

Cats

by Adam Sifre

JULY, 1972

Steve lowers himself onto a lounge chair and lets out a long, overdue sigh. Cliff and Jim, the frickin' and frackin' of the built-in pool industry, are making a Burger Chef run while the cement sets. Steve is just tired enough that he chooses the lounge chair over cheeseburgers. It has been a long, hot day filled with back-breaking work. When he took this job, Steve imagined spending his days skimming leaves, getting high and grabbing a few peeks at Miss Belgrade, whose single status was not lost on the neighborhood's horny teenagers or suspicious housewives. Maybe grabbing a little more, if some of the stories his friends told when they sparked up in the little woods were even close to true. Unfortunately, it turned out Miss Belgrade didn't even have a pool. That left getting high.

He runs a hand through a mop of blonde hair and closes his eyes, just for a minute. Still, while the peeping-tom gig turned out to be a bust, the job does have some perks. The summer is only half over and Steve is already an accomplished petty thief.

MARCH, 1946

Under an unseasonably warm sun and cloudless blue sky, they straggle into the airship hangar; dozens of smiling skeletons, each man a filthy copy of the other. Liberation, like imprisonment, is a process, a bureaucracy, and the Americans are still new at it. The thought does not comfort the man known to a select few as Spyder. He has no intention of underestimating them now. The Americans were novices at everything in the beginning of the war. But they proved to be quick studies in the end, and Spyder does not need to be a spy to know this *is* the end.

Spyder is a thin man, dressed in shabby civilian clothes. He had the foresight to abandon his uniform days ago. If no one looks too closely, he will be mistaken for just another freed prisoner.

These are not the first Americans he has to avoid, but these are the first he did not expect.

The hangar is enormous. Originally intended to house Zeppelins, it was converted to a traditional airplane hangar at the beginning of the war. Now it is being converted again — to an Allied staging area. Spyder watches as men continue to appear. He is sure they are the recent occupants of Stalag XII. The MPs shepherd each into one of six separate lines in front of a make-shift check-in desk. It is difficult to make out what they are saying. His English is good, but it takes effort and the acoustics are not helping. Soon however, he understands that the men are exchanging name, rank and serial number for papers. The sign above the desk, still wet with fresh paint, reads “CAMP CHESTERFIELD.”

This is their security.

Spyder silently thanks his good fortune.

JULY 1972

The reefer and hot sun are a pleasant weight pressing down on Steve's chest.

“Fuck a duck.” There must be a thousand pools in San Bernadino, and he has the bad luck to be roasting in front of the only empty one in the entire state of California. *Who waits until fucking July to build a pool?*

Mr. Thompson's car is gone. That's good. He has only met the man once. Nice guy, but he has to be at least 60 and still a bachelor. *Probably a fag.* That's cool with him. Steve is an equal opportunity thief. He sits up, enjoying the dizzying rush of blood leaving his head. Cliff and Jim will be back soon. Steve stands up and waits for his head to clear a little. Pink Panther music starts playing in his mind as he makes his way to the back door, doing an exaggerated cat burglar tiptoe sneak in time to the music in his head.

MARCH 1946

Spyder turns away from the spectacle and slowly makes his way toward the rear of the building. It is darker there and darkness is almost always good for him. Once the men sign in, there is little organization. They form small groups and swap stories of home and girlfriends while they wait. Most are eating ham sandwiches and drinking bottles of Coke.

How fast things change.

Three weeks ago, with a full stomach and the warmth of brandy and coffee in his belly, Spyder had witnessed two worthless Jews fighting in the dirt over a potato. He grimaces at the memory. He had known about the camps, of course, though his job rarely required him to witness the work done there. Spyder's stomach groans. He may not be ready to fight over a potato, but he *is* hungry. If the damned Americans had come just 20 minutes later. But like everything else in Germany, good luck is in short supply.

JULY 1972

The back door is locked.

"No problemo." Steve quietly assures himself. He takes out his wallet and removes his library card. He's had it since he was a freshman, the lamest of lame gifts from his mother. She had it laminated, because nothing says 'special' like a laminated library card! Steve laughs and realizes that he is a lot higher than he thought. He slides the card between the door and door frame and brings it down until he feels a slight resistance. The soft click of that tells him the door is open. He twists the knob.

"Easy peasy, Japanesey."

MARCH 1946

Spyder walks past broken desks and chairs - makeshift offices used by the Germans before their exodus ahead of the Americans. Spyder frowns. It is too dark to see the far end and the hangar. What if Goering was lying, or sent someone else on the same mission? Or, more likely, what if someone else had already discovered the package? All this risk for nothing. The unbearable certainty of the

thought grows with each passing second. It is only a matter of time before one of the MPs ask for his papers, and then...

Something crunches under his foot. A picture frame. A fat woman and two small fat children smile up at him, their faces scarred under broken glass. Almost without thinking, Spyder worries a long piece of glass free. He crouches behind the nearest desk and waits for one of the skeletons to wander into his web. He does not wait long.

JULY 1972

Steve quietly enters the kitchen. His limited experience as San Bernardino's premier cat burglar has taught him that there are rarely treasures hidden in kitchens. He quickly walks through the room, glancing curiously at a copper Jello mold in the shape of a lobster, hanging on a wall next to a three foot wooden fork and spoon.

Definitely a fag.

MARCH 1946

The murder was quick. Easy. Spyder is a trained killer, and the American was half dead already. A ham sandwich and Coke cannot undo the rigors Stalag XII. The American's clothes fit well enough. They are filthy, but the stains are so old that they smell only of dust. The previous owner's body is safely hidden in a utility closet. He used the glass to slash the dead man's wrists. When — if — they find him, he will be just another German who chose suicide over capture.

Spyder, now Private Thompson, makes his way to the back of the hanger, boarding pass clutched in one hand. He will get his prize, and then, *Gott will*, Private Thompson will visit America. He may even return to Germany one day, when it is safe. The fortunes of war are fickle, after all.

Someone is shouting. It sounds strange to his ear. Only after the uniformed officer repeats himself does he understand why.

There's no threat of violence in his voice. He's shouting to be heard.

The man is telling them it will be three hours before the transport planes will be ready. No one complains.

Spyder continues past more abandoned desks. A few still have personal touches, left by people who were in a hurry. He sees no pictures of Fuhrer, which he finds interesting. Spyder is a trained spy, and he knows there is an art to everything, including fleeing. Even without training, however, he doubts his first instinct would be to grab the Fuhrer's picture.

JULY 1972

The lights downstairs are off, but all the window curtains are open and there is plenty of sunlight. Steve frowns. The house is one of the larger ranches in the area, but the living room is furnished like something straight out of "Sanford and Son." There's a large hallway that must lead to the bedrooms and bathrooms. The only thing worth stealing here, is the TV. He won't, of course. Sneaking out a television in broad daylight is beyond his cat burglar skills. There's an old coffee table with about a dozen magazines spread out like a cheap card trick. Most are military magazines, with black and white photographs from WWII on their covers. Steve's eyes glaze over a bit and he moves on.

MARCH 1946

At the very back of the hangar, Spyder finally finds what he's looking for; a virgin Messereschmitt 109. The finest fighter plane in the world. The new models are lighter and stronger, the two qualities fighter pilots dream of, the way young boys dream of easy women. Even if the Americans were not here, Spyder would not have flown this beauty. He was no pilot.

My apologies Herr Goering. The Fatherland will have to look after itself, as must I.

He feels little guilt. Spyder has no doubt the package was intended to end up in Goering's pocket, so technically, he was not

stealing from the Reich. What difference can it possibly make whose pocket it ends up in now?

He has to restrain himself from running the last 100 feet. He risks a quick glance over his shoulder. No one is even looking in his direction. Good. He smells the unmistakable order of fresh machine oil. Quickly, Spyder hoists himself up so that he is half hanging inside the cockpit. His hands fumble blindly behind the pilot's seat. Fear and doubt worm their way into his stomach. Someone else has been here. Someone has found it already.

Then his fingers touch something cold and heavy, and Spyder almost weeps with relief. It takes him a few long moments to remove the two items.

The small cloth bag of gems he quickly pockets. The other item is the real problem. It is 14 inches long and at least eight pounds. Not exactly something easily hidden for the weeks it will take 'Private Thompson' to reach America. He considers leaving it behind, but only for a moment. Smuggling it will be risky, but not so much as getting caught without the means to bribe his way to freedom.

JULY 1972

Steve quickly goes through the rest of the room. There's a small table by the door with a drawer. Inside he finds a few dollars and a pack of Camels. He takes the money and leaves the cigarettes. The old man might not notice a few bucks missing right away, but people tend to keep strict inventories of how many cigarettes they have. He does not want Mr. Thompson realizing he's been robbed on the same day the pool guys were at his home.

He makes his way down the hallway to the first room. It's some sort of office. The only furniture is a large, expensive looking writer's desk. A shelf above the desk holds a spattering of books and old nick-knacks. Without much hope, Steve walks over for a closer look at the items.

The books, like the magazines, are military histories. There are a few Time Life volumes of "America At War." Steve actually read one or two of these when he was a kid, or at least flipped through the

pictures. The photos of the camps and the trials were pretty cool. There's a miniature brass cannon that is being used as a makeshift bookend. Steve barely gives it a second glance.

Crap. Probably came with the Time Life books.

He picks up the thing next to the cannon. It's metal. Heavy. It's dark green, like old copper. It appears to be a sculpture of a lion. It's curved, with the lion's front paws stretched out at both ends of the arc. The front paws hold a round metal globe that rests under its head. The end of the tail is also a ball, although a bit smaller. He examines it for a few seconds.

"It's a door handle." The voice is low and angry.

Steve screams like a girl and whirls around, instinctively swinging the metal lion. Mr. Thompson is standing right behind him, dressed in old pajamas and a bathrobe.

Just before the lion smashes into Mr. Thompson's head, Steve thinks: *That's how a real cat burglar moves.*

The lion crashes against the old man's head and Mr. Thompson drops to the floor like a stone. Blood pools on the floor. A lot of it.

"Fuck!" Steve almost shouts. "I'm sorry!" Mr. Thompson does not answer. Steve isn't really thinking anymore. He is in full flight mode. He steps quickly around Mr. Thompson, making sure not to step in the blood, and runs down the hall, through the kitchen and out the back door. He pauses outside, not sure what to do next. It's then that he remembers the lion in his hand. The front paws and head are spattered with blood. Steve's eyes are wide with horror. He's standing outside, under a bright sun, with a murder weapon in his hand.

"No. No. No."

He looks around, stupidly searching for a trash can. Part of him knows he's probably already caught. There's a dead body in a house and he's here. But a much bigger, much more desperate part of Steve believes he can still get away - if only he can find a trash can!

Then he remembers the pool. *The cement!* Without really thinking, he hurls the metal lion into the wet cement at the bottom

of the pool. Another hour, maybe even another 20 minutes, and the cement would have hardened enough to ruin his plans. The lion gleams for a moment, gold flecks showing through green paint, then the wet cement swallows the damn thing as if it never existed.

He can't flee, no matter how badly he wants to. He has to wait for Cliff and Jim, finish the job and pretend like everything is honky-friggin-dory. And he can do it. He's the best cat burglar in San Bernadino, after all.

It was a full day before the police discovered the body, and no one thought to search under the pool for a murder weapon. The solid gold door handle, the gold lion that once adorned the massive doors of Hitler's Eagle's Nest, found its final resting place.

