

LAKE COMO SECRETS

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A Thriller

Michael Jones

Arcanum Verum LLC

Lake Como Secrets

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Historical events referenced in this novel are based on documented history but interpreted fictionally.

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To my mother — she never explained the world to me. She simply loved me until I could see it for myself.

To my father — who taught me that style is how you carry yourself, imagination is how you see what others miss, and creativity is the only way a man truly leaves his mark.

To Michael — there are no limits, son. There never were. That was always just a story someone else wrote. Write your own.

To Manu — you didn't show me the light. You gave it back. You gave me the tools to be myself again. And from that self, this story was born.

To Mino, Francesco, and Chris — who helped me build this story from nothing.

To Lake Como — where beauty and secrets breathe beneath the same still water.

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And to you, holding this book — never let anyone tell you “you can't do it.”

Because the only ones who can't are the ones saying it.

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution.

— Albert Einstein

How to Read This Book



LISTEN
Audiobook



READ
Digital



REELBOOK

I'm a passionate reader before I'm anything else, and I built this book for readers — all of them.

You can read it. You can listen to it. You can experience it as a ReelBook. You can hold it in paper — or go all the way in: investigate the story, chase the clues, and solve the case yourself.

I wanted to give you every option I never had as a reader. How you go is up to you — deep or light, fast or slow. Read for a while, then listen. Listen for a while, then watch the ReelBook. One day you just want to read; read. One day you want to listen; listen. One day you want to see it; watch the ReelBook.

You have full control. Thank you for trying a new way of reading a book.

— *Michael Jones*

PROLOGUE

The Execution

Lake Como, Italy | April 25, 2025 | 4:28 AM



LISTEN
Audiobook



REELBOOK

The telegram arrives eighty years too late.

Giovanni Bianchi holds it under the banker's lamp, hands trembling, not from fear. He stopped being afraid in 1945, when he learned what fear cost. When he watched them hang his brother from a rafter for asking too many questions about that morning on the lake.

This is age. And certainty.

Eighty years of carrying secrets do that to hands.

MOST SECRET — WAR CABINET, LONDON
26 APRIL 1945 — 48 HOURS BEFORE EXECUTION

FROM: PRIME MINISTER, 10 DOWNING STREET
TO: STATION CHIEF, MILAN

RE: DONGO INTERCEPT — OPERATION SUNRISE
MESSAGE BEGINS

MUSSOLINI CONVOY INTERCEPTED LAKE COMO REGION STOP
SECURE ALL DOCUMENTS IN IL DUCE POSSESSION STOP
PRIORITY THE CHURCHILL CORRESPONDENCE STOP THESE
LETTERS COMPROMISE HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT STOP
PARTISAN FORCES WILL EXECUTE IL DUCE ON SIGHT STOP ALL
WITNESSES TO RETRIEVAL NOW CATEGORY FOUR STOP NO
EXCEPTIONS STOP PARTIES PURSUING DOCUMENTS AS FOLLOWS
STOP COMMUNIST PARTISAN COMMAND STOP SOVIET NKVD...

The water-damaged section where the list ends, deliberately cut or accidentally destroyed, he can't tell. After eighty years, does it matter?

Someone sent this three days ago. London postmark. No return address. No note. Just the document that should have been locked in British government archives until 2045.

They know he is alive.

Three days until April 28th. Eighty years to the day since they shot Mussolini and his mistress against a villa wall overlooking this same lake. Since the documents vanished. Since the killing started, and never stopped.

The library smells of stale tobacco and leather, old smoke trapped in mahogany, Persian rugs worn thin by three generations of Bianchis who kept their mouths shut and their doors locked. The banker's lamp throws green light across the desk. Everything past that circle is black.

War photographs pinned beneath glass. Young men in partisan uniforms, Lake Como behind them, 1945. Faces he has outlived. Every one.

Forty-seven witnesses dead over eight decades.

Heart attacks. Car accidents. Falls from balconies. Suicides with typed notes on machines they never owned.

All so convenient.

All so final.

Giovanni reaches for the desk drawer where the Beretta waits. His fingers find the handle.

A hand clamps over his mouth.

Professional. Surgical gloves. The scrape of heavy fabric, a dark cloak, brushing Giovanni's shoulder as the figure moves behind the chair. Fingers like iron pressing his lips against his teeth, killing the scream before it forms. The chair yanks backward, someone behind it, holding him, controlling every movement.

Cold pressure against his neck.

Sharp.

Metal.

A whisper. Close enough that Giovanni feels warmth through the hood's fabric, but the voice is flattened, genderless, stripped of everything that might make it recognizable.

"Eighty years."

Two words. And Giovanni understands.

The needle punctures before the thought can finish forming.

Fire threads through his veins, fast, chemical, wrong.

He tries to jerk away. Can't. Tries to reach the gun. His arms refuse.

Ten seconds: his legs go heavy. Dead weight.

But his right foot still answers. Barely.

On the floor where the chair jerked it loose: a photograph. Facedown. Black and white. He knows the one without seeing it.

He drags his shoe across the floorboards. Pushes it under the chess table, into the dark beyond the lamp's circle, where a man who has come to kill will not think to look.

Fifteen seconds: his arms stop obeying. Hang useless at his sides.

Twenty seconds: everything below his neck turns to stone.

The hand releases his mouth.

Doesn't matter now.

He can't scream. Can't move. Can't breathe properly, his diaphragm half-paralyzed, each breath a war for air that won't fully come.

But he can see.

He can hear.

And he understands exactly what is happening.

The figure moves around the desk. Into the lamplight.

Dark cloak. Surgical gloves. And a mask, black lacquered leather shaped into a long curved beak, the nose sweeping down like a scythe. A plague doctor's mask, the kind the Venetians wore when death walked through the calli and no one dared look it in the face. Only the eyes are visible, two dark points set deep in the hollows, catching the green light of the banker's lamp.

But the eyes.

Giovanni has seen eyes like these before. Flat. Patient. The eyes of someone for whom this is simply work, the way a fisherman guts a catch, the way a farmer wrings a neck. No cruelty. No pleasure. Just the steady patience of an old profession.

The figure leans close. Giovanni smells leather and something chemical, latex and antiseptic. Nothing human. Nothing warm. Whoever is behind the mask does this with the detachment of a surgeon.

Giovanni tries to speak. Tries to say he never told anyone. That the secret cost him everything, his brother, his wife who left because she could not live with the silences, his grandson who thinks he is just a bitter old man with ghost stories.

Nothing comes out. His tongue is dead meat in his mouth.

The figure reaches beneath the cloak.

Removes something that catches the lamplight.

Straight razor. Antique. Mother-of-pearl handle worn smooth by decades of use.

The blade opens with a practiced flick. Catches the light. Stropped to surgical sharpness.

Giovanni's eyes lock on the razor. His life plays in fragments, the morning they surround the convoy above Dongo. Mussolini and Clara Petacci. Their final day. The rifles. The British agent who arrives not late, perfectly timed. And then the lies. The official version, clean as a pressed uniform. The real history buried by men who never let Giovanni speak. Who never let anyone speak. Eighty years of someone else's version, and the world swallows it whole.

The way his brother's body looked three weeks later, hanging in his study with a typed note on a machine he never owned.

The razor moves toward his throat. Cold metal against warm skin.

Giovanni thinks of his grandson in Brooklyn. Michael, who became a journalist because he cannot leave a question alone, same as Giovanni's brother, same stubborn blood. Michael, who does not know what Giovanni has spent eighty years protecting him from.

Michelino. La verità, not the lies. Not like me. But God, the cost...

He wishes he could send it as a text, so Michael could read it, hold it, know. But his fingers are stone. And the phone sits in the drawer beside the Beretta, dark and cold as the lake outside.

The pressure increases.

Then the split.

No pain. Not yet. Just cold. Then warmth spreading down his neck, soaking his collar, pooling in the hollow of his collarbone.

Blood.

The figure leans closer, watching Giovanni's pupils dilate through the mask's dark hollows. Watching the light leave. Not all at once, in stages, like a house going dark room by room.

A whisper, barely audible through the mask's beak: "*Ottanta anni.*"

A gloved hand checks a watch beneath the cloak's sleeve. Counts to ninety.

At ninety, gloved fingers press Giovanni's wrist. Nothing.

The razor is cleaned on a dark cloth produced from a fold of fabric. Left side of the blade. Right side. The cloth disappears back into the folds.

From beneath the cloak: a white ceramic chess piece.

A king.

Placed beside Giovanni's hand. Not upright. Toppled. Fallen.

Checkmate.

Then a second piece. Black king. This one standing tall.

The figure draws the cloak tight. Steps over the blood pooling on the Persian rug. Moves toward the garden door. For one moment, passing the French windows, the long beak of the mask catches the moonlight, a silhouette sharp as a woodcut against the glass, there and gone. Then through the garden gate, into the dark lane beyond, where the cape swallows the figure whole and the night takes back what it gave.

The library stands silent.

The banker's lamp still burns. Green glass casting its circle of light
onto mahogany drowning in blood.

And inside that silence, blood begins to drip.

From throat to desk.

From desk to chair.

From chair to Persian rug.

From rug to ancient floorboards that have held the weight of three
wars and too many secrets for one family.

Each drop a second passing.

Each drop a second closer to a phone ringing in Brooklyn.

Where Michael Jones wakes to a phone he does not yet know will
change everything.

At exactly 4:28 AM, New York time.

The same rhythm as the blood falling four thousand miles away.

Two-second intervals.

As if the drops travel across an ocean and become sound.

Drip.

Ring.

Drip.

Ring.

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