, bloody rumps were two unarmed Union soldiers under a tree. They were squatting on the ground over a long, lifeless body clad in a dark blue Union coat. Lighter blue pantaloons were tucked inside black, mud-spattered boots. He couldn't quite see the face but did notice a black beard. Was it McPherson? If so, where was his two-star, gold shoulder boards of a major general and the gold breast buttons of his uniform coat?

The two Yankees seemed in a heated argument when Watie quietly snuck up on them. A hatless soldier, his bloody left arm shattered at the elbow, cradled the victim's head in his lap while yelling at the other Union soldier to, “Put it back.”

The other Union straggler held a pocketbook and a handful of Federal bills, stuffing them in his coat. “We'll split it then.”

“No, I won't split it with you,” the injured soldier said. “We need to protect all of his items and return it to his staff. I won't go along with your robbery. Put it back, I say.”

They were fighting over the dead Union man's pay.

Watie pressed his revolver against the thief's head. “Listen to him.”

The Union robber didn't even look up. He raised his trembling hands and dropped the pocketbook on the ground.

Watie placed his long blade under the soldier's chin and ordered him to stand up. “Get the fuck out of here or I'll cut your bowels out.” A wet stain formed at the Union thief's crotch. Watie let the man go and kicked him in the ass for good riddance.

The soldier plunged aimlessly into the woods.

Watie looked down to the other Union soldier, a private, and briefly locked eyes. He then glanced at the dead man he was cradling in his lap and recognized the man's face.

It *was* McPherson.

There was a ripped exit wound on the right breast of the general's buttonless coat. Blood freely ran out. Suddenly, he moved an arm and clutched at his chest with a yellow, leather riding gauntlet. His eyes blinked open, then closed. He groaned. Bright red blood dribbled from his mouth and spread throughout his dust-encrusted black beard.

He's still alive!

Watie stared down at the figure, transfixed with his victim, realizing he must have shot him through the lungs. It was a mortal wound. He'd be dead within minutes.

The private looked up to Watie. "I was protecting this dying man," he explained in a quivering voice. "That wretch stole his money."

How ironic, thought Watie. "This man is your own General McPherson. You know that, don't ya?" The private nodded back.

"Where's his shoulder boards? His coat buttons?" asked Watie.

"I cut them away to conceal his identity," stated the grimacing man.

Not wanting to linger, Watie turned away from his dying foe and holstered his revolver. Regret overtook him. He didn't want this memory embedded in his mind. This was too personal. A general shot in cold blood. In the back. Unarmed.

He looked above him up in the pine sapling, searching for the general's distinct Hardee-style, high crowned, black hat with a rolled brim. He had remembered it suspended in the branches after the general went down. But it was nowhere in sight. He looked all around. And then he spotted the gilded, braided hat cord that would normally be around the base of the crown. It lay a few feet away, deliberately discarded. He snatched it up. Next to it was a dirty, gray Kepi cap, it being nothing but a ripped rag with a black brim. But no general's field hat was anywhere to be seen.

Frantically, he searched the ground again, then the trees, and brush. "Where's his hat? Where's the general's hat?" Watie demanded of the wounded soldier. He held the hat cord up and shook it, the gilded acorn terminals swinging back and forth. "Did you take this bullion cord off?"

"No. I didn't touch his hat."

"It's supposed to be here. Up in these branches." He pointed with his

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knife. "Where did it go?"

"Your own men took it," the wounded man shrugged. "They thought the general deceased."

"Goddamn!" Watie wailed.

The Union man spoke up. "I got hit after our rifle pits were overrun and was making my way back when I saw what happened and played dead in the thicket. One of your Johnnies traded out his old hat for the general's hat. Said it was his trophy."

Watie picked up the gray Kepi at his feet and looked inside for a name of the previous owner. Nothing. He slammed the hat back to the ground then angrily shoved the general's bullion cord in his pocket.

"They took his field glasses and his sword-belt," the private continued. "Got his watch and some papers, too. And some corporal took the general's horse back toward your lines. Then they all double-quickened it up through that pine thicket to engage our army. That's when I cut his buttons and boards or else he'd be stripped naked if found again. I sat here with him and I couldn't believe it but he came to. It's my sacred duty to protect him."

McPherson moaned. Both Watie and the wounded soldier looked down at him. His lips moved and his eyes fluttered open looking at the wounded man. He spoke in a whisper. "What's your name?"

"Private George Reynolds, Company D, Fifteenth Iowa Infantry, sir."

"You're a good man," McPherson's dry, weak voice cracked. "Water? I need water." His mouth bubbled with more blood, his breathing strained.

A faint Reynolds, himself reeling from loss of blood, tried to unstrap his canteen with his good arm but only fumbled in pain. Watie sheathed his knife. He lifted the strap and canteen over the private's head and popped the cap. Bending down, he cradled the general behind his neck, and gently lifted his head to wet his lips.

Turning to Reynolds, he pleaded with him to go back to his lines. To get to a field hospital. That he wasn't his prisoner.

"I won't leave him! He's the ablest and purest general in our army."

"His wound is mortal," Watie said. "He's done. Now leave or I *will* make you my prisoner."

The private stood up and started away, but he stopped and looked back

at his general.

Watie ignored him. He peered back into the general's blanched face as he gave the dying man more water. "I'm sorry it came to this, but you must tell me something. Is my waybill still stashed inside your hat?"

McPherson opened and locked his deep blue eyes with Watie's. His thick black eyebrows raised in sudden recognition. After a moment, he responded in a whisper. "It is, Watie." He then coughed up more blood, accidentally spraying the cheek of the young man who stole his life. His voice wavered. "G-g-get my hat. I-I'll return it." The general turned his head slowly, searching for his hat.

Watie shook his head. "It ain't here."

Staring back up at Watie, the general's eyebrows creased in confusion. "Where is it?" His eyelids fluttered as he strained for words. "Where is—" another gurgling inhale. His last warm breath exhaled on Watie's face. "My. . . Haaaat?" His eyes stopped moving. They remained frozen, staring straight up, the light of life fading to emptiness.

Watie blinked several times. A tear trickled out of his eye and dripped onto McPherson's lifeless face. "I don't know," he answered back. He lay the general's head on the ground and whispered. "Damn this war to hell."

He heard sobbing a few feet away. Private Reynolds. He, too, had watched the general expire. Watie screamed at him to leave and this time the wounded man trotted off back up the road. He then took off his own hat. From under his sweat-stained shirt he extracted a thin leather necklace and pulled it over his head. On the end of it dangled a small, translucent, rock, quartz crystal. He bunched it up in a fist and placed it in the inner pocket of McPherson's coat, directly over his heart. An ancient Cherokee token, the protector crystal would ward off any blackbird witches who preyed on a fresh heart.

Hat back on his head, Watie rose to his feet and unslung his Whitworth to reload as he double-stepped into the woods toward the sounds of battle. Catching up to his infantry was all that mattered now.

And finding out which one of them took McPherson's hat.

1

Present day. Friday. July. 6:57 p.m.

Cherokee Rose Manor

Savannah, Georgia

OLD MAN TOMMY BLACK WATIE IV LAY BLANKETED in his antique, king-sized, four-post bed, head propped up by pillows. He stared at a car insurance commercial on his 60 inch wall-mounted, flat-screen, high-definition television. The sound was muted, the way he liked it when these repeat commercials came on. Behind an oxygen mask, his loud breathing was steady but labored. His ninety year-old heart started to race though as he fumbled with the buttons on the TV's remote control.

"Too many tiny buttons on this dadgum thang," he mumbled in a muffled Southern drawl. He scratched at his scalp covered in long, stringy white and silver hair, bangs swept back over his forehead, and squinted at the remote. While doing so, the cord of his fingertip-attached pulse oxymeter, which measured his pulse rate and blood oxygen level, pulled tight and almost knocked over the portable bedside stand.

"Now where's that mute button? My show's gonna start any minute."

Sitting in a corner nook of the second floor master bedroom in Watie's historic Italianate manor, reading a showbiz magazine, and nibbling on Girl Scout Thin Mints, was Becky Holden, his personal PDN or private duty nurse. The reliable, thirty-something, robust black woman knew the routine all too well. She had been assigned to Tommy for about three years

now dealing with his various ailments. His latest, a bad bout of pneumonia, was just about over.

She was at his house almost every day of the week, at all hours, on-call 24/7. She not only acted as his nurse, cook, and personal assistant—and paid quite handsomely for her duties—but she had become a close companion for the lonely, elderly man who had no one left in his waning years.

Placing the magazine on an end table and brushing off the cookie crumbs from her white blouse and matching pants, she uncrossed her legs with a sigh of redundancy and stood up to relieve her client of his remote control dysfunction.

“What’s that you say, Mister Tommy?” she asked loudly, compensating for his hearing loss. Waddling on over to his bed, she noticed his heart rate monitor displayed about seventy-five beats-per-minute, a slight increase from normal.

Tommy pulled his oxygen mask away from his mouth to be heard. “The dadgum mute button. Can’t find it.” He held the remote in front of his light-brown face, aimed it at the TV and pressed a button. The channel switched to some apparent celebrities engaged in ballroom dancing. “Ah, son-of-a-bitch,” he cursed, snapping his mask back over his mouth and nose.

Holden calmly extracted the remote from his hand as she had done countless times already. “You hit the recall button by mistake again. That takes you back to the previous channel.” She switched back to the channel he was on and replaced the remote back in his hand, guiding his finger over the proper button. “Right there. That’s the mute button. Press *that* one.”

Tommy pressed it and the volume turned on—quite loud. He smiled back. “Thanks, Sweetie.”

“Can you hear it okay? Want me to turn it up?” Holden straightened out his oxygen mask and ran her eyes down the long thin tube attached to the tank sitting beside his bed to make sure the line wasn’t tangled.

“Shush now, show’s starting,” he admonished her. Holden playfully nodded with a flash of large white teeth while reading the gauge on the oxygen tank to see how much remained. Another hour and she’d have to

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change it out. All was well. She resumed reading on the cushy corner chair while grabbing another Thin Mint.

Tommy's favorite new show on the Military Channel was called *Battlefield Investigators*, a mix of military history and mystery investigation. Still in its first season the show had already aired six, highly-watched episodes featuring experts on military engagements and rare battlefield artifacts. Each hour-long episode featured a guest host who took the viewers on an adventurous ride as they investigated a military mystery from battles past. Tonight's new episode would be bringing back the popular duo of a rough and tumble military historian, Lieutenant Colonel Jake Tununda and his beautiful co-host, Investigator Rae Hart.

During episode three, several months ago, Tununda and Hart had retraced the tragic mission of a Revolutionary War scout, his torture death at the hands of enemy British Freemasons and savage Iroquois, and the stunning discovery of lost British gold in a sunken cannon deep within an Upstate New York lake.

What aging World War II veteran Tommy Watie liked the best about their episode was that they weren't just reciting a boring narration like some of the other guest hosts did. Instead, they passionately took viewers to the real-life scenes where history unfolded, getting down and dirty along the way. From a hallowed battlefield to a quiet hall of a research library, to the depths of a deep blue lake, Tununda and Hart had kept Tommy mesmerized as they re-enacted their successful hunt for lost gold. Tommy was hooked from the get-go, along with millions of other viewers who loved seeing artifacts dug up from the past. Plus, it didn't hurt that the fellow decorated combat vet Tununda obviously had some Native American blood in him like himself. Or that the young woman was one helluva fine looker, too, he thought.

Tonight's episode of *Battlefield Investigators* was especially enticing to Tommy because it was based on the Civil War, or as he put it all his life: the War of Northern Aggression. This episode would talk about the Battle of Atlanta in the summer of 1864.

From the trailer that had run the last few weeks, they had hyped up Tununda and Hart's investigation of a mystery item surrounding a well-

known Union general killed during that battle. The previews had flashed the general's portrait without mentioning his name. However, Tommy knew the picture by heart. It was Major General James B. McPherson, the highest ranking Union officer to be killed in combat during the war.

By Tommy's namesake granddaddy.

Old man Tommy's heart rate increased even more. For it was a coveted secret held by the Watie family that twenty year-old Arkansas Confederate Corporal Thomas Black Watie Jr. had assassinated McPherson. He had shot him square in the back. Other soldiers were given credit over the years, but the Thomas Black Watie namesakes over the next generations knew he was the real triggerman.

And the real reason why he had to take the general's life.

The show's slick opening war graphics and contemporary, fast-paced hard rock music started playing. Tununda and Hart appeared in action scenes from their last hosted episode. The theme then dramatically changed to the Civil War era with the playing of a slow ominous flute. Tununda appeared in a full Class "A" Army Blue Service Uniform, arms crossed over a wide chest filled with medals and ribbons, black beret cocked confidently.

He stood outside on a sunny day in front of the McPherson monument; a single, huge, iron cannon, embedded breech-down in a granite block, muzzle pointed straight up into the clear blue sky. The spot was now surrounded by a dense residential Atlanta neighborhood. A screen caption below the host read: *Lieutenant Colonel Robert "Jake" Tununda, Military Historian, U.S. Army Military History Institute.*

The camera zoomed in on his tan, handsomely square, beardless face with high cheekbones. The light brown of his eyes sparkled in the sunlight. Crow's feet and graying temples on his short-cropped, black hair marked him somewhere around forty.

"I'm Colonel Jake Tununda and you're watching Battlefield Investigators." Jake placed his hands on his hips and with a stern voice started the introduction. *"In tonight's episode we're taking you back to the Civil War and the Battle of Atlanta. We'll focus on the death of Major General James Birdseye McPherson whose life was snuffed out right where I'm standing."* He made a gesture toward the monument.

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A stunning woman, slightly shorter and several years younger, stepped into the scene and stood close to him almost touching shoulders. The screen caption below her read: *Rae Hart, former New York State Police Investigator*. She wore a black leather jacket over a deliberately revealing white button down blouse. Her long reddish-brown hair, curled at the ends, sat on her well-endowed upper chest. Tommy perked up from his bed and whistled behind his mask. Nurse Holden glanced up, too, caught Hart's image and couldn't help but notice her natural beauty. She looked to be a combination of Latino and Asian with mesmerizing, narrow green eyes, a petit nose, luscious red lips, and a perfectly rounded face. Yet she carried with her the air of determination of someone who doesn't get taken lightly.

Hooking a thumb in the front pocket of her size-4, tight-fitting blue jeans she took up the show's introduction where Tununda had left off.

"On July twenty-second, eighteen sixty four, the Battle of Atlanta raged deep in the woods just to the east of this rebel city stronghold. By the end of the day the bloody battle would claim the life of Union General Sherman's most cherished young commander. Some historians even believe McPherson would have eventually become president of the United States." The picture changed to a black and white photograph portrait of a hatless McPherson. *"He was a revered general on both sides of the war. His kind treatment of Confederate prisoners after the capture of Vicksburg earned him his enemy's admiration. But after McPherson was shot and killed here in Atlanta is where our mystery begins."*

Tommy's breathing became fast and heavy and it wasn't because of the young woman's looks. He propped himself further up on his pillows; eyes glued to the television screen.

Holden took a peek at Tommy's pulse monitor. Not good at all, she thought while chomping on yet another cookie. Her patient was getting himself all worked up. She paused from reading and edged forward on her seat, watching the television to see what was getting him so bent out of shape. Something about some Civil War soldier getting killed. Ho-hum.

The screen changed to a famous period lithograph by war artist Alfred R. Waud, which portrayed McPherson at the moment of being shot. Head tossed back, body falling off his horse, his field hat suspended in the air.

MICHAEL KARPOVAGE



DEATH OF GEN. J. B. McPHERSON.
In Battle of Atlanta, July 22, 1864.

Death of Gen. J. B. McPherson by Alfred R. Waud.

His mounted signal officer, Colonel Scott, watching in the background. The camera then zoomed in on the hat and held the shot. Tommy's eyes widened. He froze in anticipation.

Tununda's voice chimed in. *"After he was shot, McPherson's body was rifled of his personal possessions by Confederate soldiers. His binoculars, sword belt, his gold watch, a dispatch from his commander Sherman, and his hat were all stolen as he lay fighting for his life."*

Hart's voice took the narration. *"But soon after, all of these items were recovered after the Confederate soldiers were surrounded and captured. With the lone exception of McPherson's field hat. It became lost to history. She paused for dramatic effect. "Until today."*

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Tommy gasped. Memories flooded his mind as if a filing cabinet had spilled its contents. He was overwhelmed, couldn't catch his breath. His heartbeat shot through the roof, his head felt dizzy. The room suddenly became cold like a draft had blown in. He heard the distinctive cackle of a raven outside his window and his heart beat palpitated with terror. A loud thump hit the side of the house. A shadow seemed to pass by.

It was his nurse hovering at his side.

The screen switched back to the co-hosts in front of the monument. Tommy stared as the narration switched back to the Colonel.

"McPherson's lost hat has been discovered!" Video appeared of the duo flanking a three-foot high pedestal on which sat a tall, worn, black Hardee-style hat with a rolled brim. The clip changed to a close-up of Tununda's right hand slowly reaching for the hat. For a split second you could see a shiny gold ring on his third finger. On the ring's flat, ruby face was a raised gold and silver emblem; the square and compasses of the ancient fraternity of the Freemasons. His hand lifted the hat off the pedestal and turned it over while the camera zoomed inside until it reached the interior peak of the crown. The picture stopped on a small white tag attached to the silk liner. The tag held McPherson's signature.

"Yes, the very same hat he lost in death," continued Tununda. *"In tonight's episode we'll take you on the long, strange chain of possession this hat has taken; how it was stolen as a trophy of war; how it sat lost for over a century, forgotten in a box; how it ended up at the Military History Institute and ultimately on loan at the West Point Museum, where it now sits on display with the rest of the general's uniform."*

"Stay tuned as we begin our journey into the past," Hart finished as the show switched to a commercial.

Tommy sat upright and pointed to the television with a shaky finger. Through wheezy muffled breaths, he ordered his nurse to, "Call West Point now!" He tore his oxygen mask off and saliva streamed onto his white stubble chin. "I want Tununda! Granddaddy's waybill is in that hat!"

Then, with a loud moan, his eyes rolled back into his head.

Holden caught him before he crashed back to his pillow. He lurched upward as if something had pulled on him. The nurse held tight as he went

stiff as a board. His heart rate stopped altogether on the monitor, followed by his breathing.

“Oh, no you don’t, Mister Tommy!” Holden shouted as she fished her phone from a pocket and dialed 9-1-1. She then mashed the power button on the remote control to turn off the high volume. Putting her phone on speaker, she started cardiopulmonary resuscitation while waiting for the dispatcher.

“Nine-one-one. What’s your emergency?” a female voice asked.

“Heart attack,” Holden responded calmly and clearly. “Ninety year-old male. CPR in progress. Send ambulance to twenty-one West Gordon Street. And make it snappy, girl.”

2

Sunday. 9:10 a.m.

Q-Area, Seneca Army Depot

Romulus, New York

“**Y**ES, THIS IS HE,” REPLIED AN OVERLY IRRITATED Lieutenant Colonel Jake Tununda to the weak voice over his iPhone. The caller had even butchered the pronunciation of his name. “How can I help you?”

The question was blunt and didn’t disguise Jake’s annoyance. Hell, it was the sixth call this morning from the same 912 area code his phone displayed. The calls had started around 8 a.m. and continued every ten minutes or so. But he hadn’t known because he was deep underground making some electrical repairs on his secretly-owned, igloo-style Army ammunition storage bunker. And of course there was no reception nor Internet access inside. It wasn’t until he had come back up to the surface and opened one of the two, heavy, steel entrance blast doors to step outside that his phone reconnected and the calls were listed on screen.

He figured it must be some automated recording or some asshole telemarketing representative who had penetrated his Do Not Call authorization. But no voice message was left behind. And then the seventh call came in. Jake debated on whether to take it or not because his rendezvous *guest* would be arriving shortly for their early morning motorcycle ride. He decided to take the call.

Standing in the sunlight of a clear, mid-July morning in the Finger

Lakes of Upstate New York, wearing a vintage WWII-era, brown leather, zip-up riding jacket over blue jeans, Jake waited for the caller's response.

"It's 'bout McPherson's hat," said what sounded like an old man in a slow, deep Southern accent. He neglected to introduce himself and got right to the point.

Jake figured he was a fan of *Battlefield Investigators*. He remembered all of the calls they had gotten after his and his girlfriend, Rae's, debut episode many months ago. Well, *she* had gotten most of the calls. A slew of marriage proposals to be exact. Jake asked to whom was he speaking.

The old man cleared his throat and spoke louder this time. "This here is Tommy Black Watie the Fourth. You can call me Tommy."

The man pronounced Watie as "Waaaaa-Teeeee" in two long syllables of a thick Southern drawl. "Okay, Tommy," Jake replied as he shed his riding jacket and slung it on the handle of the blast door. Underneath, he wore a tight olive green t-shirt with the words "Army Ranger" stenciled in white capital letters across his wedge-shaped chest. "I take it you saw the show a couple of nights ago?"

Jake was in prime physical shape for a man his age, who didn't run ten miles a day. With large biceps and Popeye-like forearms, he preferred doing reps of push-ups, crunches, and stretches as opposed to the sweat and exertion of a daily weight lifting regimen. Although his five-foot-ten inch frame was still firm-muscled and flexible, he just didn't have that same level of stamina and endurance as he did in combat some twenty years ago.

As a former U.S. Army infantry officer with the 10th Mountain Division he was in the "shit" with constant deployments throughout his many years of frontline combat duty. From the Balkans to Afghanistan to Iraq, he had participated in the ravages of all-out war. He was a highly intelligent, fearless leader respected by his men. Being one of the most lethal warriors in the 10th, he had earned a Silver Star and a Purple Heart with an Oak Leaf Cluster for two wounds sustained in combat. His battlefield exploits were the stories of legend—especially the hand-to-hand fight at the 2001 Mazar-i-Sharif prison takeover in Northern Afghanistan.

During that encounter, Jake had confronted three armed enemy Taliban in a blown-out basement. The first he knocked unconscious. The

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second he shot dead. The third he plunged a knife in his heart. Both dead men then had their scalps ripped off with a blood-curdling Indian war whoop. Thus the legend of Jake Tununda, Seneca warrior, was born.

The last few years, though, saw him leave the infantry behind for his new field historian position at the U.S. Army's Military History Institute based out of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Thinking he'd have a quiet end to his military career pursuing his lifelong passion of military history, he couldn't have miscalculated more.

It had started out on as an adventurous hunt for an ancient Iroquois crown which ultimately led to a keg of buried British gold coins. But death still followed him like a shadow. The only blessing in that whole affair was that he met the love of his life, who was now on her way to meet him.

"Well, Colonel," Watie said, pausing, smacking his lips. "I caught the first part on Friday night and you literally gave me a heart attack when I saw that there general's hat."

This time Jake laughed out loud, playing along. "Really now?" He caught the old man using his officer's title. It was a respectful gesture and Jake assumed he must have served in the military.

"I'm ninety years-old and I ain't never had one dadgum heart attack in all my life, son. Thank God for my bedside nurse. She done saved this old geezer's life. Her and those paramedics with their ayy-eee-dee-thing-a-majig, they jolted me right back to life."

"Good God, I'm, uh, sorry to hear that," Jake said, genuinely feeling like an ass at wanting to berate the caller at first and then not believing about his heart attack. He started pacing on the cracked pavement outside his bunker and noticed out of the corner of his eye as several brown deer ran down the secluded lane of storage igloos on the abandoned Seneca Army Depot base. One of the base's famous white deer followed closely behind the brown herd.

"I'm glad you made it, Tommy. I think you're referring to what they call an automated external defibrillator. Are you doing alright now?" Jake asked, not quite sure how to handle this stranger's brush with death over the phone. He ran a hand through his short hair. "Are you sure you should be making a phone call so soon? You want to call me back later, sir?"

“Naw. I’m okay now,” Watie said with a laugh. “I was out for only a little bit they said. Technically, I’m a dead man walkin’, guess you might say. But I need to talk to you now, Colonel. Been trying all morning. Do you mind?”

“Sure. Sure. Go ahead. I don’t mind.”

“It’s that dadgum hat,” started Watie. “I watched the rest of your show last night when it re-ran. My doctor wouldn’t let me at first—didn’t want me all riled up again. But when he left my house I convinced my nurse to put it back on. Had her track down your number after.”

The old man was rambling loudly in his ear. Jake put him on speaker phone and continued pacing back and forth.

“Colonel, I’m just gonna cut to the chase because it wasn’t mentioned in your show and it gives me a ray of hope. I need to know something about that hat that’s been doggin’ my family for three generations. I need to know when you looked inside of it if you found anything. Like a paper?”

Jake paused, then frowned. “Umm. Not quite sure what you mean, Tommy. We did find McPherson’s signature on a sewn-in tag, if that’s what you’re getting at. And like we said in the show, we had a forensic handwriting expert verify that the signature was in fact his, thus authenticating the hat and the story behind the captain from Mississippi who picked it up as a war trophy.”

“Naw. Naw. Naw,” Watie barked. “I mean *inside* of his hat. Underneath the fabric and inner lining and such. Did y’all look in there?”

Jake twitched his cheek, somewhat confused. He scratched his temple with an index finger. “Well, I can’t say we looked *inside* the inside. I mean we handled the hat quite a bit. Lots of people—experts—inspected it in both my and Rae’s presence. None of us saw anything out of the ordinary. I do recall all of the stitching was pretty well secure given the age of the hat and wear and tear it had gone through. We didn’t lift out any of the material inside the sweatband if . . .”

“So, you didn’t find anything hidden, right?” interrupted Watie. “Like a paper with any symbols on it? Something that looks like a map?”

“Nooooooo. Nothing like that,” Jake replied, stopping in his tracks. “Was there something *supposed* to be hidden in there?”

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This time it was the old man's wheels that were turning. The silence lasted too long. Jake asked if he was still there.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here." But he didn't answer the question.

"Tommy, what's your full name again?" Jake asked, his radar now turned on.

"Thomas Black Watie," the elderly man replied. And then quickly added, "the Fourth."

"Watie, you say?"

"Yep, four generations of us. Well, five if you count my dirty rotten son. But he only goes by Tom Black. Oh, 'scuse me, United States *Congressman* Tom Black. He officially killed the Watie name back when we had our great fallin' out years and years ago. That son-of-a-bitch was my son no more after that."

Jake shook his head. This was out of hand. Who is this guy? Bitching about an estranged son of his?

"Tom Black? As in that new firebrand congressman from Atlanta, Georgia?" asked Jake.

"That's him all right," Watie ripped with complete disgust. "Lying, thieving, no-good, greedy con artist."

"Okay then." Jake was flabbergasted. He certainly knew of Congressman Black. Newly elected in Atlanta, he was the latest piece of demagogue, garbage politician to be voted into office by an ignorant, uneducated, emotion-laden general public. But no sense in giving his caller another heart attack again by prying further—wasn't any of Jake's business. In the distance, the distinct rumble of a motorcycle approaching caught his ear.

"Despite my own son, the Watie's are a proud Cherokee family, Colonel. A proud American military family. Great Granddaddy was the brother of Cherokee General Stand Watie who fought out in the Indian Territories during the War of Northern Aggression. Granddaddy fought in the Atlanta campaign of sixty-four against that devil Sherman. Daddy fought alongside Teddy Roosevelt as a Rough Rider and I done fought with Patton in Europe. My lazy son, the *Congressman*, and his drugged out, liberal, hippie moron friends protested against our Vietnam vets returning home from the war. That's been his contribution to our military."

There's that animosity again, Jake thought. But the Watie name finally rang a bell. "You're directly related to Stand Watie?" he asked, a bit too excitedly. But he also had the presence of mind to turn on a handy iPhone app he had been using for research purposes. Called Recorder, it allowed him to record phone conversations. With a tap of his finger the recording was on.

"Proud of it," Watie answered.

"Tommy, I'm honored to speak with you," Jake said, sincerely, "as a fellow combat vet." At the same time, the motorcycle sound became louder, closer. The motorcycle was just around the corner now, the familiar old rumble echoing off the row of grass-covered concrete bunkers down his deserted lane. Within seconds, it rounded the bend and Jake caught a glimpse of a white, five-pointed star painted on an olive drab fuel tank. The older model WWII bike headed for Jake. A female rider in a matching olive drab helmet and jacket gave him a wave. He waved back but had to turn his phone off speaker and placed it to his ear to hear better.

"Thank you, Colonel. I do appreciate that. My great granddaddy—brother to Stand—was *murdered* when my granddaddy Thomas Junior was just a baby. Stand was a big influence on Junior's life growing up. After he fought in the Cherokee Mounted Rifles, Stand sent him to Georgia when he was twenty. It was pertaining to Cherokee business during the summer of 1864, but he done got caught by mistake in Adairsville by General McPherson's cavalry. He was let go though—talked his way out of it—sort of like me—I talk too much."

Jake was completely mesmerized by this story. "No. No. Go on, please continue." He pressed the phone harder to his ear as a 1944 U.S. Army Indian Scout motorcycle, in pristine condition, complete with brown leather saddle bags, cruised slowly toward him. His own matching motorcycle sat waiting for him back inside the bunker.

The woman rider gleamed with a big happy smile. Jake ran his hand across his throat in a quick motion, giving the universal sign for her to cut the engine. She frowned as she turned the engine off and let the bike glide in neutral gear toward him. He pointed to his phone and intentionally widened his eyes letting her know it was an important conversation. The

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woman lowered both knee-high, brown leather riding boots to steady her bike, and Jake walked up and planted a nice kiss on her lips. He then raised an index finger to his own lips for her to keep quiet and placed the call back on speaker so she could hear the conversation, too.

“McPherson’s men, who caught my granddaddy, thought he was a spy because they found a waybill on him with Cherokee symbols on it. It’s like a map.”

“Ahhhh,” Jake said, the puzzle pieces starting to fit. “What was it a map *to* if I might ask?”

“None of your business,” Watie shot back.

“Duly noted, sir.” That door quickly slammed shut, Jake surmised.

Rae Hart, Jake’s co-host in *Battlefield Investigators* or, as he dubbed her, his “co-host in crime,” mouthed the word “Wow.” They were in fact a very serious couple, as she liked to express it. They’ve been going strong for well over a year now after a death-filled investigation they both had survived. She took off her olive drab, dual visor, Outlaw half helmet, adorned with a pattern of ghosted skull symbols and hung it on the handlebars. Jake had his eyes glued on her, scanning her lean curvaceous body with probing desire. She reached back and undid her pony tail band, fluffed up her long auburn hair, and flung it over her shoulders while tilting her head toward the phone to listen better. Her sizzling green eyes, framed with long eyelashes and bronze eye shadow, met his. She winked and Jake’s heart skipped a beat.

“But he wasn’t no spy!” shouted Watie, causing Jake to blink back to the call. “And McPherson had no evidence to prove it. Couldn’t very well keep him prisoner. He and his staff couldn’t even read the dadgum waybill. But the general confiscated it. To be *cautionary*, he said. And, in front of my granddaddy and another witness he hid that waybill inside his field hat. The same hat that is now sitting at that museum in West Point. Is that where you’re at now, Colonel?”

“No. No. I’m not at West Point. I’m about four hours away in the central part of New York State. Where are *you* calling from?”

“Savannah, Georgia.”

“Beautiful city. Been there a couple times. Many moons ago. Sooo,”

Jake said, getting back on subject and summarizing for Rae's benefit. "You're claiming your grandfather, Thomas Black Watie Junior, had his Cherokee waybill confiscated by General McPherson and supposedly it's still inside his hat?"

Watie paused. Rae's mouth fell open.

"Well now, yes indeed, that's what I'm claimin'," the old man said. "His hat went missing after Granddaddy shot the general in the back. He knew one of his comrades took it but could never find out which one as lots of 'em ended up being captured by the Yankees during the battle. He thought it was lost for good."

Jake tried to get a word in but Watie kept talking.

"It wasn't until some forty years after the war, in an issue of the Confederate Veteran, that Granddaddy found out it was that captain from Mississippi, Captain William A. Brown, who took the hat. He tracked Captain Brown down all right. Found his grave marker. Already had died in eighteen eighty-nine though, and the hat was long gone. Sold off. Granddaddy searched the rest of his life for that dadgum hat. He sent inquiries out, placed newspaper ads, but never got any replies about it. Even visited Clyde, Ohio once. McPherson's home. And that hat never showed up like the rest of his possessions did. Was obsessed with it. And he passed the story down to us as family legend. My Daddy and I caught the bug, too, and searched and searched most of our lives whenever we had free time. About cost me my marriage. After my dear wife Margaret passed, I about put that hat out of my mind. Until your show last night."

"Wait, could you go back a little?" Jake asked, a bit louder than normal in order to dominate the conversation. "You said your grandfather shot McPherson? I have to take friendly issue with that. Evidence shows that a Corporal Robert Coleman of the 5th Tennessee Infantry Regiment actually made the fatal shot. This is according to eyewitness statements Captain Richard Beard made. He was the Tennessee officer who ordered McPherson to surrender at sword point."

"Colonel, all of us in our family read what Beard claimed. Heck, if you'd have done your homework young man, you'd realize others gave the credit to Robert Compton of the 24th Texans. Compton or Coleman?"

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Doesn't matter. We know it was Thomas Junior who shot him."

"But—," Jake muttered.

Watie spoke louder. "Thomas was known as the *Raven* to his fellow soldiers. He was a sniper armed with the famous Whitworth rifle. And he shot McPherson seconds before any of the other skirmishers got their volley off. All they shot was the horses! I've got the letter my granddaddy wrote to his uncle Stand to prove it. But listen to me, I'm not interested in trying to prove you wrong on this account. Not my beef. Thomas Junior even said others would take credit. He didn't care about that. Matter of fact, he regretted killing the general. Spoke to him before he died, too. McPherson told him the waybill was still inside his hat. Only problem was Captain Brown already took it by the time Junior got to the general. I'm only interested in getting our family property back from inside that hat."

"You're claiming that waybill belongs to *you*?" Jake fired back, clearly miffed after having been schooled in history. "Even if it is still hidden in there after all these years?" Rae placed a hand on his arm to calm him.

"Abso-dadgum-lutely, I'm claiming it as our family property." The old man said excitedly. "On. My. Life."

Jake's eyes darted back and forth. He felt his face flush with rising tension. He had been down this road before—an important family member, another Indian no less—claiming hereditary rights to a newly discovered artifact. Last time this happened a trail of dead bodies ended up all across New York State—even on the ground he was standing on. Correction, *under* the ground he was standing on. He needed to take those lessons learned and approach this right. Looking at Rae, he remembered all too well the horror they went through just over a year ago. She raised a cautionary eyebrow as if reading his mind.

Jake acquiesced, deliberately adjusting his tone to one of friendliness. "Tommy, I'd like to work with you on this. You've been through enough already. I can't have on my conscience anything more happening to your health over this matter. Let's do this together; as partners. If we can find that waybill you speak of, hidden inside the hat, then we can figure out who gets rightful ownership. Does that sound good?"

"*Sound good!?*" Watie angrily shouted through the phone. "Sound

good? How about soundin' like I can *prove* that waybill belongs to me?"

"How so?"

"By the written receipt that McPherson signed when Granddaddy was being held prisoner in Adairsville. He said he could claim that waybill back when the war was over. The general signed it, Granddaddy signed it, and McPherson's orderly signed it, too, as a witness. The war is over and the hat is *back*. I have the receipt. And I *want* what's inside of it."

Jake was stunned. He stammered with a reply. "Okay, sir. I can't beat that. If the waybill is there, and your receipt is authentic, then we have a deal. You have my word. Let me place a call to the West Point Curator of Arms at the museum and we'll get this taken care of right away. They open at ten thirty. I'm not even sure if he's there on Sunday, but I've got your phone number. I'll give you an update as soon as I find anything out and we'll go from there. Okay?"

Uncomfortable silence again. Finally, the old voice replied, "I'll wait for your call." Followed by a click of dead air.

Jake promptly turned off the iPhone app recording the conversation. He looked up and he and Rae stared at each other with mirrored serious expressions. They knew all too well that once a secret of the past was revealed, unexpected consequences soon followed, some good, some deadly but definitely a hidden mystery waiting to be solved.

3

Sunday. 10:45 a.m.

West Point Museum

Highland Falls, New York

DROWNING OUT THE INCESSANT RINGING OF THE West Point Museum curator's office phone was the overbearing, ear-piercing, rhythmic whooping of the building's fire alarm. Coupled with the severe audio warning, was the visual alarm of bright, flashing strobe lights at nearly every corner inside the smoke-filled four levels of one of the nation's premiere military history museums.

Security guards were already scrambling about trying to evacuate the public in practically invisible conditions as thick white smoke billowed from unknown sources. The smoke had started in the sub-basement gallery where large weapons were on display such as a WWI tank, a cannon, even an atomic bomb of the type that was dropped on Nagasaki. The dense smoke rose up and filled the balcony gallery in the basement level, sending most of the security staff down to investigate the source. Their portable radios, rendered useless against the extreme audio conditions, further hampered their abilities to lead panicked patrons to proper exits. Within minutes, the main first floor gallery filled with the same white smoke. It wasn't long before evacuating visitors on the second floor slammed into people on the first floor causing a rush for the exits. Several women screamed in fear thinking their lives were at risk.

In the midst of the mounting chaos, a lone, hunched-over, elderly,

World War II veteran stood calmly leaning on his wooden cane. Wearing a dark gray overcoat over a shabby suit, topped with an old black fedora hat, he was tucked away in the far corner of the first floor gallery. He kept a calculating gaze in front of a wide, seven-foot tall, glass display case that exhibited famous graduates of the West Point Military Academy; among them Civil War generals Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, and James B. McPherson. Soon, he too, became invisible as thick smoke wafted around him. With a darting glance around, he sensed the timing was right.

Reaching inside a coat pocket, he pulled out the last of his smoke grenades and pulled the pin. The grenade was actually a consumer fireworks product made in China of which he had purchased several cases a few years back. It was all plastic, even the pull pin, making it easy to bypass metal detectors. The five-inch tall grenade practically mirrored the same size, shape, grip, and dark green coloring of a WWII U.S. Army issued grenade. What made this smoke screen device especially useful was it did not require ignition with matches or a lighter like a typical fused smoke ball would. The pin the old vet pulled was attached to a short piece of string that created ignition inside a tiny tube at the top of the grenade.

A tongue of flame shot out the top and sizzled for two seconds until making connection with the active ingredient inside. Balls of thick white smoke spewed out, adding to the already smoke-choked first floor. A typical consumer smoke grenade would only burn for a minute. But with some homemade tinkering the vet had inserted special chemicals to have his grenades burn four times longer.

The old vet tossed the grenade in the center of the room and then nonchalantly took his coat off and hung it over his arm. With a lance-like, forceful thrust of his wooden cane he pierced the single-pane glass display case in front of him. Large chunks of glass shattered to the carpeted floor. It was just a split second of crunching, masked perfectly by the fire alarm.

No one heard, saw, nor cared. The surveillance cameras were rendered useless from the smoke. There was no direct video evidence of him actually igniting the last grenade nor shattering the display case.

Placing the curved handle of his cane on the wrist of the arm his coat was draped over—just as he had practiced in his inn room the night

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before—he reached into the display case and snatched an old black hat off the uniformed mannequin portraying General McPherson. The wool felt hat was immediately hidden under his coat and held firmly against his body. He replaced the missing hat on the mannequin with his own fedora, revealing a half-bald, age-spotted scalp of stringy, gray hair.

The general's field hat was the sole item he was hired to obtain in this high-risk, hastily planned endeavor he had agreed to just yesterday. His New York City-based art and antique broker had contacted him with the initial offer in the early hours of Saturday morning. She had been negotiating with an individual who represented the client, a wealthy Civil War collector from Atlanta. After a counter offer, a large, final price was agreed on, amicable to all parties. The hat was apparently priceless in the client's eyes, given the substantial sum of money to be wired into his Cayman Island account upon completion of the job.

Transportation to the job had been quick and easy. An hour cab drive north from the city deposited him at an inn at Highland Falls, home of the West Point Military Academy. He had checked into a first floor room at the West Point Inn & Suites under one of his dozen false identities and paid cash in advance for a two night stay. Saturday afternoon he spent as a visitor and cased the museum.

He snapped pictures with his cell phone, developed a plan, and even implemented part of it before leaving by setting off the fire alarm without being noticed by the many security cameras. Afterward, he learned of the intense auditory stimulation, evacuation procedures, and time accrued for fire response—all key factors to be used to his advantage.

After purchasing a fedora, cane, and overcoat at a hospital thrift shop located in the next little town over, and rounding out other supplies not already in his burglary kit, he waited all night for approval to execute. It was his prerogative when to make the actual theft, whether to pull off one of his signature daylight attacks or whether to try for an after-hours insertion. But he had been told that the deed needed to be done and the hat delivered by Monday night as a gift for the client's birthday party in Atlanta. A hefty cash bonus would await him should he arrive before midnight Monday.

During scouting, he also had observed nighttime motion detectors

throughout the museum. Being on such a tight schedule he opted against an evening insertion. It was best to stick with a plan at which he excelled and was least expected: a theft right under the noses of the public, conducted through a literal smoke screen of deception, disguise, and con artistry.

This Sunday morning's entrance through security was also his first test with a new disguise he recently purchased. It worked like an absolute charm. Especially convincing was the incredibly realistic, silicone, full-head mask that turned him into a crotchety-looking old fart. To conceal his eyes he wore oversized tinted glasses. No one gave him any long looks—well maybe at his somewhat shabby appearance—but nothing was given away on his face.

With today's technology in make-up and special effects materials readily available to the public, almost anyone could be fooled with a disguise. His mask was so life-like that it behaved like real flesh and muscle when he spoke. He first got the idea from reading about a white man who used a black man head mask and pulled off six robberies in Ohio back in 2010. Cops arrested a black man whose face looked exactly like the mask and the suspect's mother even thought it was him on television. The robber would have gotten away with it had he not left the mask lying about in his hotel room where his girlfriend found it along with dyed bank money and turned his ass in.

The old looking thief even made sure his heavily-veined, exposed hands were aged correctly with some foundation blotting. Toss in an American flag and an Army lapel pin and he looked like every other aging WWII veteran that visited the museum—someone who security would least expect.

It also had been a breeze limping through the lobby metal detector with plastic smoke grenades hidden on his body—nothing metal—nothing to set it off. It was his wooden cane, however, that gave him the biggest scare just as he stepped out from under the metal detector.

An overzealous, young security guard confiscated his cane and offered, as an alternative, a specially-provided, disabled person's sit-down scooter to explore the museum with. The thief's superb acting skills then kicked in. Sticking with his disguise personality, he angrily demanded his cane back

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as the only way he could move about the museum.

Refusing to budge one inch, he stood behind the metal detector and held up the visitor line for emphasis. Heads turned as he had raised his gravelly, old voice saying he wanted to walk, not ride in some “damned scooter!” After the security guard put up a weak argument about some national security bullshit about his cane being used as a potential weapon, several people queued up in line behind him, laughed aloud, and urged the guard to give him back his cane. The old vet tried to trump the stubborn guard by citing his rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act. It didn’t work.

Finally, the thief used his patriotic ace-in-the-hole to elicit sympathy. He told the security guard he was a very old WWII Army veteran and Purple Heart recipient who had been surrounded by the Germans at Bastogne, during the Battle of the Bulge, and this was his first and probably last time visiting the museum. The guard questioned what Army unit he was with. After a pause, the old man mumbled the 82nd Airborne. The naive security guard nodded his belief, thanked him for his service and sacrifice, and handed his cane back. The vet gave him a tip of his fedora amid the applause of the other patrons.

With the stolen Civil War hat now in hand, the elderly thief walked quickly—without the limp—to his last two target items. The non-toxic smoke bombs were still holding up well, giving him the time and cover to conceal his movements in the camera-monitored museum. He counted the strides along the way, having memorized the number and path he needed to take from his recon the day before. These next items were purely personal, beyond the scope of the contract, targets of opportunity he had observed during his visit and something he simply needed to take. It was pure obsessive excitement and desire, his addictive high of which he could never get enough of.

On the way into the next room he bumped into a coughing mother and teenage son wandering blindly toward a partially lit exit sign. He yelled for them to keep moving and gave them a little shove in the right direction before continuing his pre-planned steps to the next display case. Just before reaching the corner, he lashed out with his cane and smashed

open two more cases merely to sow confusion.

Even though the West Point Museum housed the oldest and largest public collection of military artifacts in the Western Hemisphere, it was still like most museums across the world with lax or inadequate protection for those priceless items. Budgets were tight, resulting in fewer security cameras for each room. Reduced security staff meant fewer eyes probing visitors' actions and whereabouts. Investing in after-hours motion detection technology was great, but overlooking inferior materials for display cases meant easy pickings for bold professional thieves like himself. All the reasons why he took the risk of a few more minutes to get what he wanted. He knew the game, the rewards, the consequences. Why not go for broke?

Racking up over \$8 billion a year in stolen losses, art theft was a highly lucrative field that offered one of the best risk versus reward ratios for criminal enterprises. For a career choice it beat the hell out of armed robbery, drug dealing, arms trafficking, or money laundering considering hardly any art thieves lost their lives or garnered lengthy prison sentences. And, with the right connections, the payoffs were huge.

The only thing in the back of this thief's mind was this was the first time he ever stole something on U.S. Army property. He didn't know what kind of additional heat that would bring. All the better to get more than just a lousy Civil War hat if he was risking his own neck in the process, because these items would also serve as his "get-out-of-jail-free card." If he was captured down the road after already hiding the prized items, he could negotiate with authorities and say, "Cut me a lesser sentence and I'll reveal where the trophies are."

His payoff was sitting in a waist-high, double-pane glass cabinet now before him. The trophies of WWII from Nazi Germany reflected back at him through the smoke. Among the many items in the case were his two prizes: the famous Lilliput golden pistol of Adolf Hitler and an ivory baton of Hitler's second in command, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring.

He attacked the glass cabinet with a swift wallop of his cane. This time the double-pane glass proved stronger and his cane bounced back. Double-fisting the shaft he slammed the cane down again and broke through the first layer of glass. The cane cracked. A loud burglar alarm instantly

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blended in with the already blaring fire alarm. Two more heavy blows and the cabinet top shattered, along with half the cane. He tossed the other half, its usefulness elapsed.

During yesterday's scouting, when he found out the museum cases were all housed in either single-pane or double-pane glass, it felt like he had hit the jackpot. He had thought with hundreds of billions of dollars in the annual military budget, the Pentagon could at least allocate for shatterproof armored glass as a viable replacement for their treasured items.

Sorry bureaucrats. Your loss.

Hitler's gold plated Lilliput Model I, .32 caliber, semi-automatic pistol was the first item he grabbed. The small wooden box it was housed in made it even easier to take as a whole. It held the palm-sized gold pistol, a gold plated magazine for six bullets, and a gold cleaning brush all nestled in a molded black, velvet-lined interior. The box wasn't even wired down. He simply shut the top and snatched it. The box, no bigger than a thick hardback book, was stuffed inside McPherson's hat, both being concealed by the coat over his arm.

Next was Göering's baton. What a morbid beauty, he thought for a split second. After clutching the foot-long ceremonial baton, he was surprised at how heavy it weighed. It felt about five pounds. The shaft was made of white elephant-ivory embossed with twenty gold eagle insignias and twenty platinum German Iron Crosses. The solid-gold cap ends held bands engraved in platinum and were encrusted with 640 diamonds making this Nazi artifact just as priceless as the pistol. The thief shoved the baton down the front of his pants securing it to a cloth loop he had stitched on the inside of his waistband. The length of the baton stretched down the inside of his pant leg with a bulge making him rival the grotesquely-hung 1970s porn star, John Holmes.

His heart pounding in the thrill of the moment, it was time to leave, but not through the main lobby. It would be too crowded with too many watchful eyes and too many well-wishers wanting to help out an old man. Instead, sticking with his plan, he made for a rear emergency exit he had found during his recon mission. The smoke had dissipated upon reaching the exit. Perfect timing, he thought, as he opened the emergency door and

stepped outside.

Down a walled-in stairwell, he made it to ground level and immediately skirted a trash dumpster. Next, he headed toward some shadowy trees bordering the property's fence line. Lady Luck stuck with him as no one was around on that far side. He quickly made it to the bus parking lot where he squeezed between several charter buses for a breather and observation.

Two fire trucks, a police car, and ambulance were parked outside the concrete car bomb barriers lining the front entrance, their lights flashing. Throngs of visitors were still pouring out the front doors of both the museum and the adjacent visitor's center. Several security guards helped coughing patrons as a team of fully-equipped firefighters with air packs, axes, and a hose line hustled into the museum. Onlookers from the village, like moths drawn to light, also gravitated onto the fenced-in museum property from one of two parking lot entrances on Main Street. Rubbernecker drivers had already clogged the street as a police officer waved at them to keep moving.

While attention focused on the chaos at the entrance, no one noticed an old vet, walking with a different sort of limp, off Army property. He soon disappeared across the road and into his room at the inn.

Three minutes later the true man emerged. Thirty-five year-old Nathan Kull stepped out with a tightly packed backpack of stolen items. Standing at five foot, nine inches with a firm body weighing in at one hundred seventy-five pounds and facial features rivaling any GQ model, he wore black wrap-around sunglasses and a black ball cap, brim angled low. A gray hooded sweatshirt over khaki cargo pants rounded out his casual attire. He hustled over to the small parking lot where his Alamo rental car was parked. Having already rented the nondescript blue four-door sedan yesterday morning after his museum recon, he was all set for a quick getaway. With his travel duffel bag and burglary kit previously placed in the trunk, he wasted no time in getting out of town.

Heading west out of the village, he passed a fast-moving U.S. Army Military Police sports utility vehicle surely headed to the scene of his crime.

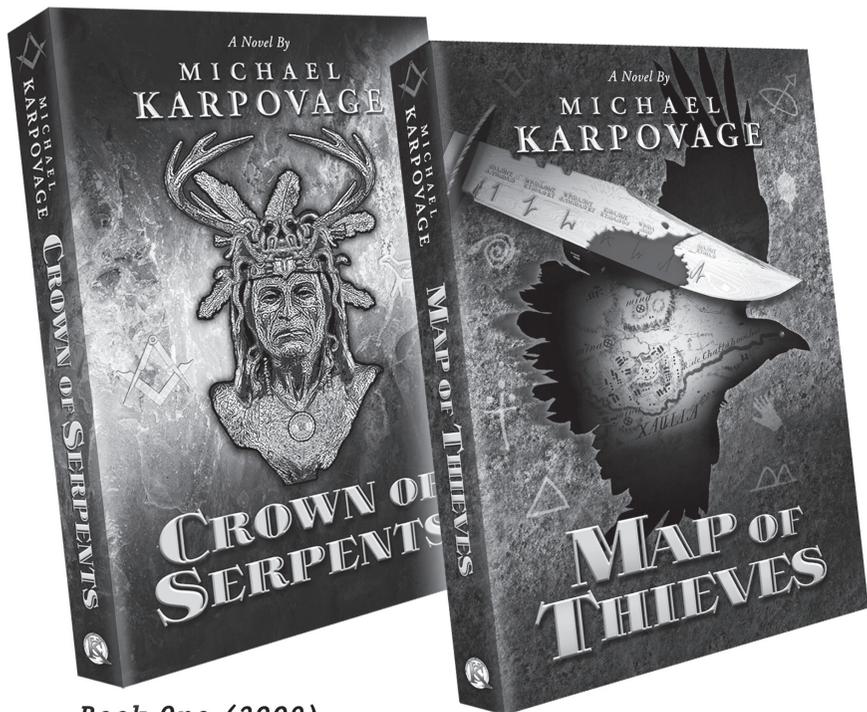
Within ten minutes, he hit Interstate 87 and headed south.

To Atlanta.

I hope you've enjoyed these first three chapters of MAP OF THIEVES and are thoroughly hooked. To learn the rest of the story, purchase the book at MapofThieves.com or Amazon.

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"Betrayal, suspense, and historical fact, brilliantly mixed with present day fiction, make MAP OF THIEVES an intriguing read that is extremely hard to put down." – Paula Howard, reviewer

After discovering a lost Civil War hat from a famous Union general who was shot in the back during the Battle of Atlanta, Freemason military historian Lieutenant Colonel Jake Tununda is shocked to learn a secret waybill may be hidden inside the hat's liner.

Before he can inspect it, the hat and two priceless Nazi artifacts disappear from the West Point Museum in a brazen daytime theft. Jake and his stunning girlfriend, private investigator Rae Hart, head to Savannah to question their main suspect, an aging World War II vet. They soon find themselves targeted for assassination. Even worse, Jake is suspended from the case and the Army itself.

In *Map of Thieves*, a mystery thriller set in the deep South, Jake and Rae team up with Delta Force operative Alex Vann to catch a killer thief and to locate the legendary Cherokee Tunnel—a gold vault in the Georgia mountains that dates back to 1838 and the Trail of Tears. Enter U.S. Congressman Tom Black of Atlanta, one of the dirtiest, most corrupt politicians ever to steal an election. He's also the great grandson of the sniper whose shot killed the Union general. Once privy to what's inside the secret Indian tunnel—*Hernando de Soto's stolen Spanish mining map*—Black will let nothing stand in his way to steal it for himself, including killing his own elderly father.



Map of Thieves author Michael Karpovage is a native of upstate New York and a graduate of Rochester Institute of Technology. Michael is an award-winning map illustrator and principal of Karpovage Creative, Inc. He is a Freemason and lives in Roswell, Georgia. *Crown of Serpents* was his first book in the Tununda Mysteries.

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