

Prologue

“Hey Dad, check it out!” Gunther Schueller pointed at the video game room with excitement. Inside, incessant whirring, chiming bells and psychedelic lights surrounded a maze of electronic devices.

Hans van Schueller turned and chuckled. “Ah, yes. I can see where you’ll be spending your time!” Canard’s new cruise ship, the Princess, was a modern marvel. Schueller and his family looked forward to a well-deserved vacation on the liner’s maiden voyage.

What they didn’t know was that the gaudy cave-like video room would soon become young Gunther’s eternal tomb.

Schueller, the European Commissioner for the European Union, was returning to Brussels. The German statesman had just completed a landmark trade deal between top U.S. officials and the EU.

In fact, many passengers were the world’s richest and most influential people, including the U.S. ambassador to the UK and European diplomats. A few hours earlier, the Princess had left New York with great fanfare; ports of call would be Britain, France and Italy. Measuring 1,130 feet in length, the huge ship towered twenty-one stories from keel to masthead. The manifest named 2,400 guests of its 2,800 capacity.

But the festive crowd on board the Princess was oblivious to the eminent danger lurking below.

Some two hundred miles away, a Russian-made nuclear submarine prowled the ocean floor like a stealthy bull shark. The Foxchase U-486, an Antyey type Attack Submarine, was armed with twenty-four ballistic missiles. Banks of twelve were stored on each side, between twin layers of the boat’s thick hull skin. On this mission, the missile of choice was the 100-RU Veder, NATO code-named Stallion. The top-secret, rocket-boosted torpedo was especially designed to destroy American carriers and submarines.

The Princess deftly sliced the moonlit sea at thirty knots. Inside, guests were joyfully dining, dancing and socializing. Lively music echoed against the ocean, then faded in the cool night air.

“Yes!” screeched young Gunther. He had scored another hit in a

video game entitled, *Dead or Alive*.

In the dining area, Schueller and his wife Elke sipped a glass of red wine—Brunello di Montalcino, 1993. They had finished an elegant dinner comprised of chateaubriand, scalloped potatoes and sautéed zucchini.

Wineglasses in hand and elbows propped on the table, they interlocked their arms in a toast. His eyes fixed admiringly on his wife, Schueller said, “*Zur Gesundheit und zum Glück,*” to health and happiness. They drank some wine, then kissed softly.

Framing her heart-shaped face, Elke’s short, golden blonde hair glistened in the candlelight. The smile on her ruby lips quickly reached her dazzling hazel eyes.

Meanwhile, on board Foxchase U-486, the submarine commander, a short man, looked at the clock on the wall. A deep frown etched his round, weathered face. He twitched his head to the left and shouted into a snake-like microphone, “Prepare to launch!”

A launch technician wearing heavy earphones lifted the cover on the number one missile switch. “Fire control ready!” His unshaven, boyish face gleamed with beads of sweat.

On the Princess, Schueller tipped his glass and savored the last drop of wine. “Ready to dance?”

“Yes!” Elke replied.

The couple rose to their feet in tandem. Hand-in-hand, they proceeded to the crowded dance floor in front of the main stage. A trumpet player in the sixteen-piece band was playing a soothing arrangement of Moon River. They came together cheek-to-cheek and began dancing.

In the depths of the ocean, Foxchase U-486 had reached optimal firing range. His scrunched hat tilted up; the stone-faced commander navigated the sinister iron whale. “Steady. Maintain course,” he ordered. A red light on the bulkhead cast a creepy glow upon a row of engineers seated on the starboard side. They were motionless, eyes glued to multi-colored radar screens on an instrument panel.

“Two minutes to launch!” declared the navigator.

With a slight quiver, the launch technician rested his hand on the panel and loosely gripped the red toggle switch with his fingers. His bloodshot eyes were hollow.

“Minus sixty seconds!” said the commander. Intently following the second hand, he arched his eyebrows and took in a deep breath. “Three, two, one, fire one!”

“Fire one!” the technician blurted, while flipping the ignition switch.

The attack vessel shuddered, and recoiled in a rumbling crescendo. The Stallion had shot out of its twenty-six-inch diameter tube. Target: The Carnard Princess.

After the nuclear warhead cleared the submarine, its rocket boosters ignited underwater. The Stallion burst through the surface spitting orange flames and puffy billows of gray and whitesmoke. Guided by GPS driven radar, it reached altitude and darted through the air at twice the speed of sound.

When the lightweight torpedo arrived at the drop zone, it shut down its rockets and slowed in velocity. A small parachute popped open with a sharp clap. The deadly warhead gently dropped into the dark sea, just three miles ahead of the Princess. A few feet below the surface, its propeller motor started with a surge.

Armed with the equivalent of 200,000 tons of TNT, the projectile zoomed towards the innocent cruise ship for the final kill. Like a serpent, it slithered quietly through the water with diabolical intent.

Within minutes, the Stallion struck the bow of the luxury ship precisely below the waterline. It blew a gaping hole in the ship’s hull. The huge liner momentarily wrenched.

On the dance floor, Schueller was thrown backwards, but quickly regained his balance. Fear in her eyes, Elke fell into his arms and they clutched each other tight. People stumbled to the floor, furniture shifted, drinking glasses tumbled and shattered. The music stopped. A classic Steinway piano slid off the stage and crashed to the floor. Alarms sounded. Screams of terror filled the room.

In a matter of seconds, the timed warhead melted through the forward interior walls. When the secondary explosion occurred, the Princess became a massive fireball. Shock waves traveled hundreds of miles. The blast created a crater over 2,000 feet wide, and unleashed a 1,500 feet high waterspout. A colossal tidal wave followed.

The cruise liner had disintegrated.

There were no survivors.

