

Desert Run

A Lena Jones Mystery

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For Paul

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Chapter One

December 24, 1944

At 1:36 a.m. on Christmas Eve, Gunter Hoenig, crewman on German U-boat 237, ate Arizona dirt.

The gunnery mechanic didn't mind. Dirt was better than mud, and at least the narrow, one hundred and seventy-eight foot tunnel he and his comrades had dug underneath the prison camp fence remained as arid as the desert above before last night's rain began to fall. Taking heart from the encouraging shouts behind him, Gunter spit the dirt out of his mouth and crawled on. Less than thirty feet left to go and they would all be free. Once out of the tunnel, he and the other twenty-seven German prisoners of war would make their way to Mexico, where supporters of the Reich would smuggle them back to Germany.

Gunter smiled. The Americans had outsmarted themselves, believing they could outwit members of

the Reich's great navy merely by caging its sailors on this inland sea of sand. As Kapitan zur See Erik Ernst pointed out, where humans live there will always be water, and Arizona had proved no exception. The maps smuggled into camp showed that this seemingly arid country was criss-crossed by manmade canals which fed into great rivers. Oh, German sailors understood rivers! And rafts! The raft Das Kapitan had designed and he and his friend Josef had built would navigate those rivers all the way to the sea. What difficulty would riding a mere river prove to men who had conquered the mighty Atlantic? As for their less adventurous comrades behind them in the tunnel, Mexico was less than two hundred miles away, and their feet would be sufficient.

"Schnell, schnell!" Kapitan Ernst, right behind him, barked. "Quickly, quickly!" He followed up his words with a blow across Gunter's buttocks.

Did Das Kapitan think he wasn't already hurrying? Not for the first time Gunter ground his teeth in fury at his commander. Perhaps once he and Josef reached the canal, they would make their own plans.

That final freedom must wait. First, escape through this narrow tunnel (not much narrower than U-237!), then a sprint to the high brush by the canal. Then he would tell Josef his thoughts and they

would slip away from Kapitan to navigate Arizona's waters on their own. Perhaps their commander had managed to save them when the U-boat caught fire, but he had abandoned so many others. Fifteen men dead, and all because of his cowardice.

Gunter could still hear his shipmates' screams.

Ach, no time to think of that now. Just hands and knees churning up dirt, but good, all good, because the end of the tunnel was less than twelve feet ahead. He could already see the velvet night.

Above him, in the camp itself, the remaining German prisoners drank home-made schnapps and sang *Stille Nacht* to cover any noise their escaping comrades might make. They had grown fat and happy and preferred the comforts of camp to the unknown dangers of the desert. Well, good luck to them. But for him, the taste of freedom was sweeter than any Christmas pudding.

Only ten feet more. Five. Three...

Hands reached down to pull him out into the mesquite-scented air.

Freedom. Danke Gott!

Chapter Two

It was a good day to film, but a bad day to die.

The elderly star of *Escape Across the Desert* sat slumped in his wheelchair, blood ruining his white shirt and every other surface in the small kitchen. I'd seen neater slaughterhouses.

Knowing it was pointless but praying it wasn't, I knelt beside him and put my finger on his neck, hoping a tell-tale throb would prove he hadn't yet bled out. "Kapitan Ernst?"

Dead men seldom answer. The former U-boat commander's flesh was cool and rigor well-established, meaning that he had died long before sunup. Duct tape sealed both arms to the wheelchair, almost as if the killer feared that the ninety-one-year-old double amputee might put up a fight. I doubted he had, so why the overkill, why so many disfiguring blows? Why had the killer beaten Ernst to death, taking his good sweet time?

Him? Violence like this usually pointed to a male perpetrator. Then again, women were getting meaner these days.

The police would want to know the exact time I discovered the body, so I checked my Timex. Seven twenty-six a.m. I took one final look at Ernst, then backed out of the kitchen. Retracing my footsteps as closely as possible, I exited the house the same way I had entered, leaving the door open behind me. When I reached the curb, I fished my cell out of my carry-all and called 911. Then I called Warren Quinn, director of *Escape Across the Desert*, and told him that Das Kapitan would never be ready for his closeup.

Up and down the street of the quiet Scottsdale neighborhood, men and women were backing BMWs and Mercedes out of their driveways, some of them clutching travel mugs in one hand and cell phones in the other, leaving them to steer with their knees. I winced as one of these suburban Kamikazes came perilously close to my restored 1945 Jeep. When the driver passed by with at least a half-inch to spare, I gave her the finger, but she didn't even notice—she was too busy applying eye-liner. Nearby, someone was cooking bacon and its fatty

scent drifted away on the crisp breeze humming through the Papago Buttes. From one house I could hear a blender, and from another, the yapping of a small dog. Birds sang, children laughed.

Until the news helicopters thundered in.

The film crew of Living History Productions was working out of Papago Park, the site of an old World War II German POW camp. The thousand-acre desert park dividing the city of Phoenix from Scottsdale was only a quarter-mile west, so along with the news copters, Warren and his assistant director Lindsey Reynolds beat Scottsdale PD to the murder scene by a good three minutes. Lindsey looked her usual cool self, but Warren was in such a state it took all my strength to keep him from running into Ernst's house.

"He can't be dead, Lena! I need him for my last scene!"

If Ernst had been murdered at the beginning of the shoot, I would have been shocked at Warren's seeming heartlessness, but after being around movie people for several weeks, I was getting used to the Hollywood credo: film first, feel later.

"Believe me, Warren, he's dead."

"But..." The director stopped and took a deep breath. During the pause, his usual compassion

overrode his business concerns. “Poor old guy. What happened? Heart failure?”

“Kind of.” Not really a lie, because when you come right down to it, all deaths are ultimately the result of heart failure. Drown, your heart stops. Take a bullet to the brain, your heart stops. Get the holy living hell beat out of you while you sit duct-taped to your wheelchair, your heart stops.

Warren stared at the house, no longer anxious to enter, maybe because he’d noticed the blood on my shirt. He ran trembling fingers through his beach-blond hair. In his early forties, he still had a clean, farm-boy face, only slightly hardened by his sharp eyes. “Does he have relatives? Kids?”

“Not that I know of.”

When he swallowed hard, I began to regret not closing the front door behind me, because the scent of death was beginning to mingle with the odor of frying bacon. It was an unfortunate combination, but I’d smelled worse.

Warren pulled himself together. “Lindsey, we have to let everyone on the set know we’re closing down for the day. Out of respect.”

Lindsey shook her perfectly coiffed head and when she spoke, her voice was calm. “No need. We’ll just shoot around him.”

One by one front doors opened along the street, and by the time several Scottsdale PD cars came screaming up, the sidewalk in front of Ernst's house was filling up with not only Ernst's neighbors, but the gaggle of film buffs the shoot always attracted. The area bustled with a frenzy it probably hadn't experienced since that Christmas Eve night in 1944 when twenty-eight German POWs, Kapitan zur See Erik Ernst among them, dug under the Camp Papago fence and fled into the desert. Some crowd control was in order, so I was happy to see Captain Kryzinski, my old boss from my days at Scottsdale PD, exiting an unmarked cruiser. Whenever a crime involved—however peripherally—someone of Warren Quinn's stature, the brass wanted to cover their collective butts.

While detectives and crime-scene techs trooped past him and a couple of uniformed officers began to cordon off Ernst's property, Kryzinski gave me a grim look. "Great, another high-profile murder. The Chamber of Commerce will be thrilled. So what are you doing, Lena, messing around with these film types? You got some piddly little security gig going with them or something?"

"Hardly piddly." I explained that after some

expensive camera equipment had disappeared a month earlier, Living History Productions hired Desert Investigations to run background checks on a few gaffers. After I fingered the culprit, Warren kept me on to act as a go-between his company, the Arizona Film Commission, and over-friendly locals. The money was more than double my usual fee, and the job's relatively tame duties made a nice respite from the dark cases I normally worked. Until today.

Kryzinski flicked his eyes toward Warren, who despite his distress was as handsome as half the actors in Hollywood. "You finally give up on Dusty?"

How quickly gossip travels in the desert. After several years of pseudo-intimacy, my boyfriend Dusty began disappearing for weeks at a time. Despite several bouts in rehab, where each time he swore to turn over a new leaf, he had disappeared again. This time I wasn't waiting for him to come back. Not that my love life, or lack thereof, was any of Kryzinski's business. Besides, Warren and I enjoyed only a professional relationship.

"Forget about Dusty, Captain. I have."

"Whatever you say." He turned away from Warren and studied Ernst's house, a stucco ranch

half-hidden behind several twisted olive trees. “It’s weird, don’t you think, a former POW living right across the street from his old prison camp?”

“Ernst was a weird guy.” But Kryzinski was right. The neighborhood was an odd place for a U-boat captain to end up, but as I’d learned from my work on the documentary, Camp Papago hadn’t exactly been Devil’s Island. Also, the view from Ernst’s picture window must have been spectacular. On a clear day—and most Arizona days were clear—he would have been able to see the red-mauve Papago Buttes rising in the distance, the muted greens of tall saguaros thrusting up through the scrub and the vivid red blooms of prickly pear cactus attracting rainbow hummingbirds. But with careful scrutiny, he would also see the leveled ground where the prison camp’s barracks once stood, and in some places, the deep impressions in the earth from the weight of stockade towers.

Kryzinski followed my gaze, but didn’t find the view all that interesting. “How come you were the one to discover the body? You acting as his chauffeur or something?”

I shook my head. “I decided to watch some filming before I went to my office, so I was hanging around the set. Lindsey usually took care of

picking up Ernst whenever he was needed, but she had something else to do this morning so yesterday she asked his care-giver to bring him over. When Ernst didn't arrive by eight and nobody answered his phone, Warren asked me to drive over and see what the holdup was." I glanced around to make certain no children or tender-eared grannies were within hearing distance. Closest were Warren, Lindsey, and the pesky, whippet-sized salesman from the autoplex down the street who had driven them over in the '57 Studebaker Golden Hawk he was trying to sell Warren. I kept my voice low anyway. "When I knocked, the door swung open. I called Ernst's name, but I knew before I went in. Death has an odor."

Kryzinski narrowed his eyes. "Yet you continued on inside the house. I'm disappointed in you, Lena. An experienced detective like yourself should know better."

Up above, a red-tailed hawk wheeled through the cloudless sky, its lonely *keee-rrr* announcing that it hadn't eaten in a while. A tough life, for all its seeming freedom, but a life I envied at moments like this, when I wanted to be elsewhere, doing anything other than what I was doing, even dealing with ground kill rather than people.

“Lena?”

The hawk drifted behind the Papago Buttes so I had to look at Kryzinski again. “I knew something was wrong so I continued into the house to render aid.”

He wouldn’t let it go. “Since you could smell what you smelled, what made you think you could ‘render aid’? Were you planning to give him last rites?”

Lucky hawk, who never had to explain his actions. “Okay, so I was pretty sure Ernst was dead, but I... Oh, who the hell knows why I went in. I’m human, and I just wanted to help.” What was with my old boss? Maybe it was his age. Since I’d seen him last, his formerly glossy black hair had turned as flat and gray as cement.

“Sorry. It’s just that so much has been going on down at the department lately, what with the new Police Chief and all. I need to make sure my detectives are dotting their i’s and crossing their t’s.”

There was no point in reminding him that I hadn’t been one of his detectives for three years. Old habits die hard. So did my affection for him, and it softened my answer. “Actually, Captain, I was worried about Ernst before I reached the house. He’d been acting weirder than usual the last few

days, always dropping hints about some big secret he was going to reveal in the film's final interview. He said the secret was 'like gold.'"

"Interview? I thought this was a movie?"

I passed on Warren's explanation of how his documentaries worked. "Besides the re-enactments of various aspects of the escape, Warren planned to do a series of interviews with some of the original people involved with the camp. He's lined up a couple of historians, some of the camp's surviving guards, and Fay Harris. You know, the reporter for the *Scottsdale Journal*. I think you two used to go out." He neither confirmed or denied. "Okay, so maybe I was wrong. She's the one who wrote the book, *Escape Across the Desert*, which Warren optioned for the documentary. The pivotal interviews were to be with Ernst, since he was the only escapee Warren could get. There are a few more POWs still alive back in Germany, but from what I hear, their health is too fragile for them to make the trip. And one over on the west side of Glendale, but he didn't want to be involved in the project. So as far as the German side of the story goes, Ernst was Warren's 'star,' as he liked to call himself."

Kryzinki frowned as a young police officer staggered out Ernst's door and vomited under an

olive tree. “That’s all very interesting, but what kind of ‘big secret’ was Ernst hinting about? Do you think he meant gold, the metal? Or was that just a manner of speech?”

“Nobody knows. Warren doubted that Ernst had anything new to add to the information already known about the escape, but he humored him anyway. Anything to keep him happy.”

Kryzinski glanced over at Warren again. More or less recovered from his shock, he was leaning against the fender of the Golden Hawk with Lindsey. The adoring glances from the looky-loos reminded me that he was probably the closest thing to a Hollywood celebrity this South Scottsdale neighborhood was likely to see, although they were treated from time to time to glimpses of the Oakland Athletics baseball team, which had a practice field in the park.

“This Warren guy, he any good?”

“Supposed to be. He won the Best Documentary Oscar a couple of years ago for *Native Peoples, Foreign Chains*.”

“I didn’t see that.” Kryzinski’s movie tastes ran to Clint Eastwood and James Cameron.

“It was about the Colonial practice of enslaving Native Americans and shipping them to work on

sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean.”

“I didn’t know we did that, sold Native Americas out of the country as slaves.”

“Most people don’t.” I changed the subject. “*Escape Across the Desert* was due to wrap next week, but now that Ernst is dead, I don’t know what will happen.”

“Wrap?”

“Finish filming.”

One side of Kryzinski’s lip lifted in a sneer. “Look who’s gone Hollywood. Gonna buy yourself a Shitzer, now, or whatever those little dogs are called, and tool around in two-hundred-dollar sunglasses?”

“Come off it, Captain.” Just like old times, with Kryzinski sniping at me, me sniping back. Fortunately, Detective Kyle McKindroe, a friend from my own days in the department, emerged from the house and walked up to us.

Although middle-age, with years of experience under his belt, McKindroe looked green around the gills himself. “It’s pretty bad in there, Captain. I’d say whoever did it wanted to get up front and personal.”

My thoughts exactly. The level of violence directed against Ernst hinted at a personal relationship

between killer and victim. But while still in Ernst's kitchen, I had noticed several drawers pulled out, and it was possible that Ernst merely interrupted an intruder, someone high on drugs. Addicts' crimes tended to be messy. Visualizing the kitchen again, I remembered something. By rights, Rada Tesema, the Ethiopian care-giver who visited Ernst several days a week, should have discovered the body when he came over to cook breakfast before bringing Ernst to the set, as he'd promised. But Tesema was a no-show. Where was he?

While I stood there in thought, McKindroe went back in the house, leaving Kryzinski staring at me. "What?"

I liked Tesema, whom I'd met on several occasions, and doubted if he had any violence in him. "What do you mean, 'what'?"

"I know that look of yours, Lena. What are you thinking about? That care-giver who never brought Ernst over to the set? Where the hell is he, anyway?"

I glanced toward the curb. Unless I was mistaken, the autoplex guy had resumed his badly timed sales pitch. As he slid hands along the Golden Hawk's sleek hood, I heard snatches of spiel. "...highly collectible classic gold-and-white two-tone...T85

three-speed with overdrive manual...two-hundred-seventy-five horsepower..." Beyond him and hurrying toward us was Fay Harris, reporter's notebook in hand.

"Here comes Fay, Captain, closing fast."

Kryzinski wouldn't allow me my evasions. "Where's the care-giver?"

"Sorry. I don't know."

He frowned. "Okay, let's try it this way. Did Ernst have any enemies that you know of?"

Probably more than I could count. It would be hard to have a history of torpedoing American warships without incurring a few grudges. From what I had heard, Ernst had been unusually ruthless, even for a U-boat commander. The ugly rumor going around the set was that Ernst had a habit of shooting survivors out of the water, which was a war crime under the Geneva Conventions. But I wasn't ready to tell Kryzinski yet.

"Enemies? Why would an old man—an amputee, no less—have enemies? Look, Captain, if you want to know more about Ernst, talk to the people who worked with him." I gestured toward Lindsey, who was staring at the car salesman as if he'd lost his mind. "Ask Lindsey. She interacted with Ernst more than anyone."

As much as Kryzinski wanted to stay and question me further, his own professionalism dictated he do otherwise. After telling me to leave the homicide investigation to the Scottsdale PD, he asked me to come into the station later that afternoon and make a full statement. When I promised I would, he walked over to question Lindsey, the *Journal* reporter hot on his heels.

While we'd been talking, the uniformed officers had finished sealing off the perimeter, but that didn't stop one neighborhood looky-loo from ducking under the bright yellow crime tape and swiping a handful of gravel from Ernst's desert landscaping. Apparently he felt that Death was a celebrity, too. The man's efforts went for naught when a nearby cop made him toss his treasure, then ordered him away. Grumbling, the man faded into the crowd.

"You a movie star, honey? You look awful familiar." I turned to see an elderly woman, her back bent almost into an "L" as she leaned on her cane. She might have been pretty once, but now her skin sagged from her cheeks and chin, and her varicosed legs appeared too thin to support her body.

I shook my head. "No, ma'am, just a private detective."

She cocked her head and stared at me through

thick bifocals. “I remember now. You’re Lena Jones. You were on TV a couple of months ago when you saved some woman from burning alive.”

That case, which involved the death of a Scottsdale publisher, still bothered me, so I changed the subject. “Did you see anything suspicious last night?” Experience had taught me that the elderly, for all their physical problems, could be excellent observers.

“You could say that.”

At that point I should probably have directed her to Kryzinski or one of the detectives, but my curiosity trumped my willingness to follow orders. “Why don’t you tell me about it, Mrs...”

She limped closer. “I’m Carol Hillman, dear. I live right next door to the Kraut and I always sleep with my window open. Before you start to lecture me, let me reassure you there’s bars on the window, so it’s safe enough. Anyway, around two this morning, a woman started banging on his door and the racket woke me up. She was a redhead, almost as pretty as you, but she dressed, well, cheap. Tight miniskirt, tiny bodice top. Implants.”

Kraut? Deciding she might have lost a family member overseas during WWII, I didn’t comment on her use of a pejorative term you almost didn’t

hear any more. However, I also doubted that this myopic woman could see whether someone had implants at a distance of twenty-five feet, especially in the wee hours of the morning. “You are very observant, Mrs. Hillman.”

She frowned. “Don’t condescend to me, young lady. The porch light was on and those implants were real bazookas. A blind man couldn’t miss them, not that he’d want to.”

Properly chastised, I apologized. “You should tell one of the detectives about this. I’m not part of the investigation.”

“I’m telling *you*. After the Kraut—we weren’t on first-name terms, and I’ll be damned before I ever call him *Das Kapitan* like he wanted everyone to—after the Kraut let the woman in, things were pretty quiet for a while, so I started drifting back to sleep. But all at once I heard yelling, most of it from her, something about him being responsible for everything.”

“You heard all this?”

The frown again. “Didn’t I just tell you I sleep with the windows open? So did the Kraut. Difference is, he didn’t have any bars. It’s a wonder the idiot wasn’t murdered long before now.”

An interesting thing for her to say. The memory

of Ernst's body, duct-taped to his wheelchair, flashed through my mind. Yes, a woman could have killed him. Maybe even an elderly woman if she'd been able to get enough leverage. And hated him enough. "Did you hear exactly what this 'everything' was?"

Mrs. Hillman shook her head. "Not all of it. Just some stuff about her reputation, although why she should care, dressed the way she was, is beyond me. And I didn't hear what he said about it, either, because he kept his own voice down. Until the end, that is, when he lost his temper and started yelling back at her in Kraut."

German, I guessed she meant. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that a ninety-one-year-old man had a thing for hookers, and it wouldn't be the first time a hooker had killed a john, but those incidents were almost always spur-of-the-moment killings. The duct tape around Ernst hinted of premeditation. "Had you seen the woman before?"

"Never. The Kraut lived next door to me for more than twenty years, and other than you, that sweet black care-giver of his, and Little Ms. Skinny over there..." Here she pointed to Lindsey. "...the redhead was his only visitor. Bastard had no friends."

I studied her for a moment, watched her eyes narrow every time she said "Kraut," and went ahead

and asked the question. “Mrs. Hillman, did you lose anyone in the war?”

“My husband. Two uncles. My son-in-law lost his entire family. Jewish, you know.” A combination of rage and grief swept across her face.

Sensitive to Mrs. Hillman’s old sorrows, I softened my voice. “You really need to talk to the detectives in charge of the case. They’ll want to find that woman and question her.”

She gave me a hard look. “Don’t want to get involved, huh? I guess I was wrong about you. You’re just like the rest of your generation, you don’t care about anyone except yourself.” With a sniff, she walked away, leaving me staring at *Das Kapitan’s* house.

Thus put in my place, I started toward my Jeep, then stopped as a thought struck me.

Where *was* Rada Tesema?

I didn’t know Ernst’s care-giver well, having met him only a couple of times, but judging from our few encounters he seemed like a nice enough man. Even the hardly PC Mrs. Hillman liked him. A licensed practical nurse, he worked for one of Scottsdale’s many home care agencies, which were enjoying high times as the city’s population aged. From what I knew, he arrived at Ernst’s house at

six o'clock, three days a week, to cook breakfast and do what needed to be done. And he really seemed to care about his charge. Once, when I had volunteered to take Ernst home from a location shot—Warren had kept him late to film him silhouetted against the sunset—I'd found Tesema standing on Ernst's doorstep, fumbling through a jangly mess of house keys. His car, a battered blue Nissan, hissed in the driveway.

Relief covered Tesema's face when he saw Ernst in my Jeep. "*Kapitan Ernst*, please call when you be late! I worry you hurt in there!"

Ernst hadn't bothered to answer. After Tesema helped him out of the Jeep and into his wheelchair, he rolled past the Ethiopian with a barely audible grunt.

So where was Tesema now? Chauffeuring Ernst around wasn't in his job description, Lindsey usually took care of that, but since he had promised to do so this morning his absence was odd. Could he have been murdered, too, and his body hidden somewhere? Or had Tesema himself...? No, I refused to consider that possibility. Something must have happened to keep him from his regular rounds. But whatever the reason, I needed to alert Kryzinski.

Even a man like Das Kapitan deserved justice.