

## Prologue

Paris, France, Winter, 1941

Klaus Wilhelm Rettke knew he could be shot for what he was about to do. Still, he would not be dissuaded. He exited the *Hôtel de Crillon*, headquarters of the German army, and set out to navigate the *Place de la Concorde*. Despite the December chill, the package he'd hidden in his inner pocket gave him a warm rush of exhilaration, a toxic blend of euphoria and apprehension.

Across the huge impressive square of seventeenth and eighteenth century buildings, Rettke's destination appeared small and insignificant. He stepped into the crosswalk. Paris's five and six-way intersections infuriated him. He half-ran, half-jogged to reach the opposite side. Horns blared, brakes squealed while the local pedestrians seemed oblivious of the din. He patted the treasure in his coat and darted across the final bridge over the Seine. At last, Rettke stood on the steps of the *Musée du Jeu de Paume* and exhaled a plume of vapor, along with a frisson of fear. He was not in the clear yet.

He gazed at the stately entry of pillars and glass. Long the premier gallery for exhibitions of contemporary art, the *Jeu de Paume* now served as a storehouse for thousands of displaced paintings from all over Europe. Confiscated from the Rothschilds and the Bernheims, the Schlosses and the Weills, to Rettke most were worthless, like the Picassos. Bah. But there were those noteworthy pieces. By Monet, Vuillard, and Degas, yes, but the most extraordinary by far, Vincent Van Gogh. Slashes of bold color, lavish, almost careless brush strokes, ethereal light, shadows within shadows. An artist meant for immortality.

Rettke glanced over his shoulder at the city. Patches of snow glittered like pearls on the winter lawns of the *Jardin des Tuileries*. Beyond, the graceful curves of *La Tour d'Eiffel* leaned against a leaden sky.

Inside, the museum buzzed with scores of staffers darting to and fro like worker bees in a field of sunflowers. They wheeled around dollies of wooden crates, their destinations stamped in black ink on the side. They scribbled on clipboards and answered phones that never ceased ringing on government-issue desks placed haphazardly in the great hall.

Rettke steered clear of them and proceeded to the rear gallery. At the entrance, a National Labour guard clicked his black-booted heels and raised an arm in salute. The soldier, barely eighteen, wore shirt and pants of olive-drab wool, a red swastika band wrapped neatly around his left arm. Rettke could feel the package burning a hole in his skin as the man examined his identification. Every day the guard saw him, every day the guard demanded his papers. Rettke was tempted to argue; however, today of all days he could not afford to be contrary.

He entered the Room of Martyrs. One of the larger galleries in the Museum, it boasted fourteen-foot ceilings, gilded moldings and rich oak floors covered with muted Persian rugs. It was aptly named, for the room was crowded with hundreds of paintings, each relinquishing its life to the Third Reich.

Dozens of easels had been consigned to display even more works: oils, charcoals, water colors, stacked one in front of another. Paul Cezanne's *Self-Portrait*, and *Woman in White* by Berthe Morisot. Colors, forms, angles, light. Every time Rettke entered the Room, his heart sped as if on nitroglycerin, a drug he sometimes used for angina.

On a large wooden desk in the far corner of the room, he unpacked the equipment that waited for him every day in that very place: camera, lenses, tripod, film packages. Rettke's

official job was to photograph and archive confiscated art. And he was good at it, in fact, considered one of the finest photographers in Europe, ahead of his time in the latest technological advances.

He pulled out a log book and jar of ink from the desk drawer. As he assembled his tools, the only sound was the reassuring hum of the air filtration system. And the rush of blood in his ears.

He reached deep into his inside coat pocket and drew out a rolled up canvas, about 56 centimeters long and slender, easy to hide. Moving quickly to the aisle farthest from the door, he flipped through six paintings before he found the empty frame. As he lifted it from the stack, it slipped from his hands and clattered to the floor. He swore and glanced at the door. No sound, no movement.

With a touch akin to tenderness, he stretched out the rolled-up painting. Sweat made its way down his forehead. A drop fell onto the canvas and his lungs almost burst. He dabbed at the liquid, fearing salt might damage the paint.

Before he could fit the painting into the frame, the sound of voices reached him from the outer hall. His skin turned to ice. He fumbled the canvas and it, too, dropped to the floor. With his toe he nudged it under the easel, thankful the painting sprang back into a protective roll. Then he hastened back to the desk.

“Ah, there you are.” That distinctive guttural voice made Rettke’s skin crawl. “I see you have received my gift.”

Rettke swung around. Gift? Ah, the new Zeiss. “Indeed I have, *Reichsminister*. It is a very fine camera, very fine, indeed.”

Alfred Rosenberg curled his thin lips into a wry smile. He approached Rettke and plucked the instrument from his hands.

“*Ja. Ausgezeichnet!*” Perfect.

“I am loading it with--”

“With *Agfacolor Neu*, I expect?”

“Of course.” When did Rosenberg become such an expert?

“*Sehr gut*. We shall see how this new color photography works. What better experiment than this room, eh?” Rosenberg waved an arm. “Color, color, and more color. Like a penny carnival, no?”

Rettke tightened his grip on the Contax. His eyes darted to the hidden prize on the floor.

Rosenberg clasped his hands behind his back and ambled through the aisles. “Disgusting. Fake life, grotesque forms, artificial colors,” he said, pointing to a Kandinsky. “Pure filth. Don’t you agree?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Like the Fuhrer, I, myself, favor the old Masters. Rembrandt, Vermeer, Goya.”

“Of course,” Rettke mumbled.

“By the way, the *Reichsmarschall* himself will arrive later today for inspection.”

Goering here? Rettke turned to find Rosenberg glaring at him. “I am just about to begin, *Mein Herr*,” he said. “Will you be needing something?”

“Ach, I am in your way?”

”*Nein, nein.*” Despicable man. Rettke found it striking that most Rosenbergs he knew were Jews. This one was a Jew-hater.

The photographer forced himself steady as he shrugged the camera strap around his neck. He arranged the tripod and adjusted the lights from the last session. Next, he set the built-in meter on the rangefinder, twisted a wide-angle lens in place and zoomed in on the first painting.

Concentrate. Aim, focus, shoot, record pertinent information in his logbook: artist, title, date, provenance.

When he straightened a few minutes later, Rosenberg was gone. Relief coursed through his body. At long last, he could complete his mission.

## Chapter 1

Washington, D.C., March, 2004

Maggie Thornhill could barely see through the window at Pappalecco's Café. Between the steam haze inside and the teeming rain outside, the glass was all but opaque. Her chair was wedged in a corner of wall and window, her favorite spot in her favorite coffee house in Georgetown. She nursed a double mocha no whip as she waited for her friend. As usual, Ingrid was late. Since their high school days almost twenty years ago, their standing joke had been Maggie always early, Ingrid always late. Maggie always impatient and irritated. Ingrid always apologetic and contrite. Nothing changed.

Today, however, Maggie felt this nagging bite of worry. Something had been bothering Ingrid for weeks now and Maggie believed it was more than the death of her grandfather a month ago. Ingrid seemed on edge, nervous; maybe frightened was a better word. So where was she? Maggie pulled out her new Motorola RAZR to see if she'd gotten a voice message. Nothing. She checked her email on her phone. Nothing. She peered out the window again and suddenly recognized Ingrid. Her friend was hard to miss even through the fog and rain. She was six feet in flats and thin as a Vogue model. But it was Ingrid's shoulder-length platinum hair that drew eyes. And damned if it wasn't natural.

Ingrid burst into the cafe, catching the knob before the wind tore the door out of her hands. She shook her head and raindrops flew. Maggie stood and Ingrid leaned in to kiss both cheeks.

“Don’t you have an umbrella?” Maggie said.

“I did, but it’s turned inside out and no doubt in Baltimore by now. *Mein Gott*, what a wind.” Ingrid untied the belt on her raincoat and squirmed out of it. She threw it on the nearby empty chair and sat with a deep sigh across from Maggie. They looked at each other and settled into comfortable small talk until the waitress came. Ingrid ordered espresso. Maggie ordered a second mocha.

“So what’s going on with you?” Maggie said when the drinks were in front of them.

Ingrid raised an eyebrow. “You know me so well.”

“Well, apart from the fact that you said you had to talk to me, yes, I think something’s going on.”

Ingrid concentrated on her cup and Maggie noticed a slight tremble to her lip.

“Ever since your grandfather died, you’ve been on edge,” Maggie said. “I didn’t realize the two of you were that close.”

“We weren’t. Klaus has, had, only been in this country for a few years.”

“From Berlin. I remember,” Maggie said. “Did you always call him Klaus?”

“He wanted me to. Didn’t like *grandfather* or *grandpa*.”

“So what did you want to talk to me about?”

Ingrid reached into her purse. “Let me show you something.” She withdrew a five-by-seven brown envelope and handed it to Maggie.

Maggie opened the flap and pulled out photographs. Four total, three color and one black and white. She pushed her coffee cup to the side and spread the color photographs on the table in front of her, then lay the black and white one above them.

“What do you see?” Ingrid said.

“The color ones look like pictures of a Van Gogh painting, the same one in all three. He did such beautiful flowers, didn’t he?” Maggie stopped, picked up the black and white image.

“Four men circa 1940s?”

“Go on,” Ingrid said.

“This is your grandfather, right? Klaus Rettke?” Maggie pointed to the man on the left.

“I’ve seen his picture in your apartment.”

Ingrid nodded.

“This man next to Klaus, the one in uniform, I know him.” Maggie pointed. “God, this is Hermann Goering, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Ingrid said in almost a whisper. “Hitler’s second man.”

Maggie narrowed her eyes at Ingrid then looked at the photo again. “The third man, also in uniform. I don’t recognize him. Who is he?” When Ingrid didn’t speak, Maggie examined the photograph again. “And the fourth man, he’s in ordinary street clothes. He looks. . . I don’t know. . .”

“He looks what?”

“He looks miserable, like he doesn’t want to be there. See the third guy in the uniform is clasp his shoulder to keep him in place.” Maggie looked up. “Who is he?”

“I don’t know.”

Maggie leaned back. “What do you know?”

Ingrid hesitated before speaking. “Very little, actually. Klaus never talked about his days in Germany, except for the times when he was growing up.” She bit her lip. “Not the war. Never the war.”



“He worked as an art dealer, didn’t he, in Paris? Is that why he has this photo of a painting?”

“Maggie, let me ask you something. As the director of the Digital Photography Lab at Georgetown U, you would know the answer.”

Maggie waited.

“Can you authenticate a painting from a photograph?”

“What? Are you serious?”

“Deadly serious.” Ingrid leaned over the table. “I think that picture is indeed, of a Van Gogh painting. A painting missing since World War Two. I believe Klaus may have stolen it.”

“Stolen it?” Maggie picked up the snapshot of the four men and looked at it. “As in confiscated it? For the Nazis?”

Ingrid blinked.

“Was your grandfather a Nazi?”

“I, we, I mean, no, we never talked about it. I don’t know.”

Maggie stared at her.

Ingrid averted her eyes. “That picture. The other man in the German uniform is Alfred Rosenberg. He was the head of the ERR, in fact it was named for him. The *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg*. The group assigned the task of confiscating all art, artifacts, and cultural objects from, er, undesirables.”

“You mean Jews?”

“Not just Jews, but yes, mostly.”

Maggie waved the picture. “And the fourth man?”

Ingrid shrugged her ignorance. “The point is, Klaus was part of them, the ERR. At least that’s what it looks like in the picture.”

“But it’s just one photograph,” Maggie said. “Perhaps it has another meaning.”

“I searched Klaus’ apartment and could find nothing to tell me. No letters, no diary, nothing to connect him to the Nazis. Except that.” Ingrid tilted her head toward the snapshot.

Maggie studied her friend’s face. Skin like porcelain, elegant bones. “Now I understand why you haven’t seemed yourself. You just learned your grandfather might have been a Nazi.” Maggie shook her head. “And that maybe he has a Van Gogh painting hidden somewhere. My God.”

Ingrid took a moment to respond, picked at her perfect nail polish.

“There’s something else?”

Ingrid stared at her empty espresso cup. “Yes. I don’t know, maybe I’m crazy.”

“Go on.”

“I think I’m being followed. I’m not sure. I walk down the street and feel someone’s behind me but I turn and there’s no one.” Ingrid brought her hand to her forehead. “I’m scared Maggie. What if Klaus had this painting. What’s if it’s a real Van Gogh and now someone is trying to find it?”

“Whoa, slow down. It’s easy to get spooked. Have you checked out this painting? Is it really a Van Gogh? Maybe Rudolf would know.” Maggie’s soon-to-be ex-husband, Rudolf Hofer, was a curator at the National Gallery of Art. “If he doesn’t know, I’m sure he could locate a Van Gogh expert.”

“Right now, I don’t want anyone to know about this. Only you. I trust only you.” Ingrid grabbed Maggie’s hand and squeezed it. “That’s why I asked. Can you authenticate a painting from a photograph?”

Maggie blew out a breath, held her friend’s hand. “I don’t know. I don’t believe it’s ever been done.”

“Can you find out?”

“But what difference does it make? If this is a real Van Gogh, all you have is a photograph. Where’s the painting?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Ingrid said. “If Klaus had a genuine Van Gogh, where would it be now?”

A clap of thunder made them jump.

“Maggie, why would Klaus have these photographs if the painting was a fake? It makes no sense. No, it must be real.”

“Where did you find these photos?”

“That’s also strange,” Ingrid said. “Not in any place you’d expect. They were well hidden in his apartment. Behind the front of a fake big screen television. It was only by chance that I happened to find them. I wanted to turn on the news and nothing worked, the screen, the remote. So when I looked closer I saw it wasn’t plugged in. Then I noticed the face of the screen was tilted slightly and, well, it doesn’t matter. They were behind the screen.”

“Nothing else, just the photographs?”

“Nothing. Believe me, I looked.”

Maggie wasn’t so sure. Ingrid was never one for details. “Did he leave a will?”

“Yes, but it’s very basic. Everything in his apartment and some small bank accounts were to come to me. They don’t amount to much.”

“No Van Goghs on the wall?”

Ingrid shook her head, not smiling.

“But if this is a real Van Gogh and he’s got it hidden, it would be worth a fortune.”

“Yes, it would.”

“Like, how much?” Maggie asked.

“Tens of millions, probably.”

“And you would inherit it.”

Ingrid gazed down at her cup.

“But it wouldn’t rightfully be yours,” Maggie said softly. “Would it? Not if it were stolen.”

Ingrid ignored the question. “Will you help me, Maggie?”

Maggie reached out and laid her hand over her friend’s. “I’ll find out if a painting can be authenticated from a photograph. If there’s no process out there yet, well, I’ll have to invent one, won’t I?”

Ingrid smiled.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile in a month,” Maggie said. “What will you do about this stalker? You should contact the police.”

“If it happens again, I will. I think it may just be my imagination.”

“Can I keep these?” Maggie held up the photographs.

“Yes. Those are the originals but I made copies. If you can find out about the painting, I will find out the truth about Klaus.”

“How? There are no family members to ask, are there?”

“Not here. I’ve been putting together a family scrapbook and have already started looking into my German history.” Her face flushed in embarrassment. “The Nazis kept exemplary documentation. I’ll even go to Berlin if I must. I have a distant cousin or two there.”

Maggie gazed at her friend again and this time noticed the fine lines under her blue eyes and the drawn look to her cheeks.

Ingrid stared down at her hands. “I must know about this painting and . . . the truth about my grandfather. Was he a Nazi?”