

# **The Book of Ghosts**

## **Bibliomysteries**

**by Reed Farrel Coleman, 1956–**

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***Queens, New York, 2011***

Having survived three years in five concentration camps, Jacob Weisen knew death as one twin knows another. But that period of his schooling had come to a

close seventy years ago. Now there remained but one last thing to learn of death, and that lesson would come soon enough. Weisen neither feared death—he had seen it in all its permutations so that he understood there was a kind of peace in it—nor welcomed it—he had fought too hard to live during his years in hell to give into it simply because he was a tired old man.

“What are you thinking about, Zaydeh?” asked Leah, Weisen’s granddaughter, noticing the sour expression on his face.

“Dying.”

“Oy, not this again.”

“One day, Totty, the rain will come. It will lift me up like an oil spot off the gutter and wash me into the sewer. One day I will be here, then I will be gone. No one should mourn an oil spot and that is all we are... less, maybe.”

“Zaydeh, please stop it. I hate it when you get this way,” she said, as she drove out of Kennedy airport and onto the Van Wyck Expressway.

“You hate that I talk the truth?”

“Your truth, Zaydeh, not everyone’s.”

He pushed back the arm of his jacket, rolled up his shirt sleeve, and tapped his gnarled index finger to the sagging skin of his forearm and the faded numbers tattooed there. “No, Totty, not my truth, *the* truth. I have seen the truth of oil spots and ashes: here one day, gone the next, and then forgotten. And once you’re forgotten... there is no return.”

“Not all are forgotten,” she said, her voice impatient. “There’s you and your friend Isaac Becker. You two won’t be forgotten. The both of you will be tied to *The Book of Ghosts* forever.”

*The Book of Ghosts*, indeed! What a load of dreck, he thought. While Leah was correct about them being bound together, Jacob Weisen had no more been a friend to Isaac Becker than a spider to a fly. It was then, for fear of letting the endless years of pent-up bile and guilt pour out of him in one furious rush, that he decided to keep his mouth clamped shut until they reached the auction house. Many, many, decades had passed since he’d been forced to learn to hold his tongue in the face of unrelenting atrocity. In a world where speaking up got you nothing but a bullet or “delousing,” self-imposed silence was an essential survival skill. Lying, too, became second nature. Lying was a particularly effective skill at Birkenau in the anteroom of the gas chamber.

“Remember your hook numbers so you can collect your clothing after your shower,” was a lie he had learned to utter quickly and with conviction in many different languages: Yiddish, German, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, Czech, Dutch... the list was long. Jacob still woke up some nights with that polyglot lie on his lips.

One of the guards, Heilmann, a real bastard with coal for a heart and a face like a plane crash, used to repeat the same joke to Jacob after each group of the dead was carted to the ovens. “You Jews must have such terrible memories. Your people never come back for their clothes. I wonder where they have all gotten to?” And each time, Heilmann would laugh—each laugh a little stab wound. He wondered why he should be thinking of Heilmann after all these years. Would he finally start bleeding from the thousand little stab wounds?

So it was no small irony that Jacob Weisen's failure to just keep his mouth shut and that his most foolish and unnecessary fabrication had caused his life after the war to be haunted by Isaac Becker and his accursed book, the book for which the idiot Becker—with Jacob's complicity—had sacrificed his life. And as Weisen grew older, the taste of irony grew more bitter in his mouth—so bitter that he could have choked on it. He *was* choking on it now as Leah drove down the Long Island Expressway, the skyline of Manhattan and the prospect of the rare book auction looming before him. And as they did, he asked himself the same question he had asked himself a thousand, ten thousand, a million times in the wake of the camp's liberation at the hands of the Red Army. Why? Why: three letters, one syllable, a single sound, but the most complex question in the universe when it came to the human heart. Why didn't he just keep his trap shut when the Jewish resettlement agency people came to interview him in the hospital? Why spin the tale of Isaac Becker and *The Book of Ghosts* when he might have gotten to America anyway?

He was not without answers, reasonable answers, ones that sometimes let him sleep the whole night through. He wanted no part of the Soviets. He had witnessed their barbarity first-hand and thought them not much better than the Nazis. He had no desire to build a new life in the ruins and gloom of a bloodsoaked Europe, nor did he have the zeal to fight the British for a homeland in Palestine. America. He wanted a new world in which to make something of the shreds of whatever remained of himself. Jacob Weisen thought if he could just make himself seem heroic—the Americans, he knew, had a weakness for heroes—he might stand a better chance of making it across the Atlantic. So he took the facts and spliced them with lies and embellishments to create the myth of his salvation. Only now, with Manhattan but minutes away, it felt much more like damnation.

"Your name is Jacob Weisen." The raven-haired American woman from the agency had read from his request form. She was actually quite beautiful, delicate, and spoke passable Yiddish. "It says here you want to be resettled in the United States or Canada."

"United States only. See, I wrote the United States there for my second choice too, but they crossed it out and made me write Canada."

She smiled in spite of herself. "Why America only, Jacob?" she asked, giving him the opening he'd been hoping for.

And thus Weisen told the story of how his brave childhood friend, Isaac Becker, the storyteller—"Even the SS men called him that"—had written a book during his year and a half in Birkenau and the other Auschwitz satellite camps. That Becker's book was a novel featuring a protagonist known only as the Gypsy.

"You see, in the book," Jacob explained to the American woman, "the Gypsy is visited by the ghosts of the people he knew in the camps before they were gassed. The ghosts tell their stories to the Gypsy who commits them to memory to tell to the world if he himself should survive. Isaac never told me the book's title, but I came to think of it as *The Book of Ghosts*."

"This is fascinating, Jacob, but I don't see how this relates to you or your request for resettlement in the United—"

Weisen cut her off, continuing his tale. "You see, because Isaac was such a wonderful storyteller, he sort of became the personal property of Oberleutnant Kleinmann. He was Kleinmann's pet and it was Kleinmann who gave Isaac the

writing tablet and pen in the first place so he could write down his stories. What that bastard Kleinmann didn't know was that Isaac was really using the tablet to write *The Book of Ghosts*. He only pretended to be reading stories from the book to placate the Nazi pig. In exchange for the stories, the lieutenant kept Isaac from the showers. The charade worked until Isaac told a story Kleinmann was so taken with that he demanded to have the tablet back from Isaac and to keep it for his own. Isaac protested for a time, but what choice did he have, really? In the end, he gave the book to Kleinmann who just glanced at it, saw that the first page had some Hungarian on it, and locked it in his desk drawer."

"Still, as captivating as this all is, I don't understand how it helps your cause," she said, although the quiver in her voice betrayed her words.

"Poor Isaac came to me, frantic, explaining the situation and how he feared our whole barracks might be punished for his indiscretion. 'If they think you all knew about the book and didn't tell them,' he said, 'who knows how they will punish you?'"

The woman was hooked, so much so that she reached across the table for Jacob's hand. "Please, tell me what happened next?"

"Under cover of darkness, Becker and I snuck back to Kleinmann's little office where the book was hidden. We were prying open the lock when Kleinmann caught us in the act. I stabbed the monster through the neck with a piece of sharpened glass. Here," Jacob whispered, reaching out and touching the soft white skin of the American's neck, "but not before he had wounded Isaac in the leg. I wanted to stay, to help my friend, but he wouldn't hear of it. All he could think about was the book. 'Save yourself,' he said, 'and smuggle the book out of here no matter what it takes. The world must know what happened in this place.' I did as he asked. I wrapped the book in some fabric and rubber sheeting I had bartered for with one of the guards. The next morning I slipped the package into a wagon of ashes headed for one of the nearby farms I heard was owned by a man in the Polish resistance. Did you know the Poles used our ashes as fertilizer? We were no use to them alive, but dead..."

"Oh, my God!" she gasped, tears running down her cheeks. "And Becker, what happened to Isaac Becker?"

"Tortured, then crucified. Took him three days to die and they left his body for everyone to see as the birds gnawed at him."

"The book. What became of the book?" She wanted desperately to know.

Jacob Weisen shrugged his broad shoulders. "It could be plowed beneath the soil in some Polish farmer's field or it could be anywhere. I fear we will never know." Jacob could have left it at that, but didn't. He was so encouraged by the woman's touch, her tears, and her beauty, that he took one step too far. "So you see—I'm sorry, I have been impolite. What is your name?"

"Ava, Ava Levinsky," she said, blushing slightly.

"So you see, Miss Ava Levinsky, I must go to America and tell this story to our people. They will see pictures of the camps, but they will never know the horrors like us few surviving Jews of Europe. The book is gone, but our people in America must know we did not all die like sheep, that some of us kept our pride. They must know of poor Isaac's bravery and his book. Remember, he told me before I

left him there next to Kleinmann's body, "The world must know what happened in this place."

And so was born the legend of Isaac Becker and the myth of *The Book of Ghosts*. The truth of it was something else altogether, but there was no one left to dispute Weisen's version of history. The last member of his barracks died of typhus the day before the Red Army marched into the camp and none of the SS henchmen who managed to avoid justice or death in the aftermath of the war was apt to come forward to set the record straight. So Jacob Weisen was granted his wish and only a few months later had his new American life.

Settled into a one-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of a Victorian house on Foster Avenue in Brooklyn, commuting to 32nd Street in the city where he worked as a cutter in the *schmatte* trade, the garment business, he might very well have lived out a quiet, productive life as a simple man. Maybe he would have taken a wife, had some children, but maybe not. To put more distance between himself and his past, he had begun to call himself Jack Wise and had even gone to a lawyer to start the process of legally changing his name. It all could have turned out very differently had someone else interviewed him at the hospital after the war.

When he was lonely, which was all the time, he had thoughts of the beautiful American girl with the passable Yiddish and the silken black hair who had been instrumental in making his new life a reality. He remembered the warmth and softness of her hand as she caressed his and the feel of her lovely white skin when he brushed his fingers against her neck. Sometimes he repeated her name in his head like a lullaby as he rode the noisy, crowded subway to work and then home to his spare apartment. *Miss Ava Levinsky... Miss Ava Levinsky... Miss Ava Levinsky...* There were weak moments when he considered hiring an investigator to track her down. But no, he thought, little good would come of it. Whatever they might've had would have been built on the wet sand of his lies.

Then one glorious spring Sunday morning, as he did every Sunday morning, Jack Wise went fishing off the pier in Coney Island, the Parachute Jump shooting up into the cloudless blue skies at his back. Fishing was something he did without regard to the weather. The camps had hardened him to the weather: hot and cold, wet or dry. He would get up with the sun, ride the subway into Sheepshead Bay or to the end of the line at Coney Island, and drop his line. Fishing was his only indulgence, the solitary joy he allowed himself that remained beyond of reach of his sometimes suffocating guilt and the horrors he had left behind in Poland. Sunday mornings were the only times he could ever fully get the stink of burning human flesh out of his head and nostrils.

That Sunday was particularly beautiful—a light breeze off the ocean, the scent of Nathan's fries mixing with the salt air, the sound of children laughing—and he would have remembered it even if he hadn't snagged a shark and attracted a crowd when he yanked it out of the water. He posed for pictures, holding his catch, for what seemed an hour, but was only a few minutes. Then, when he tossed the beast back to King Neptune, the crowd evaporated and the other fishermen went back to their own poles. Jack went back to his.

And then he heard her voice. "Jacob Weisen!"

He fought very hard to ignore it, to pretend it was his mind playing tricks, but he knew it was her. He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed—it was the first time

he'd prayed since God went deaf in 1933—for her to go away. His heart had a very different prayer.

“Jacob,” she repeated, only this time she grabbed his bicep.

He could not fight the fight any longer. His heart's prayer was answered because its petition was made to a flawed and lonely man, not to an aloof God.

“Miss Ava Levinsky,” he said, turning to see the face he had dreamed of for three years. For a brief moment, his heart sank. “It is still Miss Levinsky, yes?”

“Yes, but not for long, I hope.”

“We will just see about that, young lady,” he said, leaning over and kissing her softly on the mouth.

And with that kiss, he reopened the door to Isaac Becker, *The Book of Ghosts*, and a life of haunting. He knew that instead of explaining his name change and about how he had so quickly moved from the sweatshop floor to the showroom of Beckerman & Sons Fine Menswear, that he should have confessed his sins to her right then and there. Even as he stared at her, disbelieving his good fortune, he recited the confession in his head.

*Listen, Miss Ava Levinsky, let me tell you something about the man you just kissed. He's a liar, a murderer, a hypocrite. Remember that story he told you about his friend and the book? Well, some of it was true. There was a book, and this liar had known Isaac Becker since they were children in the same tiny German town on the Polish frontier, but they were enemies, not friends. They hated one another, fiercely, from the moment they met. He always thought Becker was a dreamer and a fool. Becker thought him artless and calculating. When they found themselves in the camp together, their mutual loathing only intensified. This man you're going to marry, he was the barracks' enforcer and murdered men with his bare hands for stealing rations or informing for the SS. On the other hand, he facilitated with his lies the deaths of more of his own people than half the Nazis they hung at Nuremberg. Oh, Becker was no saint, either, Miss Levinsky. He was a gifted storyteller, yes, but to escape work on the ash heap, he made a deal with Kleinmann. For each story he would tell Oberleutnant Kleinman, Becker got time off and extra food rations. Those extra rations had to come from somewhere. Some days, it meant a little less for everybody else. More often, it meant one or two additional dead Jews.*

*The bit about Kleinmann keeping the writing tablet—that much was true as well. But this man, this liar standing before you, he didn't go with Isaac Becker to retrieve the book. That would have been an act of insanity. No, Becker went on his own. It was Becker, not the liar, who stabbed Oberleutnant Kleinmann in the liver, not in the neck, with the sharpened glass. This man you just kissed, you know what he did? He turned Becker in for some extra crusts of bread and rat meat soup. And yes, there was a Gypsy, but he was not the hero of Becker's book. The Gypsy was a prisoner from another barracks who kept himself alive by consorting with the SS, by smuggling things in and out of the camp. It was the Gypsy who put the book in the ash cart. As to the actual contents of the book, this liar, this murderer, he has no idea. It could have been a book of recipes or poetry or Hungarian curse words for all he knew. The Book of Ghosts! There were so many ghosts they couldn't have fit in*

*all the books in all the world. And yes, Becker was tortured and crucified and the birds did eat his eyes out.*

He told her none of it, instead feeding her a line about how he'd been wrong back in Poland, that he found he had no taste for talking about his time in the camps. "That's why I changed my name, why I am working so hard to become an American," he said. "The past is gone. Let it remain buried with the dead."

Ava seemed satisfied with his explanation. She had certainly dealt with enough survivors during her time overseas for the agency to know that very few people were anxious to tell their stories. She never once mentioned Becker or the book during their abbreviated courtship. It was only after too many glasses of champagne that she finally let something slip. Ava was talking to Jack's boss, Mr. Beckerman, at the wedding reception when the other shoe dropped.

"A survivor! Jackie! Who knew?" asked Beckerman. "He doesn't say to me a word about it."

"He never told you about *The Book of Ghosts*?"

"Never a word."

"It's what we talked about the first time we met. He was still in the hospital over there," she said. "His name was Jacob then and..."

Even from across the reception hall, seeing the look on Mr. Beckerman's face, Jack knew he was screwed. Two days after he returned from his honeymoon in Niagara Falls, Jack Wise was summoned into the boss' office.

"Listen, Jackie, your wife told me already the story about the book and I told it to my rabbi and you shouldn't know from his reaction. He was on *shpilkes*, on pins and needles," old Beckerman said in his heavily accented English. "He's a wise man, Jackie, my Rabbi Greenspan. He says you must share the story of your friend and the book. He says no matter how much pain it brings you to talk about it, to not share it with your people is a scandal, a *shanda*. The rabbi asked me to talk sense to you. He has called a special meeting of the temple brotherhood for a week from Sunday and he wants you to speak to us to tell us the story."

Jack didn't bother protesting. He had known this day would come sooner or later and there was a practical part of his decision. Mr. Beckerman put a roof over his head and food on his table. If surviving the camps taught him anything at all, it was never to be cavalier about shelter and food. To disappoint his boss would also be professional suicide. Besides, he loved the old man. So he went and he spoke but, to his relief, it pretty much stopped there. Over the course of the next year, he had the occasional request from this Jewish group or that to repeat the myth and he did. It wasn't until the *Forward* got hold of the story that the legend of the heroic storyteller Isaac Becker, his boyhood friend Jacob Weisen, and *The Book of Ghosts* spread. It didn't take long for the New York tabloids and the *Times* to run with it.

What could Jack Wise do? He couldn't unscramble the eggs of his lies. And having once been caught in the momentum of history, he understood there was no swimming against its tide. So, he figured, if everyone else was going to swim with the tide, he would swim with it too, as far as it would take him, which, as it happened, was very far. Playing it for all it was worth, he went back to using the name Jacob Weisen and accepted every paying speaking engagement he could

land, including ones in Argentina and the newly established state of Israel. The money helped because Ava was pregnant with their first child and they were saving to buy a house on Long Island. Even Mr. Beckerman cooperated, giving Jacob all the time off he needed. But by 1952, with no witnesses to corroborate or challenge his story and with no book unearthed, his life settled back into a happy and largely uneventful routine. Ava was again pregnant. David, their three-year-old, was a terror. They had their ranch house in Wantagh and Jacob rode the Long Island Railroad to work five days a week instead of the subway.

### **Oswiecim (Auschwitz), Poland, 1946**

Bronka Kaczmarek had nothing to lose and everything to gain in trying to get the hell away from the family farm outside Oswiecim. The Nazis, as kind of a farewell to the neighborhood, had murdered her parents and older brother while she lay hidden in the hayloft, listening to the *pop, pop, pop* of the Walther. Not a week later, a squad of Red Army soldiers had filled the void left by the fleeing Germans and announced their arrival by stealing Bronka's last cow—a pathetic-looking animal—and by raping her more or less continuously for two days running. If their treatment of her was any indication, it seemed to Bronka that the Russians hated the Poles almost as much as they hated the Germans. In any case, she had had enough of them both. One monster, she thought, but for tailoring, was much like another.

Over the course of the last eight months, she had sold everything that wasn't nailed down to neighboring farmers or on the black market. She had taken her time so as not to arouse suspicion. It was probably an unnecessary precaution because now that Poland had been swallowed up by the Bolsheviks and private property was deemed a capitalist folly perpetrated by the masses, everyone was scrambling to survive. Desperation, not wheat, was the biggest cash crop in Poland after the war. The only thing Bronka hadn't sold was the thing she wished she had never seen: the little package wrapped in the tatters of striped pajamas, a Jew's striped pajamas. How did she know? Because although the yellow star was missing, its six-pointed silhouette remained. She didn't much like Jews nor did her father, but her father was a superstitious man. He had pulled her aside one day shortly after the ash cart had come from the camp and shown her the package.

“What is it, Papa?”

“It is one of *their* secret things,” he whispered as if the animals were listening.

“Maybe it's money or some of their diamonds. Let me have it. I will untie the knot and look.”

He pulled it to his chest. “No, Bronka, never!” He crossed himself and spit on the ground. “Now that I have taken it, we will be cursed if we do not protect it. Yes, they killed Christ, but they are God's Chosen. They have powers.”

She laughed at her father. “Powers! Power to what, to make blue smoke out of the sky? Chosen for what, to be slaughtered like cattle?”

Her father slapped her so hard across the face that the imprint of his thick fingers marked her left cheek for days. She hated that the slap was now her most



enduring memory of her Papa, but because the package meant so much to him, it had become her only way to hold onto her father. Since she possessed neither the inclination toward deep thought nor the time to ponder the universe, Bronka Kaczmarek sewed the package into the lining of her coat and left Oswiecem forever under cover of darkness in the rear of a potato truck.

As it wasn't in Bronka's nature to let irony take purchase in her thoughts, she didn't waste time worrying about the fact that she found herself, two years later, in West Berlin, married to a British man named Daniel Epstein. Daniel, a wiry, handsome man who worked for the BBC World Service, was nominally Jewish and didn't ask Bronka to convert. In fact, he didn't ask much of her at all. She was more a housekeeper than a wife to him—a kiss farewell in the morning and one when he arrived home in the evening—and that suited her well enough. After those two days with the Russians, the thought of a man—handsome and well-mannered or not—inside her made her break out in a cold sweat. And so it went for three years until the morning Bronka was crushed beneath the wheels of a potato truck outside the local market. Wherever her eternal soul might be, even Bronka must have appreciated the irony in her deliverance.

When Daniel was going through his wife's things, he found the coat Bronka had worn the night she left Oswiecem buried in the back of a closet. If he hadn't patted down the pockets to see if she had left anything of value in them, the remainder of Jacob Weisen's life might have been spent in relative peace. But Daniel Epstein *did* pat down the pockets and he *did* find the tatter-wrapped package sewn into the lining of the threadbare coat. Although he had no idea of what to make of it, he knew someone who might. Yes, he knew him quite well.

After several years back in the States, Max Baumgarten, an army intelligence officer during the war—translating captured documents, mostly—had been assigned to Berlin as a correspondent for the *Herald Tribune*. He loved everything about the job, including his ability to scratch a particular kind of itch out of the sight of prying eyes. Unlike Daniel, Max felt no need to take on a bride for cover, but the British had that peculiar need to keep up appearances. Hell, Daniel even played the dutiful husband in the aftermath of Bronka's death, refusing to “see” Max until a proper and respectful period of mourning had been observed. So it was a surprise, a happy surprise, when the week after the Polish peasant was buried, Max picked up the phone and Daniel was on the other end.

They set a time to meet at “their” flat. They kept this place for their trysts, renting it under a false name and paying monthly in cash. Even seven years after the war, pounds or dollars talked loud and kept questions to a minimum. They had the place until the end of the month. After that, Max didn't see the need to keep it any longer, not now that Daniel's Polish peasant was dead. Max arrived early: setting up candles, icing down a bottle of pre-war vintage Veuve Cliquot, and setting out an iced tin of pearl black caviar, sour cream, and thinly sliced and toasted pieces of baguette. When Daniel showed up carrying a package wrapped in pajama tatters, Max's lustful intentions evaporated. Max could barely contain himself. “Holy shit! It's *The Book of Ghosts*.”

Daniel crooked his head like a confused puppy. “What?”

“Did Bronka tell you where she was from in Poland?” Max answered the question with his own.

“Well, at first, no. I suppose even she was embarrassed. But one night after one too many vodkas, she confessed to me that she grew up on a farm—”

“—near Oswiecim,” Max finished his lover’s sentence.

“How could you possibly know that?”

“When I was back home after the war, my parents schlepped me to some cockamamie lecture at my old temple from a guy who was an Auschwitz survivor. He told some wild tale about his friend and how they murdered an SS lieutenant and smuggled a book out of Birkenau in a cart of victims’ ashes that the local farmers used as fertilizer. To my amazement, it was a pretty fascinating story, but I thought it was just a load of horseshit. You know, a lot of survivors have this terrible guilt and they feel like people, other Jews especially, blame them for being too sheep-like, as if these poor people marched happily into the ghettos and then the showers. So I figured this guy dreamed up this story to relieve his own guilt and to defend the people he watched die at the hands of the Nazis. I guess I was wrong.”

“It would appear so. Shall we open it?”

Max clutched his hand around Daniel’s. “No. Let me check a few things out about its potential value and historical significance. We don’t want to do anything that might damage it. We’ll store it here for safekeeping,” Max said, taking the package. “Plus, when you get home, try and find anything in Bronka’s papers that connect her to her family and farm in that area. Provenance is critical.”

Daniel was so thrilled at the idea of being a part of history, as opposed to flitting around at its edges, that he dispensed with proper mourning etiquette and dropped to his knees.

### ***Wantagh, Long Island, NY, 1952***

Ava had taken David to visit his grandparents in Scarsdale and Jacob Weisen had just settled in to read the paper after returning from his Sunday morning fishing excursion to Twin Lakes when the bell rang. There wasn’t anything particularly ominous in the sound of the bell or the hour or the time of year and Jacob was always invigorated by fishing, so he was almost jaunty as he got up to answer the bell. That all changed when the short, rotund figure in an ill-fitting suit and a squashed down fedora on the other side of the storm door announced he was Karl Olson from the *Herald Tribune*.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Olson?”

“You got me wrong, Mr. Weisen, or is it Mr. Wise?”

“Weisen.”

“Like I say, you got me wrong. It’s what I, or rather, my paper, can do for you.”

“You’re not making sense to me, Olson.”

Olson had been a journalist long enough to spot the signs of withdrawal and he couldn’t afford to lose Weisen, so he went to plan B. He opened a thin folder he carried in his left hand, removed an 8” x 12” photograph, and held it up to the screen on the storm door.

“Do you recognize the item in the photograph, Mr. Weisen?”

He didn't have to say a word, for Olson had his answer as Weisen's eyes grew big and shock flashed across his face like sheet lightning. And for the first time since he fainted during his second shift removing bodies from the gas chamber, Jacob Weisen nearly swooned.

Then, quickly recovering, Jacob said, "I was in shock there for a second. Excuse me."

"So, you think it's—"

"Isaac's book, *The Book of Ghosts*? I know that's the answer you want, but I cannot say for certain," he lied. "It's been eight years. Eight years I have spent fighting a war with myself between remembering and forgetting. Besides, anyone, any unscrupulous person who has heard me talk of the book, would know just how to make such a thing seem real. Look, Olson, even now I'm sure there are hundreds, thousands of those dreadful striped pajamas around. In my talk, I always discuss just how I wrapped the book in black rubber sheeting I got from this bastard guard named Heilmann. I then wrapped that in a layer of fabric," Weisen gestured with his hands as if neatly folding invisible fabric. "The fabric came from the pajamas of a poor barracks mate who had died in his sleep that same night. I used a long strip of sleeve fabric to hold the bundle tight together and tied a strong knot." He made the motions of tying a knot, even wincing, as he tugged at the ends of the invisible strip. "So, you see, anyone could have made a fake."

In spite of his equivocation, there was no doubt in Jacob's mind that this was the book, for he had, in fact, wrapped it exactly as he had just described before giving it to the Gypsy to smuggle out of the camp in the ash wagon. The one detail he had always left out—the silhouette of the six-pointed star—was clearly visible in the photograph. Seeing it brought all the horror back to him. He swore he could smell the stink of the ovens on the package in the picture.

"You'll have to excuse me, Olson. You can understand how even seeing a photograph of such a thing is disturbing to a man who went through what I went through."

The survivor doth protest too much, thought the reporter, but decided not to directly confront Weisen. Instead, he asked, "Why would someone want to do that, make a fake, I mean?"

Jacob shrugged. "Why does anyone make a hoax? For a sick joke maybe. To profit somehow? To discredit? I wouldn't know. Where is the thing, anyway?"

"In West Berlin."

"Curious. And how did it get to be there?"

Olson said, "I don't know all the particulars, but apparently a woman brought it with her when she fled Poland several years ago."

"A woman?"

"Yeah, she grew up on a farm outside Auschwitz."

There was that sheet lightning again. "And who has the package?" Jacob asked, his voice brittle.

"I'm afraid I can't divulge that information to you, Mr. Weisen. I just need you to conform to me that this might actually be *The Book of Ghosts*."

Once again, Jacob was caught in his own web of lies. He needed to stall, to have a moment to think. "And what, you're gonna write a story about it?"

“Not yet,” Olson said. “At the moment I’m only fact checking. For now, I just need to know it’s not an obvious fake. My guess is that sooner or later, you’ll be asked to authenticate it.”

“Sooner or later?”

This guy’s playing for time, Olson thought, which only cemented the opinion he’d reached seeing Weisen’s reaction to the photograph. Still, he was a reporter and his opinions and impressions counted for only so much. He needed to hear Weisen say the words, so he prodded, “I’m sorry, Mr. Weisen. You haven’t answered my question. Is it an obvious fake?”

“No,” Jacob heard himself say, “not an obvious one. But I’m not saying it’s the—”

“Thank you, sir,” Olson cut him off, already turning his back on Weisen. “I’ve got all I need for now.”

### ***West Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, 1952***

*JW confirms package probably authentic—Olson*

The person manning the teletype machine in the *Herald Tribune* office the day Olson’s cryptic message to Max Baumgarten arrived was a man named Ernst Flesch, the same man who had sent Max’s original inquiry note to the New York bureau. Flesch had a small burn scar on the underside of his left arm near his armpit. The burn hadn’t occurred during the war, but immediately in its wake. Many men in both the Federal Republic of Germany—West Germany—and the German Democratic Republic—East Germany—bore such scars. In retrospect, it was foolish of them to burn themselves in this manner as the resulting scar marked them as certainly as the thing they were so desperate to obliterate: their Waffen-SS blood group tattoo.

That a former member of the Waffen-SS was manning the teletype that day might not have been so terrible a thing had Max Baumgarten been a little more like his lover Daniel. The reserved and cautious Daniel would never give such a note to the teletype operator to send. He would have done it himself, but Max, in spite of his work in army intelligence, often did careless things. Even still, few, maybe no other former SS man, would have understood the implications of the messages sent between Max Baumgarten and Karl Olson.

It was Max’s misfortune, however, that Corporal Ernst Flesch had served for a short time at Birkenau under a certain Oberleutnant Kleinmann, an officer who had treated him well. It was Flesch who, in the wake of Kleinmann’s murder, had driven the railroad spikes into the cross through the wrists and ankles of Isaac Becker. Flesch ripped the message out of the machine, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it into the trash.

The rest was almost as easy as that: Getting Baumgarten’s address, gaining entrance by saying he had an important message from New York, garroting the Jew with a length of piano wire held tightly between his gloved hands. Only when another man stepped out of the lavatory, wet from a shower, did things get a little complicated, but not so much that Flesch couldn’t handle it. The man almost

seemed more embarrassed by his nudity in front of a stranger than shocked by Baumgarten's lifeless body on the floor before him. By the time the nude man regained his wits, it was too late. Flesch slammed the heel of his gloved right palm into the base of the nude man's nose, breaking it. Daniel reeled blindly, falling to the floor. Flesch grabbed his old Walther, put a pillow around the pistol, held the pillow to the man's face, and squeezed the trigger. Flesch held his breath, waiting to see if any of the neighbors would react. None did. There were no shouts to call the police, no shrieks, no running feet in the hallway, no banging at the flat door. Ernst Flesch exhaled and calmly set about tossing the apartment, even checking the undersides of all the drawers and emptying out all the food canisters. He repeated this same process later that evening at Daniel Epstein's flat, but neither search produced the package.

### ***Wantagh, Long Island, New York, 1952***

As is often the case, an action taken with one purpose in mind leads to its exact opposite. And so it was with Ernst Flesch's handiwork. The double homicide got big headlines in the West Berlin papers, even bigger ones and more play in the London and New York papers. Of course, the nature of the relationship between Max Baumgarten and Daniel Epstein was only alluded to and then obliquely, but it didn't take a genius to read between the lines. Yet the story had legs—long, powerful legs thanks to Karl Olson and the mood of the times. His story about the possible connection between *The Book of Ghosts* and the double homicide in West Berlin got picked up by every newspaper from New York to Yorkshire, from Pekin, Illinois, to Peking, China. Anyone who hadn't heard of Isaac Becker, Jacob Weisen, and the book knew about it now.

After his time in Birkenau, this period of Weisen's life was by far the worst. Even after the initial flurry of activity in the wake of Karl Olson's story, Jacob had no peace. With the Cold War in bloom, the Rosenberg executions pending, and Red paranoia spreading like the common cold, the story of *The Book of Ghosts* took a bizarre twist. Seemingly overnight, the legend went from something heroic and life affirming to something vaguely evil and suspect. There were all sorts of theories about how Isaac Becker was really a Soviet spy and that the book was full of coded secrets. That when they liberated all the Auschwitz camps, the Russians had enlisted Weisen as a spy. That the book was a lie perpetrated by the Russians to make Americans doubt the sincerity of their new allies, the West Germans. None of it made a lick of sense or held up under any kind of scrutiny, but what did that matter in 1952?

The worst part for Weisen was when the investigator from the House Un-American Activities Committee showed up at his house to interview him and his wife. It was bad enough that this preppy asshole came into his home, asking questions not so different than a Gestapo or KGB interrogator might have asked, but what really infuriated Jacob was that this prig hounded Ava as well.

"Levinsky, that's your maiden name, is it not, Mrs. Weisen?" He didn't wait for an answer. "You're the daughter of Saul Levinsky, the lawyer who represents the grocery workers union. Is that correct?"

“Yes and yes.”

“Were you aware that the head of the union is alleged to have ties to the New York Socialist Workers Committee?”

“No.”

“Do you think your father is aware of these allegations?”

Ava was cool. “You’d have to ask my father, I suppose.”

And so it went. Jacob kept his answers short and nearly bit through his tongue in frustration because, in spite of his anger, the investigator’s unfounded insinuations and thinly veiled anti-Semitism, Jacob knew he had been the one to bring this down on their heads. He, and he alone, was responsible. Nothing ever came of the allegations, but rumors and whispers were enough to ruin people in those days, especially Jews who spoke with foreign accents. After all, who needs the truth when you’ve got demagoguery on a grand scale?

Jacob and Ava Weisen were luckier than most in that they weren’t ruined. In fact, Olson’s story did far more damage than HUAC ever could. Now that the legend of *The Book of Ghosts* was out there for the world to know and the pictures Max Baumgarten had snapped of the tattered package were in wide circulation, Jacob had very little peace. Jewish groups raised funds to hire investigators to look for it. The Federal Republic of Germany, as an act of atonement and as a gesture to the people of Israel, had agents on its trail. It was rumored that the Israeli government had assigned some Mossad agents from the Nazi hunter squads to search for the book. For a moment there, it seemed that every adventurer, freelance reporter, and foreign government on the planet was out searching for the damned thing. And of course, they all wanted to interview Jacob Weisen. Worse still were the constant rumors of the book’s whereabouts. *The Book of Ghosts* had been transformed from a lie into a combination of the Holy Grail and the Maltese Falcon. With every report, every rumor, came a knock on Weisen’s front door or a ring of his phone.

Yes, there were whole months, years sometimes, when the activity would slow to a trickle and Jacob and Ava could enjoy their children and, eventually, their grandchildren. The damned book, however, was never completely out of their lives and each time an escaped Nazi was captured—the year Eichmann went on trial was hell—or a Holocaust-related movie like *The Pawnbroker*, *Schindler’s List*, *Shoah*, *Marathon Man*, *The Odessa File*, *The Boys From Brazil* or even *The Producers* was released, Jacob was forced back into the hell of his own making. The Internet only made things worse. By then, at least, he had retired and they’d moved down to Boynton Beach. After Ava passed in 2002, Jacob Weisen had a brief period where he was practically Zen about the whole affair. He could not undo things. What was done was done, but it wasn’t done, not by a long shot.

### ***Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, 2009***

At first they assumed Al Qaeda was responsible for the bomb blast because the center of the powerful explosion was just meters away from a subway entrance. It was only the next day, after the rescue teams had pulled the survivors from the ruins of the old building and pieces of the device were collected that it was

determined the blast was actually a long time in the making. The five-hundred-pound bomb had likely been dropped from the belly of a B-17 or B-24, been paved over, and laid dormant beneath the sidewalk for more than six decades. When the demolition and cleanup crews came to sort through the rubble, the fuse was lit to another type of dormant bomb. For in the piles of bricks, twisted metal, splintered wood, and plaster dust was a package wrapped in the tatters of concentration camp pajamas. In the report issued after a court-ordered investigation, a tentative link was established between *The Book of Ghosts*, Bronka Kaczmarek, and Daniel Epstein, who was murdered shortly after Kaczmarek's own death. During an interview, the lead investigator said he was certain that the destroyed building had contained a flat that had once been rented by Daniel Epstein and Max Baumgarten. His best guess was that the book had been hidden beneath a floor board or behind a closet wall, but he had no way of knowing for certain. What was known for sure was that none of the dozens of people who had rented the flat since had ever stumbled onto the package.

### ***Manhattan, New York City, 2011***

They had arrived, finally, and so had judgment day. Quinby's Auction House had someone waiting at the curb to help Jacob Weisen into the building, but the stooped, white-haired man rejected the offer with a curt snap of his head and a grunt.

"Zaydeh, please be polite," Leah chided.

"Forgive an old man," he said, admiring the willowy blonde who had been sent to see to him.

"Of course, Mr. Weisen. Please, if you will follow me."

And as the blonde held the door for them, another Quinby's employee went to park their car.

This wouldn't be the first time Jacob would see the package since it was unearthed in Berlin two years ago. No, he had been flown into Berlin to authenticate it and, he supposed, he could have ended his eternal nightmare by telling yet another lie. All he had needed to say was, "It's a fake. A good one, but a fake."

He had planned to say it, meant to say it right up until he said, "That's the package I put in the ash wagon in 1944." He was too near death, too accustomed to the chaos he had made of his life, to lie about it now. Besides, like everyone else, he was curious to see what that idiot Isaac Becker had sacrificed his life for all those years ago. He recognized the silhouette of the star immediately and his heart raced at the sight of it. And though it had been sixty-five years since it had been put in the cart, he swore the thing still smelled like ashes.

Preservationists, historians, museum curators, religious leaders, and survivors disagreed about how to handle the find. Some argued the package should be carefully opened, with each of the component parts—the garment wrapping, the rubber sheeting, and the book itself—sent to undergo further analysis and preservation. Some argued that to divide the package up would be to destroy its value and historical significance. Still others claimed that to do anything at all to

the package would ruin its spiritual nature. But the German government held that the decision was not rightly theirs to make. An intensive search was made to find the closest living blood relative of Isaac Becker. After nearly a year, a second cousin of Becker's, a Hyman Jablonsky, who, at twelve was sent with his family to Treblinka and survived, was found living in the Midwood section of Brooklyn. Although he had never met his cousin Isaac and had never heard the legend of *The Book of Ghosts*, it was determined that he was the book's rightful owner.

Jablonsky had a similar nature to his cousin. A man of humble means, Jablonsky needed to profit from the sale of the package, but he also understood its multi-layered significance. So it was arranged that any party to the bidding had to agree in advance of the auction to a strict set of stipulations concerning the future handling of the package. Small swaths of the wrapping, rubber sheeting and a page from the book itself had to be donated to Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., to the Auschwitz Museum in Poland, and to the German Holocaust Memorial for permanent display and for six months each year, the package should be on display at museums and memorials around the world. It was further stipulated that upon the new owner's death that *The Book of Ghosts* would be sold, at a prearranged figure, to Yad Vashem.

The main room of Quinby's was abuzz. The media were there in force as were diplomats from the United States, Israel, Germany, and Poland. Curators from the Holocaust memorials and museums were there too. All the bidders were present as well. In order to prevent any possible sale to Holocaust deniers, hate groups, or other types who might be motivated to break the terms of the sale and destroy the package, phone bidding was disallowed. A specially designed air-tight glove box—not dissimilar to the kind used when handling plutonium—with the package inside its Plexiglas walls, was on display. It had been agreed that the package should be unwrapped immediately following the sale. Expert linguists were on hand to read from the book. Yet in this room full of statesmen and dignitaries, the wealthy and the wise, it was Jacob Weisen's entrance that caused the greatest stir. First one person applauded, then another, and another, and another still, until everyone was on their feet and the room rang with applause. The old man was overcome, but only he understood why. He excused himself for a minute and went into the men's room.

He ran cold water into the sink basin, dipped his face into it, and when he stood up he saw his younger self looking back at him from the mirror. Isaac Becker—black holes where his eyes had been, blood pouring from his stigmata—was standing over his right shoulder.

"Yes, Becker," Jacob spoke into the mirror, nodding his head, "I know what must be done."

With that he reached into his pocket. When he was done drinking water out of his cupped hands, Jacob returned to the main room. There he took his seat in between the glove box and Leah. The bidding, which started at two million dollars, took much less time than he expected. When the price was at five million, Jeffrey Meyer, who ran several hedge funds and who personally owned large blocks of stock in many of the world's largest companies, went all in and indicated he was



willing to go to twelve million. When the other bidders balked, the package went to him.

“Sold!” proclaimed the auctioneer, striking her gavel on the rostrum.

Jacob, on increasingly unsteady legs, stood for pictures next to Meyer and the glovebox and then sat down. The moment he had dreaded for over sixty years was here. An eerie hush fell over the crowded room as the preservationist stepped forward and slid her hands into the gloves. These gloves were rather more soft and supple than the type used to handle hazardous materials. With fine, delicate instruments already in the box, the preservationist carefully untied the knot in the long shred of pajamas used to bind the package together. Next she removed the rubber sheeting to expose the book that Isaac Becker thought so precious he had been willing to sacrifice himself. The crowd literally gasped. Through heavy-lidded eyes, Jacob Weisen recognized it immediately. A little frayed at the edges, a little worse for wear, perhaps, but the book indeed. That the book was in there was no surprise, of course. The package had been x-rayed and scanned in Germany long before things had come to this. The scans were so sensitive that they even detected fragments of Becker’s writing, but nothing comprehensible.

Ever so carefully, the preservationist pulled back the cover and the linguists stepped forward as the faded writing on the first page was exposed. The writing was projected onto a large screen behind the rostrum and on TV monitors for the audience.

“Hungarian, definitely Hungarian,” Jacob Weisen heard someone say as he began slipping away. His eyes fluttered as the vial of pills he’d swallowed in the men’s room was now taking full hold of him. Death was no more than a few heartbeats away.

“What does it say?” a media type cried out.

“*The Ghost Book*,” said the linguist.

Jacob Weisen shook his head at the irony of it all. So, it wasn’t a book of poetry or of recipes or colorful Hungarian curse words. He was not sure how to feel about the truth buried in his sixty plus years of lies. He wouldn’t have time to figure it out. Jacob Weisen pitched forward, already dead. Some there claimed he was smiling.

