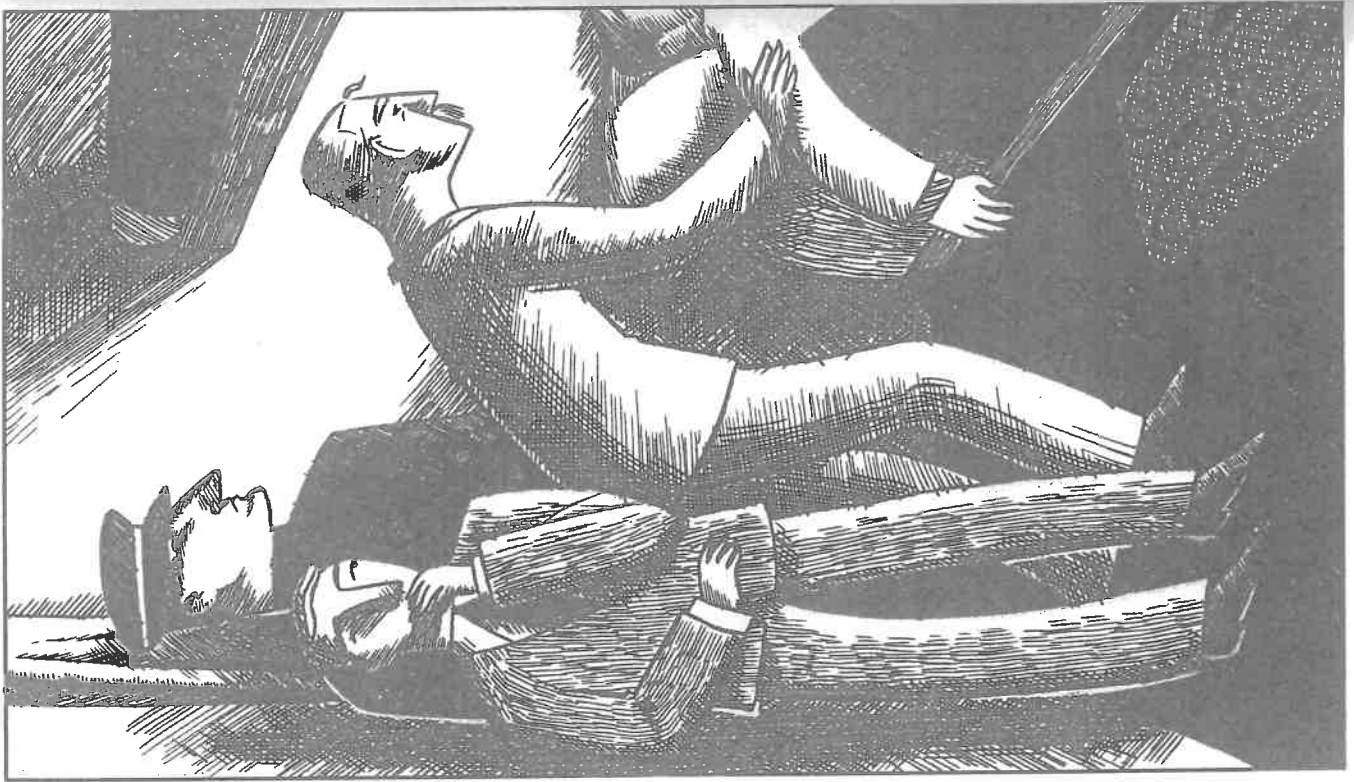




THE MAN IN CABIN 16

Over the Atlantic, 1937

JACK PAULING WASN'T A SPY. He was a junior attaché with the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, twenty-four years old, and wet behind the ears. Despite the excitement of the times, Jack was always given the dulllest of jobs, setting schedules, holding meetings with his equally junior counterparts in the German government. But when word leaked out that Chancellor Hitler was sending a top courier from Berlin to Washington with secret papers, sensible, dull Jack was the one chosen to pursue him. "There's no one else," the ambassador said bluntly as he personally gave him the orders. "You must intercept those papers—at any cost."

The world was still at a tenuous peace as Jack tailed his courier across Germany to an airfield near Frankfurt. Jack watched his quarry board a zeppelin bound for the States. Passage on the lighter-than-air ship was expensive—\$405 in U.S. dollars, he calculated, the price of a small car—but his orders were explicit, and the flight was only half full. Jack booked one of the remaining cabins and hurried on board. The date was May 3, 1937. In three days, this airship, the *Hindenburg*, would be landing in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

Jack did his best to blend in with the crowd. The bedroom cabins were tiny, but the observation lounge was comfortable and the service impeccable. The airship crew, decked out in

perfectly fitting brown uniforms, easily outnumbered the guests.

When the tow ropes were released, the *Hindenburg* slowly drifted up into the clouds. In the cramped two decks, everyone soon grew familiar with everyone else. More than once, the courier, Rudolph Lang, eyed Jack curiously.

"He recognizes me," Jack thought. "He must have seen me earlier. On the train from Berlin or maybe following him in the streets."

Late on that first night, as the *Hindenburg* floated majestically over the Atlantic, Jack followed Lang into the nearly empty lounge. Lang crossed to a far corner of the narrow room. "Heil," a voice said in a soft greeting. Jack could see a man's arm raised in a Nazi salute from a hidden chair. Someone was there, just out of Jack's line of sight.

"Heil, Heil," Lang answered in an amused tone.

"You think it's funny?" the voice growled back. "This American is after you. I would take the papers myself, but I have a rendezvous in Boston. Legally, that pouch is the property of Germany and can't be touched. But once in America...I warn you, Lang. Do not become a liability."

Jack slithered behind a bulkhead. But the drone of the propellers prevented him from hearing anything more.

For the next two days, Jack did his best to keep an eye on Lang as he kept himself out of sight. It wasn't easy. Fritzzy, one of the cabin attendants, always seemed to be nearby, offering a drink or wondering out loud why Jack was loitering in shadowy doorways.

The last morning arrived with an annoying development. Thunderstorms were preventing them from landing on time. The captain announced a 12-hour delay, then treated the passengers to a floating tour of the New York skyline. As they passed over Manhattan the ship came within a hundred feet of the spire of the Empire State Building, a spire that had been designed, but never used, as a mooring mast for these airships.

Late that afternoon, Jack was walking down a corridor when he heard a soft cry of pain and a muffled groan. It had come from the cabin he'd just passed. Cabin 16, Rudolph Lang's.

The junior attaché turned back, his heart in his throat, and knocked on the cabin door. No answer. The curtains were drawn on the window and the door was locked. Jack checked the empty corridor, then ran to the outer door and threw it open. He was standing in a hallway by a stairwell, both of them empty. And then a shadow and the sound of footsteps on stairs. Fritzzy was wandering up from B Deck. "There's an emergency," Jack shouted at the cabin attendant. "Hurry!"

Jack pulled Fritzzy in the corridor, babbling to him in broken German, trying to explain. Just as they reached Cabin 16, the *Hindenburg's* resident doctor came strolling down from the other end of the corridor. "What is the matter?" he inquired.

Jack stated the facts, at the same time urging Fritzzy to hurry and use his passkey. When the door finally opened, the three men peered into the dimly lit cabin and saw Rudolph Lang, German state courier, lying on his narrow bunk, a knife protruding from his bloody chest.

The doctor pushed his way past the others and knelt by the motionless man. "Dead," he whispered. "Come in for a minute. Close the door." The room could barely accommodate the men and the corpse.

The *Hindenburg's* physician immediately took charge. "I will inform the captain. Leave the body as it is. You will lock the door, Fritzzy. Inform the other attendants not to open this cabin, not for anyone. You, sir." He turned to Jack. "You must not tell a soul. The captain will handle this his own way." The doctor, it seemed to Jack, was more concerned about the bad publicity for the Third Reich's luxury airship than about the murder itself.

Helpless, Jack let himself be pushed out of the cabin. Fritzzy locked the door and, like a true Prussian, went about

his duties. Jack returned to his own cabin to think. What should he do? Was his mission over, now that Lang was dead? No, he decided. Of course not. He must recover the papers.

Jack was just leaving his cabin when a series of three long whistles played on the intercom. As on any ship, this was a well-known signal. Everyone, passengers and crew alike, was to gather immediately in the observation lounge.

The long lounge was packed with eager faces. The threat of thunderstorms was over. In a few minutes, they would make a final pass over Coney Island, across Brooklyn to Manhattan, then on to New Jersey. The captain was in full uniform. The entire crew, except for the first mate, were standing in tight, neat rows. As the captain thanked the guests and explained the disembarking procedures, Jack idly counted the crew. Sixty. He counted again. Sixty, not counting the first mate who was manning the wheel. Number of passengers? Thirty-five, not counting the corpse in Cabin 16.

When the captain dismissed the meeting, many of the passengers stayed by the windows. But not Jack. He knew what he had to do—get into Cabin 16. And he'd already picked out the man to help.

A cabin attendant, one that Jack had never seen before, had stood shyly at the back. "He probably doesn't know which cabin I'm in," Jack mused. "With any luck, I can persuade him that I lost my key."

The attendant was a gruff man, middle-aged, with great sideburns and a waxed mustache that must have been all the rage during the late Great War.

"Excuse me," Jack said in his best German as he button-holed the shy man. "I've locked myself out of my cabin. Can you help me?"

The attendant identified himself as Günther. He was brisk and solicitous, until he learned that the cabin in question was number 16. "*Ach, nein.* We are under orders not to allow anyone in that cabin. I don't know why. Perhaps I can talk to the captain."

"No," Jack said as he fell into retreat. "Don't bother. I'll figure something out."

Jack did figure something out. From the smoking room he stole a metal pipe cleaner and then, after several tries, managed to jimmy open the locked cabin.

But inside there was no body. No blood, no hint of the murder scene. And worst of all, no trace of the leather pouch containing the papers Rudolph Lang had been carrying to America.

Jack stood in Cabin 16, mulling over his predicament. The transatlantic voyage was almost over. The *Hindenburg* now hovered over its mooring masts. In the distance, he could hear orders being shouted down to the ground crew.

And then it happened, the terrific, deafening explosion. The floor under Jack's feet tilted back. The room was falling. Everything was falling. Jack ran into the corridor, and was instantly overwhelmed by the smoke. And then, in a whoosh, came the flames.

Only in the aftermath did Jack understand the enormity of it. In less than a minute, an unexplained explosion and fire had destroyed the huge airship, killing dozens of crew and passengers.

Jack emerged with only superficial burns. Sitting among the other stunned survivors in the customs shed, he was, like them, awaiting the ambulances that would transport them to hospitals. As the confusion subsided, Jack looked around for his German acquaintances. The doctor, he saw, was alive. Fritzzy had also survived, along with the other attendant, Günther.

Despite his painful burns, Jack focused his mind. He had to discover the truth before everyone dispersed, and his chance of securing the papers was gone forever.

Jack located the police captain in charge. He explained who he was and showed his credentials. "Before anyone from the *Hindenburg* leaves this building, I need to get some answers."

The captain quickly grasped the situation and pledged his full cooperation.

- (1) Who killed Rudolph Lang? (2) Who is the other German agent?
(3) Who now has the secret papers?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 140.
To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 117.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON ZEPPELINS & AIRSHIPS

AROUND THE YEAR 1900, Count von Zeppelin designed the lighter-than-air ship that would later bear his name, a rigid, motorized, cigar-shaped vehicle lifted by helium.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Zeppelin Company of Germany developed these airships as a form of global transportation. In an age when airplanes were dangerous, cramped, and limited in range, the zeppelin was heralded as the passenger carrier of the future. The *Graf Zeppelin* in the late twenties and early thirties became a potent symbol of Germany's technological superiority.

When the *Hindenburg* was christened in 1936, it represented the next step. It stood 16 stories tall and 808 feet long, only 78½ feet shorter than the *Titanic*. It still holds the record as the largest flying object ever built.

The *Hindenburg* differed from earlier designs, in that the passenger area was not in an attached gondola but was built into the hull. The living space included 25 cabins, a dining room, a lounge with a baby grand piano, a reading room, showers, a kitchen, a bar, a smoking room, plus full facilities for the crew. The two promenades were equipped with windows that could open.

Because of the Zeppelin Company's ties to the Nazi government, the United States, the world's only supplier of helium, refused to sell them the nonflammable gas. This forced the *Hindenburg's* owners to use flammable hydrogen. They set

new fire precautions in place. Matches, flashbulbs, and lighters were removed from passengers' luggage. The smoking room was fireproofed with extra air pressure to keep out any stray hydrogen. The only cigarette lighter was chained to a table in the middle of the room.

No one knows the cause of the *Hindenburg* explosion and fire. Was it an atmospheric fluke left over from the thunderstorms? A careless spark? One theory pins the blame on the flammable varnish used to tighten the ship's outer skin. According to this theory, even if the *Hindenburg* had been filled with helium, it would still have burned.

The *Hindenburg* disaster spelled the end of passenger dirigibles. The *Graf Zeppelin II*, then under construction in Germany, was dismantled. Within a few years, airplanes could make the transatlantic crossing without refueling. For the next six decades, no new dirigibles were built. (Modern-day blimps are much smaller and not rigid. Like balloons, they take their shape from the gas inside them.)

Today, the Zeppelin Company is once again in the airship business. There are currently three in service, transporting sightseers in Germany and ferry passengers in Japan.