

THE STAMP

Alexander Broward turned into the driveway of his grandparents' house and parked. He left his Jeep Cherokee running and lost himself in the quiet hum of the engine. He knew the others were inside waiting on him, but inside that house was the last place he wanted to be.

Alexander's grandparents had both died more than two years earlier, his grandmother first, followed shortly thereafter by his grandfather. Their home was almost exactly as they had left it. Going inside their house now that they were both gone always gave Alexander an uncomfortable feeling, like walking over someone's grave.

The family had been saying since shortly after the deaths that they should go through the house, decide on who was to get what, and clean the place up so it could be sold. No one in the family had a desire to live in the house themselves, as it somehow seemed wrong.

It was as though Alexander's grandparents were still living there unseen, always waiting for someone to come by and visit. But whenever Alexander went inside, the house felt more than just empty. He was sure the home had died with its owners, and was attempting to bury itself one bit of dust at a time.

After nearly two minutes of dreading the inevitable, Alexander shut off the engine and climbed out. Memories lapped across his mind like small waves as he approached the house. It was small and white, like almost every other house on the street. Its open carport still held the cars that were once driven by Alexander's grandparents, and he knew that the smell of his grandmother's peppermints - to which she had been addicted - could probably still be detected inside each of the vehicles. As he approached the front door, his father stepped outside.

"Hey, kid. We've been waiting on you," he said, glancing down at his watch.

"Yeah, sorry Pop. I've been kind of dreading this. I guess I drug my feet a little."

"I know. None of us have been looking forward to it. But the quicker we get started, the sooner we'll be finished."

Both men walked inside, and Alexander immediately felt the surge of uncomfortable nervousness he was expecting. He felt like he was trespassing, even though his grandparents had never expected him to knock before entering their home.

Alexander's father had a younger brother, Tom, who had never married and had no children of his own. The three men mulled around the house, wondering where to start, and little was said for the first half hour. As the day went by, the mood lifted somewhat and they all began talking about the past. Alexander heard stories he had already suffered through countless times, but politely acted as though he were being told something new.

They continued rifling through the small house, organizing the past to the best of their ability, and each new discovery spurred another conversation or story. Alexander only half-listened after a while, and had so far not seen anything that really grabbed his interest. He did not feel especially attached to anything they had uncovered.

Until he found the small, black lockbox on the top shelf of his grandfather's closet. Alexander had no idea what lay hidden in the small metal box, but he knew he wanted it. It was an indescribable feeling of desire.

The feeling only intensified when Alexander's uncle saw a small brass key taped to the bottom of the box. "Do you mind if I open it up and take a look inside?" Alexander asked, eyeing the key.

"That's the only way we'll know what's inside," his uncle replied with a smile. "Give it a whirl."

Alexander peeled the key from the box and inserted it into the lock. A gentle twist produced two clicking sounds, and the lid lifted a fraction of an inch. He sat the lockbox down on the small desk beside the door to his grandfather's closet and finished swinging the lid open. Inside was a small black book. On the cover were the words *Heilige Bibel*. Alexander understood very little German, having only studied the language for two years in high school, but he recognized the inscription 'Holy Bible.'

Why did grandpa have a German Bible locked in a box? Alexander wondered. He stroked the front cover of the small black tome. He could tell that something else rested beneath the Bible, and started to remove the book from the lockbox.

Alexander only caught a brief glimpse of the small booklet that lay at the bottom of the metal box. The moment he removed the German Bible, all the lights in the house went out. The startling effect of the sudden darkness was compounded by the eerie sound of a flock of birds taking flight from a tree

just outside. The birds squawked as though something had spooked them from the comfort of their perches.

“That was different,” Alexander’s uncle said from the darkness of the room. It was now late afternoon, so very little light made its way through the dust-and-grime-covered windows. “I’ll go check the circuit breaker. Sit tight.”

“Thanks,” Alexander replied. “This is a little creepy.”

As his uncle walked out of the room, Alexander’s father called out from the other side of the house. “Everything ok in there, Alexander?”

“Yeah, Pop. Tom’s checking the circuit breaker.”

After a moment that felt more like an entire afternoon, the lights flickered back to life. Alexander heard his uncle yell “bingo!” from the utility room. He smiled and peered inside the lockbox. Resting inside, no longer hidden by the Bible, was a small booklet that appeared to be very old. Its cover depicted a column of soldiers marching off into the distance, with bombers and fighters flying overhead. The booklet was titled “Stamps of World War II: The European Campaign,” and the year 1945 was typed at the bottom of the booklet’s cover.

Alexander picked up the small pamphlet and thumbed through its pages, which had postage stamps pasted inside small squares. Some of the squares held no stamp, and showed a picture of the stamp that was to fill that space. *I guess whoever this belonged to never got around to finishing the collection,* Alexander thought as he continued turning the pages.

When he reached a page roughly half way through the booklet, a stamp fell out and landed face-up on the small table that still held the metal lockbox. Alexander looked down at the stamp and then at the pages from which it had fallen. All the squares were full. A closer inspection revealed that the two pages contained German stamps, many of them depicting Adolf Hitler. Alexander picked up the loose stamp from the table and brought it closer to his face.

What the hell? he thought as he peered at the stamp. It was almost identical to the other Hitler stamps in the booklet, but something did not look right about the man’s face. As Alexander looked closer, he realized that an image of a skull had been overlaid on Hitler’s head to make him appear dead. *Why would the German government print that?* he thought as he placed the stamp back in the crease of the book.

Alexander’s father and uncle walked into the bedroom, and he held up the stamp collection booklet. “This is a collection of U.S. and European stamps

during World War II. You guys know I love collecting stuff, so would anyone mind if I kept it? I'd love to complete the collection if that's still possible."

"You're not gonna sell the stamps on Ebay, are you?" Alexander's uncle asked with a sly smile.

"Hell no," Alexander replied.

Alexander's father slapped his younger brother on the back of the head.

"Of course you can have it, son. Your uncle meant to say, 'yeah, of course you can keep it.' But he's stupid, so he messed it up."

That earned Alexander's father an elbow in the ribs.

"Were that Bible and stamp booklet both in the lockbox?" his father asked while rubbing his side.

"Yeah."

"Well, they both meant something to whoever owned them. Why don't you just keep it all together in case one of the old folks in the neighborhood knows the story behind it?"

"Sounds good, Pop. Thanks," Alexander replied. He placed both items back into the metal box and secured the lock. He wasn't sure why, but somehow he knew the Bible and the stamp booklet had to remain together. He shivered as he placed the key to the lockbox in his pocket.

Alexander obsessed over the contents of the metal lockbox for the remainder of the weekend, but left it sitting undisturbed on the mantle in his apartment. He did not want a repeat of what had happened the first time he opened that box. He knew it was crazy, but he was sure it had somehow caused the lights to go out in his grandparents' house. And the ominous feeling that crept into the room while the lockbox was open could not be denied. Something was odd about the whole thing.

By Monday morning, Alexander's mind was so occupied by the stamp collection that he called in sick to work. He had to find someone knowledgeable enough to shed some light on those stamps. The one loose stamp, which depicted Hitler with a skeletal overlay, stood out in his mind in particular. He had to know everything about that stamp.

A few phone calls to the post office, as well as local card and coin shops, netted Alexander the name he needed. A very helpful post office clerk had given him the address to Midtown Collectibles, owned by a man named John Trawick. The post office clerk had referred to Mr. Trawick as a well-respected “philatelist”, but Alexander had no idea what that meant. He had been too embarrassed to ask the lady, so he simply trusted that John would be able to provide him with some insight.

Alexander approached the door to Midtown Collectibles. The front windows were cluttered with posters depicting various sports cards, collectible card games, stamps, and any other item that a human being may have a desire to hide in a box. Even the front door had not escaped the owner’s passion for clutter, as it too was covered almost completely in posters and small advertisement cards.

A bell overhead rang as Alexander opened the door, and was followed by John Trawick’s voice. “Welcome to Midtown Collectibles. How can I help you?”

Alexander closed the distance between the door and the counter, which was as cluttered as the front windows, and noted Mr. Trawick’s size. Alexander was pretty sure the owner never strayed far from his seat at the counter, as that would require movement. He seemed very nice, though, so Alexander pushed it from his mind and gave a warm smile.

“I was hoping you could shed a little light on something for me,” Alexander said as he placed the black lockbox on the counter. “I was helping clean out my grandparents’ house, and I found something interesting.”

“I hope fluorescent light will be good enough for you,” John said with a chuckle. “Not much sunlight makes it through those windows.”

Alexander laughed and looked back at the windows. “At least you don’t spend a lot on glass cleaner.”

John laughed and patted the lockbox. “Let’s see if you can challenge me.”

Alexander hesitated before turning the key. Were the lights going to go out when he removed the German Bible this time? He knew something was not altogether right about the contents of the box, so was he willing to take the risk of getting fully involved?

His curiosity won the inner battle and he opened the box.

“Do you have any candles or flashlights in here?” Alexander asked as he reached down and lifted the Bible from the lockbox.

John lifted an eyebrow, wondering what Alexander was talking about, but no further explanation was necessary. The lights kept burning.

“That looks like a German Bible, but I’m afraid I won’t be much help. I don’t really do books,” John said. He furrowed his eyebrows and seemed a little disappointed.

“The Bible was just kept in the same box. My real question has to do with the stamps in this collection pamphlet,” Alexander said. He removed the small booklet and held it up.

“Ah. Now we’re on my home turf,” John said as he took the booklet and turned it over in his hands. “These World War II booklets aren’t all that rare, but they’ll fetch thirty or forty dollars most of the time. That’s not including the value of any stamps that may be inside.”

“My question is about one stamp in particular,” Alexander said. He took the pamphlet back from John and turned it to the page with the loose stamp, then laid the open booklet down on the glass countertop and pointed to the stamp in question.

“It looks like someone had a spare 1944 Hitler Head and just placed it in the book with the other German stamps,” John said. He picked it up with a small pair of tongs and rotated the stamp in the light.

“Wait.” John’s eyebrows rose as he brought the stamp closer to his face. “This isn’t a 1944 Hitler Head. This is an OSS counterfeit with the deaths-head overlay. Now this is something special!”

Alexander was leaning closer now, his interest piqued even more so than before.

“What’s an OSS counterfeit? And what’s a deaths-head overlay? Are you talking about the skull graphics printed over Hitler’s image?”

“Exactly.” John turned the stamp around so he could show Alexander the details. “This stamp wasn’t printed by the Nazi government like the rest of the Hitler Head stamps you see in the book. It was printed in Switzerland by the OSS, or Office of Strategic Services. The OSS was a U.S. intelligence agency that later became the CIA. They were into espionage, sabotage, and psychological operations. Spooky stuff.”

John brought the counterfeit down close to the other Hitler Head stamps. “You can see that they recreated an exact copy of the Hitler Head stamps printed by the Nazis, but with two subtle differences. The counterfeit has a faint skull overlay to make Hitler look dead, and the inscription below his head has been changed.”

“Ah, ok,” Alexander replied. “I hadn’t even noticed the difference in the inscriptions. My German is really bad. What do they mean?”

“It’s pretty clever,” John said, glancing up from the stamps. “The authentic stamp reads ‘Deutsches Reich,’ which means German Empire. The counterfeit reads ‘Futsches Reich,’ which means Lost Empire.

“Nice,” Alexander replied with a smile. “Let me guess. They were trying to undermine German morale with these not-so-flattering counterfeits?”

“Yeah, but it was a lot more complex than that. Don’t ask me why, but it was called Operation Cornflakes. Yeah, I know. Stupid name.” He returned the stamp to the booklet and leaned on the glass counter.

“You see, they didn’t just introduce bogus stamps into the German postal system. They introduced entire counterfeit letters and government notices into their postal system, using these stamps that you see here.”

“How did they manage that?” Alexander asked. “Did they just have someone take them to a German post office?”

John shook his head and smiled. “Wouldn’t have worked. The German postal clerks would’ve seen the stamps and blown the whole plan. The OSS had to get this stuff into the German postal system without involving the people who processed letters and applied the cancellation markings on the stamps.”

“Cancellation markings?”

“It’s the ink stamp placed on an envelope and stamp to keep you from being able to re-use that stamp. It shows the office that processed the letter, along with the date.”

“Ok,” Alexander said. “I know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, they devised the cleverest plan I’ve ever heard of in my life. Along with counterfeiting the letters, envelopes and stamps, they also counterfeited the cancellation stamps and applied them to their propaganda letters. That’s what this was all about - getting propaganda to the German people through their country’s own mail system. It seriously undermined

confidence in the government and allowed them to make it look as though certain government agencies were attempting to subvert the Nazi regime.”

John leaned back in his seat and folded his arms. “Anyway, the OSS coordinated with the Army Air Corp for this one. The Army would bomb a German train destined for wherever they needed the propaganda to go, but they’d make sure that the mail car was only slightly damaged. They needed the car to be damaged enough to scatter mail bags all over the place, but not damaged to the point that everything was a total loss.”

He leaned on the glass counter again. “This is where it gets good. Right after the fighter/bombers disabled the train and damaged the mail car, another plane would fly over the scene and drop mailbags, which were full of the counterfeit material, in the same place where all the legitimate bags were lying scattered on the ground. When the Germans came to recover the mail and carry it to its destination, they picked up the counterfeit bags along with the real stuff. They were delivering our propaganda for us and didn’t even know it.”

Alexander laughed. “That’s awesome. Did they get away with it for very long?”

“Yeah, a lot of trains were bombed as part of this operation and tens of thousands of counterfeit letters were delivered. It went on for months, but the Germans eventually figured it out. They were able to round up most of the counterfeit letters and stamps, which they destroyed, so not that many still exist.”

He pointed down at the counterfeit stamp. “The adhesive gum on the back of yours is mottled, meaning it was used at some point and isn’t considered mint anymore. But it’s still worth about three hundred dollars to the right buyer.”

“I think I’ll hang onto it,” Alexander replied. He looked down at the stamp and was silent for a moment. “I’m pretty sure this all belonged to my grandfather.” He looked back up at John. “But can I pay you for your trouble? You’ve been a big help.”

John raised his hands. “Pay me for giving me the opportunity to look at a Hitler Deaths-Head stamp? Not a chance, friend. I should probably pay you.”

Alexander reached out and shook John’s hand. “You’re really kind, Mr. Trawick. I appreciate all the information.”

“It’s definitely my pleasure,” John replied. He closed the collection booklet and handed it across the counter to Alexander. “Any time you have a

stamp or coin you need someone to look at, please come by. I live for this stuff.”

“You can count on it,” Alexander said while placing the booklet and Bible back into the lockbox and securing the lid. He thanked the man again as he walked out of the store.

Alexander sat in his car for a moment before starting the engine. *I have to find someone who's still alive that knows the story behind that stamp.*

A quick call to his father later that afternoon got Alexander the information he needed. His father told him that no one had known his grandparents better than Ms. Beth, the old lady who lived two houses down. And no one had a better memory. Even at ninety-plus, her mind was as sharp as that of any thirty-year-old. She also placed a lot of value on information concerning other people. Gossip was to Ms. Beth as treasure was to a dragon.

Alexander looked up Beth Taylor's number in the phone directory and gave her a call. She did not say as much, but her tone made Alexander believe that she was familiar with the lockbox - possibly even the story behind its contents. She seemed reluctant, but eventually agreed to meet with him the following day and discuss the matter.

Looks like I'll be calling in sick again tomorrow, Alexander thought as he hung up the phone and eyed the black metal box. He wanted to open it and look at the stamp again, but something in the back of his mind - some primitive instinct - kept him from doing so. The lights in the stamp and coin shop had not gone out when he opened the box, but he still did not trust it completely. He still believed something was amiss with what had been hidden away in that small box for so many years.

When Alexander awoke, he was standing in front of the mantle, covered in sweat. The sound of birds squawking and taking flight outside had startled him from his upright slumber. He was disoriented for a moment, but finally regained his composure and realized where he was standing. He did not remember getting out of bed, let alone walking to the fireplace. The metal lockbox lay open in front of him, and the German Bible was sitting beside it, leaving the stamp booklet exposed inside the box.

As he reached down to pick up the booklet, he thought he heard a raspy voice whisper the word 'lugen' from somewhere in the house. The voice had been accompanied by a scratching noise, like someone carving something into a wall.

"Hello?" Alexander asked with a shaky voice. "Who's in here?"

I have to turn the lights on, he realized. The only light in the room was that provided by the moonlight seeping through the curtains. It cast an eerie glow on everything it touched, adding to Alexander's feeling of uneasiness.

He stepped carefully over to the light switch and flipped it up.

Nothing.

His panic rising like bile, he glanced over at the clock on his VCR. The little screen, which normally displayed the time in green LED, was black. The lights were out.

The scratching noise again.

"Lugen," whispered again by something with a dead, raspy voice. Something full of malice.

I'm going crazy, Alexander thought as he stood frozen in his living room. *Since it's not possible that this is actually happening, I'm going crazy. I just have to go find the circuit breaker so I won't have to be crazy in the dark.*

He heard no other sounds as he tip-toed to the laundry room and fumbled around for the circuit breaker. *I have to buy a damned flashlight*, he whispered to the darkness.

A flip of the main breaker did the trick. Alexander heard the house hum back to life, and saw a glow from the living room, where he had flipped up the light switch. *Thank God*, he thought as he walked back across the apartment.

Alexander placed the Bible back in the lockbox, secured the lid, and carried it to his bedroom. He placed the box under his mattress and the key in the drawer of his nightstand. *Please let this work*, he thought as he crawled back in bed.

But he did not sleep.

At eight o'clock the following morning, Alexander called Ms. Beth to confirm their appointment. He had not slept, and waiting to call her had been difficult. He had consumed copious amounts of coffee in an attempt to clear his head, and now had the jitters.

Ms. Beth had sounded as reluctant as the day before, if not more so, as though she had hoped that Alexander would forget the whole thing. She agreed to meet with him at ten that morning, however, and Alexander jumped in the shower to get ready.

Alexander walked up the steps to the small white house, which looked almost identical to that of his grandparents. He had never seen a neighborhood where the term 'cookie cutter' applied so well.

"Good morning," Alexander said to the short, hunched old lady when she opened the door. "Thank you so much for meeting with me today."

"It's my pleasure, Alexander. I haven't seen you since you were little. Looks like that father of yours managed to do a pretty good job with you." She opened the door a little wider and motioned for him to come inside.

Alexander noted that she seemed a lot warmer in person than she had on the phone, and smiled as he walked through the front door.

Ms. Beth had set out a tray of cookies, two coffee cups and a pot of coffee in her living room. She asked him to have a seat on the floral-patterned couch, and she sat in the high-backed chair that sat at the end of the coffee table.

She stared at the metal box that Alexander had set beside him on the couch. "That was supposed to have been buried," she said in a low tone, as though she were talking to herself.

"Pardon?" Alexander asked, pausing as he brought the coffee cup to his lips. "Who was supposed to bury it?"

"Your grandfather," she replied. "He promised he would, and until now I'd believed him." She sat her coffee cup down and folded her hands in her lap. "But it doesn't look as though it's been living in the dirt for fifty years."

Alexander sat his coffee cup down as well. "No ma'am, I found it at the top of my grandfather's closet. It doesn't look like it was ever in the ground. But why was he supposed to bury it?"

Ms. Beth looked up quickly from the box to Alexander, as though a thought had startled her from a daze. “Did you find the key? Have you already opened it?”

“The key had been taped to the bottom of the box. I’ve opened it a few times.” Alexander did not elaborate concerning what had happened on two of those occasions, or that he had apparently opened it once without even being aware of what he was doing.

“Then it’s already too late,” she replied, dropping her eyes.

Alexander fidgeted in his seat. “Too late for what? I know you know something’s wrong with the stuff inside that box. So please tell me. What happened, and who did it belong to?”

Ms. Beth sat quietly for a moment, but then seemed to drop her shoulders a little, as though she had surrendered to something. “Telling you won’t help, but I don’t guess it’ll hurt, either.”

“Please, Ms. Beth. I need to know what this is all about.”

She picked up her coffee cup again and took a sip, seeming to have relaxed a little. Or maybe her calm was from resignation more than comfort.

“That box and everything in it belonged to your great uncle - your grandfather’s older brother - before he died.”

“No one ever really talked about him,” Alexander said while reaching for his own cup. “I know his name was Arthur Broward, and that’s the extent of it. I think he fought in World War II, but I’m not even sure about that part.”

Ms. Beth nodded her head as she finished taking a sip of coffee. “That’s correct. He fought in Europe, survived the ordeal, and returned home after the war. Your grandfather got him a job at the mill where he worked, but it didn’t last long.”

“Why not?”

“He had some problems. A lot of people said he was mentally unstable - that the war had messed him up. It messed him up, alright, but not in the way everyone thought. Your great uncle wasn’t crazy.”

“What was wrong then? And what happened to him after he came back home?”

“He was dead within a year,” she replied. She stared off into space.

“Why? Did he pick up a disease while in Europe, or get hurt?”

Ms. Beth looked back over at Alexander. “No one ever told you?”

“Like I said, no one ever talked about Uncle Arthur. I guess it never occurred to me to ask about him. I just never really thought about it.”

“Sweetie, your Uncle Arthur shot himself.”

Alexander stared at the old woman for a moment, not knowing what to say. “Why?” he finally asked.

Ms. Beth nodded at the box. “The answers are all in there.” Her expression turned sour and she turned her head to look away.

Alexander was becoming agitated with the cryptic side-stepping. “The *questions* are all in there. I haven’t found a single answer yet, which is why I’m here. Please tell me what this is all about.”

Ms. Beth continued looking off to the side. Her eyes were becoming red, as though she were about to cry.

“What does the word Lugen mean?” Alexander finally asked, not sure why.

When Ms. Beth whipped her head around, Alexander was not sure if the look on her face was anger, shock or fear. Possibly a combination of them all.

“Where did you hear that?” She asked, almost spitting the words out.

“Please tell me what it means,” he replied, returning her hard stare.

Ms. Beth sighed, again allowing her shoulders to sag. When she looked up at him, Alexander was sure he saw pity in her eyes.

“Lugen is German for ‘lies.’ Your great uncle claimed to hear someone whispering that word in his bedroom. Shortly after he started hearing the voice at night, he shot himself. Now please tell me. Where did you hear that word?”

She did not have to wait for Alexander’s reply to know the answer. The color had drained from his face, and he was shaking visibly.

“In my apartment last night,” he replied. “Whatever happened to Uncle Arthur may be happening to me. You have to tell me everything. Please.”

Ms. Beth reached over and took Alexander's hand. "I'm sorry for scaring you, sweetie. I'll tell you what I know."

April 16, 1945

A village outside Nuremberg, Germany

Arthur Broward approached the small cottage that was nestled between a dry creek bed and a rock outcropping. Black birds fluttered between the trees surrounding the house and the windowsills. They pecked at the windows, fluttered against the window panes, and acted as though they desperately wanted inside the small cottage.

As Arthur neared the home, the birds detected his approach and took flight, crowing in protest.

He did not want to enter the cottage, but his Captain had sent him to investigate the property. Most of the houses in this district had been abandoned as the Allied forces entered the area, but there were a few holdouts that had to be accounted for. The U.S. Army did not want any surprises as they continued their advance into Nuremberg proper.

Arthur brought the M1 Garand rifle to his shoulder and peered through the window. Everything was dark inside, so he could not make out any detail. He heard a scratching noise coming from within, but assumed that a few of the birds had found a way inside.

The smell was horrendous.

Arthur knew the last place he wanted to be was inside that house. Something was seriously wrong inside. He also knew that if he missed something important and it was later discovered, his Captain would make him pay dearly.

He mustered his courage and tried to ignore the smell as he pushed on the front door.

The door swung open, and Arthur was assaulted by the smell within. He had thought it was horrendous from outside, but inside it was like an olfactory hell. He searched just inside the door for a light switch without thinking, and then remembered that most of the homes in this area had no electricity.

He unclipped his flashlight from his belt, turned it on, and pointed it into the house.

What he saw crouched at the wall on the far side of the room did not seem human. He once had been, but no longer qualified as such. His body was more than thin. It was a skeleton draped loosely in mottled skin. He was crouching like an animal, scratching something on the wall.

Arthur strained his eyes, trying to read what the man was writing. Once his eyes had adjusted to the dim illumination provided by the flashlight, he saw that the crazed man had scratched the words *Sie ermordeten sie mit Lügen* on the wall. Arthur quickly translated the phrase in his head. His German was weak, but adequate. *You murdered her with lies*. He had not just written the passage once. Panning his flashlight around the room, Arthur saw that the man had scrawled the words on almost every square inch of the walls.

“Are you ok? Can I help you?” Arthur finally said to the man, who had not turned from the wall.

The man’s withered hand stopped writing. After a long pause, he turned his head, as though in slow motion, until he was looking in Arthur’s direction.

“I’m a soldier in the U.S. Army. Do you speak English?” Arthur asked, fighting the urge to run.

The emaciated man’s eyes widened, a look of rage washing across his face. He jumped from his crouched position, but was still hunched, as though unable to fully straighten his body. He ran toward Arthur, too fast for someone in his physical condition.

In his left hand he clutched what appeared to be an envelope and was waving it in front of his face. He stopped several feet in front of Arthur and continued to shake the envelope in angry movements, as though it were a weapon.

He did not say anything at first, and was panting, attempting to catch his breath. He was drooling and crying hysterically. Finally, he looked back up at Arthur with a burning hatred. The malice glowed in his eyes.

“*Sie ermordeten sie mit Lügen!*“ he growled, still waving the envelope. “*Sie ermordeten sie mit Lügen!*“ His madness made him sound more like an animal than a man.

Arthur remained frozen in place, not sure what to say or do. The man had clearly lost his mind, and could quickly become a threat despite his emaciation. After a long moment, during which the man repeatedly mumbled the same statement, Arthur spoke again.

“You have to come with me, sir. I can get you some help.” Arthur lowered his rifle to show that he meant the man no harm, and repeated himself. This time more slowly.

The man stopped mumbling and looked up at Arthur, drool still running down his face.

Arthur found it a bit unnerving when the man smiled. “Sie ermordeten sie mit Lügen,” he repeated, this time with a calm, matter-of-fact tone. He turned and walked toward the kitchen counter. Arthur noted that he was walking toward a set of large knives. When he heard the man mumble “jetzt töte ich Sie,” he raised his rifle to his shoulder. He had no trouble understanding the meaning of that last statement - *Now I kill you.*

As Arthur had feared, the man took one of the larger knives from the set and turned around. He charged, screaming *You murdered her with lies* again as he advanced.

Arthur had no choice. He could not risk allowing the man to reach him with the knife. He pulled the trigger of his M1 Garand rifle and the weapon rocked heavily against his shoulder. Red spray littered the room behind the German as the bullet passed through his head. The dead, emaciated man slumped to the ground in a lifeless heap. The envelope was still clutched in his left hand. The knife skittered away to the other side of the room.

Arthur knew he was going to be sick. He took off running toward the bathroom, but upon walking through the door, wished he had gone outside to empty his stomach. He had found the source of the stench.

The remains of a woman lay in the bathroom tub, and the state of her decay indicated that she had been there for several weeks.

In her left hand, she clutched a small letter. She held a pistol in her right. A Bible sat on the rim of the tub beside her shoulder. The blood spatter on the wall behind her slumped head, along with the wound clearly visible above and in front of her ear, left no doubt concerning the cause of death.

I guess she didn't find an answer to her problems in the Bible, Arthur thought as he stared at the gruesome scene.

He felt numb. Even the sick feeling in his stomach no longer registered. Without asking himself why he would bother, he removed the small letter from the dead woman's fingers, picked up the Bible, and placed the letter inside the front cover. He clutched the book and left the bathroom. As he approached the front door, intent on getting as far away from the cottage as his legs would carry him, he looked down at the German he had been forced to kill.

It occurred to Arthur that the German man had been waving the envelope that once contained the letter he had retrieved from the dead woman. Arthur's instincts told him that the woman in the bathtub had been the man's mother. And he had just murdered her son.

He took the letter from his victim's hand, slipped it into the Bible with the letter, and ran out of the cottage.

Ms. Beth sighed and leaned back into her chair. She looked older now than she had before telling the story of Uncle Arthur.

"Your uncle brought that Bible back home with him after the war. But he put it in a drawer and didn't touch it for a long time. After a while, though, he took it back out."

"What made him think of it?" Alexander asked, trying to make sense of the story he had just been told.

"He wanted the stamp from that envelope for a collection he had started," Ms. Beth replied. "Guilt also played a part in it. He said it had been gnawing at him. He had never read the letter that lay hidden in that Bible, but something had told him to do so. Eventually, he gave in."

"What does it all mean, though? What does the letter have to do with Uncle Arthur's death?"

"Everything, sweetie. After Arthur translated the letter, he knew what the German man had meant by '*you murdered her with lies*'."

Alexander sat forward in his seat. "What did he mean?"

Ms. Beth sat up straight again. "There was something during World War II called Operation Cornflakes."

Alexander interrupted. "I'm familiar with it. Someone just gave me all the details yesterday."

"Then you know it involved a lot of counterfeit government letters using counterfeit stamps."

"Yes ma'am," Alexander replied.

“Well, some of those counterfeit letters were death notices. The U.S. got its hands on the German Army’s death notice registry, which contained the addresses for all the soldiers’ next of kin. When a soldier died, a death notice was drafted and sent to the appropriate address.

“Normally, our government only targeted people whose son had actually died. They would send them propaganda, figuring the loss of their child in a hopeless war would make them easy targets. It would be easy to turn them against their own government.

“But eventually they got overzealous. They figured they would create their own easy targets by counterfeiting death notices for people whose sons were not actually dead. I guess their thinking was that, by the time they discovered the truth, the damage would be done.”

Alexander sat back in his chair. “Let me guess. The woman Uncle Arthur found in the tub had received one of those counterfeit notices.”

“Right,” she replied. “And Arthur’s best guess was that she had committed suicide after learning the news, or supposed news, of her son’s death in the war. At some point after that, the son evidently came home and found his mother dead in the bathtub.

“It would seem he noticed the counterfeit stamp on the envelope, was possibly aware of what the U.S. government was doing with the mail, and figured out that his mother was the victim of a cruel ruse.”

“That would explain why he kept saying ‘you killed her with lies,’” Alexander replied. He looked down at the metal box again.

“It would,” Ms. Beth replied. She glanced at the box as well, but then averted her eyes.

“But why would that lead Uncle Arthur to kill himself?” Alexander asked. He looked from the box to Ms. Beth. “Would that knowledge alone lead a man to that sort of end?”

“Everyone said the war had driven your uncle crazy. They said he had seen too much and couldn’t take it. But they got it wrong.”

She looked down at the metal box again, a glaze of bitterness in her eyes. “Something followed Arthur home with that stamp,” she said after a moment.

“That sounds a little far-fetched,” Alexander said, looking away from the woman.

“Look at me,” she replied.

He did as he was told.

“If you had a reason to ask me the meaning of the word *Lugen*, then you know it’s not far-fetched.”

“So how do you know it was the stamp, and not the letter?” Alexander asked.

“Arthur burned the letter and envelope, thinking they were the cause of his problems. That only made things worse. Only the stamp and the Bible remained, and I have a hard time believing the Bible would be at the root of this sort of evil.”

“Evil?”

“Yes. Hitler was the embodiment of evil. I don’t know much about such things, but I believe his image on that stamp, combined with the hatred and pain caused by what that stamp helped accomplish, created something that doesn’t go away too easily.

“You can call me crazy. Hell, I’m old enough to be senile anyway. But I think that stamp absorbed the hatred and malice of that woman’s son. Hatred and malice was all that was left of the poor man when Arthur found him, and it passed to that stamp when the German soldier fell dead on the floor. That’s the only way I’ve been able to make sense of it.”

Alexander only nodded.

Ms. Beth stared at him for a moment before continuing. “Whatever followed Arthur back tormented him. He said it would start in the middle of the night. It was like he was back in that little cottage outside Nuremberg, and the woman’s son wanted him dead. Wanted Arthur to die like he and his mother had died.”

Alexander leaned forward and looked down at his hands. They were shaking. “So what do I do?”

“You get rid of that damned box, along with everything in it, like your grandfather was supposed to do. I guess he never opened it himself, since he never seemed to suffer from anything like Arthur did. But by keeping it around, it looks like he’s dragged you into the nightmare.”

“How do you know so much about all this?” Alexander asked without looking up.

“Arthur told me everything. We loved each other, and we were to be married once he built up a nest egg. I never bothered with another man after he killed himself. I’ve been alone ever since. I guess whatever lives inside that box ruined two lives.”

Alexander looked up and saw that Ms. Beth was on the verge of crying. He wanted to spare her the indignity of going through such emotions in front of another person, so he decided it was time for him to go. He had what he had come for.

“Ms. Beth, I know it was hard for you to talk about all this. Thank you.”

“You’re practically family, Alexander. Or should have been, anyway. It was the least I could do.”

As Ms. Beth and Alexander reached the front door, she gave him a hug. “You bury that box,” she whispered into his ear, holding back tears.

“I will,” he whispered back. “Thank you.”

Alexander heard the door click shut as he walked away. Before he reached the steps leading down from the front porch, he heard Ms. Beth sobbing inside the house.

Alexander returned to his apartment a little before sundown. After leaving Ms. Beth’s house, he had driven around, wondering what to do with the metal lockbox. He knew he should find a place to bury it, but for some reason could not force himself to commit to the idea. Surrendering to the thought of burying the box felt like telling a field surgeon to go ahead and remove the gangrenous leg.

He walked into his apartment and went straight to bed. Before turning out the lights, he placed the lockbox under his mattress and sat the key in the drawer of his nightstand.

Tomorrow. He would be able to part with the box then.

“Sie ermordeten sie mit Lügen,” a voice said from the darkness of Alexander’s bedroom. The scratching noises were almost rhythmic. Alexander was awake, but did not open his eyes. He knew who was in the room.

“Sie ermordeten sie mit Lügen,“ the voice repeated.

Alexander finally opened his eyes. He was crouched in front of the wall, holding a black marker. He realized the voice had been his own.

He looked back toward his bed. In the dim moonlight, he could see the open lockbox sitting atop his bedspread.

“Sie ermordeten sie mit Lügen,“ he repeated, continuing to write on the wall.

Alexander thought about the German Luger P08 pistol that sat in his nightstand. The one his grandfather had given him a few years before passing away. He wasn't sure how his grandfather had acquired the small handgun, though he had an idea.

But he did not need the pistol right now. Not yet.