

the CAT'S EYE

Fans Are Talking About ... *In the President's Service*

Ace has a rare gift to blend history and fictional characters, in a way that is both true to the facts and compelling to read. As a history teacher, it meant a lot to me that he structured this series to be both accurate and fun to read.

The *In The President's Service* books show Ace's writing at its most versatile—from wartime intrigue to personal crisis to murder mystery to political scheming, and then back again, all in the space of a small number of pages. And the story keeps the reader hooked from beginning to end.

If you are a fan of World War II fiction, of great detective stories, or of just plain old excellent writing, get into this series. Ace will not disappoint you!

—Mike Messner, Mountain View, CA

Ace Collins takes these short novellas to a new height. He researches and loves history so the details come out in his writings. All this series sheds new light on the people and places which played such a role in World War II. How some people tended to not be loyal to a flag but to the power they could gain by playing one side against the other. This made for some very tense moments as well as some very lethal enemies.

—Caliegh

These books remind me of the old serial movies on Saturdays back in the day! Can't wait for the next one. Helen Meeker started with *The Yellow Packard* and I have read them all. Keep them coming, Ace!!

—Helen

The reason I loved the story so much is because it has mysteries that weave together throughout the story to keep me glued to the book. I love the way the author piques the interest of readers by his brilliant storytelling. I am excited to read the next installment in this intriguing story. Thank you for writing with great details, having interesting characters, and a storyline that takes us back in history.

—Deanna

I read this on my computer and after realizing the book was complete, I had to look to be sure. Oh, my goodness, I need to find out what happened. Ace Collins, do you have Episode 9 finished because I want to read it!

This story takes place during World War II. Espionage, mystery, and kidnappings abound. It's fast paced and well written with researched historical facts. The scenes are in England, Europe, and the United States. The characters are well developed and continue to grow throughout. The author has an element of faith interwoven. If you want a clean, suspenseful story that moves quickly, *In the President's Service* is your series. *Shadows in the Moonlight* is Episode 8. Even though I have read only one other in the series, I could pick up what was happening.

—Sharon

Ace Collins makes this story build with intensity and suspense, introducing new twists and turns in the plot. Now in the third installment, Helen Meeker is severely wounded and not expected to live even if the doctors can find someone with her B- blood type. The Third Reich is using humans for guinea pigs to be able to build super soldiers who would heal completely at a remarkable rate when wounded. Helen needs a miracle as evil seems to be progressing on the war front. At the White House, the discovery of a mole infiltration sets everyone under a microscope until he or she is removed.

Not all the characters are working for the benefit or destruction of a nation as some are using the chaos war brings for selfish benefit. As I read the tale, I was kept guessing as to what was happening not only because of characters' actions or words, but sometimes because the author wasn't revealing what happened to certain players. The sacrifice called upon by the President in the story wasn't happening overseas or on the home front, but in ways many people didn't know of in this fictional plot.

I don't want to spoil the series for you, but one thing I will say is when a new major turn of events happens that puts the very foundation of American government at risk, I sure was surprised! I never anticipated or thought of that angle to the plot; it was not just amazing, but in my opinion raised the climax of the episodes up several notches.

All I can say is don't miss reading *In the President's Service A Date With Death #1*, *Dark Pool #2* or *Blood Brother #3* and anticipate further episodes coming soon!

—Lighthouse88

Ace Collins is a master storyteller and historian. He has made me view war so much differently than my simplistic views before. Never had I considered there could be masterminds behind the major powers, minds not claiming loyalty to one nationality or another, but simply addicted to power.

—Becky

Ace Collins is a brilliant and masterful storyteller with great plots and characters. His research of history comes across in his books. This has been an amazing story of danger, espionage, suspense, twists and turns that keeps you on the edge of your seat.

—Donna

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The Cat's Eye—Book 14 In the President's Service

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This book is a work of fiction. Characters are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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the CAT'S EYE

BOOK 13

IN THE PRESIDENT'S SERVICE

Ace Collins



Plymouth, Massachusetts

PART ONE



CHAPTER I

Wednesday, November 18, 1935

9:45 a.m.

Farm just outside of Oslo, Norway

Though she deflected the compliments, Anna Olson knew her five-year-old daughter, Elga, was the most beautiful child in the area—perhaps in all of Norway. Her arctic-blue eyes were mesmerizing. Like magnets, they attracted and almost hypnotized everyone the child met. As the news spread of those clear and strikingly beautiful eyes, complete strangers traveled miles just to have a glimpse of them. Once visitors pulled their gaze away from Elga's eyes, they were just as struck by Elga's creamy, flawless complexion and her soft, wavy, straw-colored hair. She was literally the most beautiful girl most had ever seen—the embodiment of Nordic perfection. But in this rare case, beauty was far more than just skin deep. Beyond her obvious attractiveness, Elga radiated all the other qualities parents prayed for in their daughters.

She was reading by age three, playing piano at four, and now solving math problems that often stumped

fifth graders. She was outgoing, friendly, talkative, and unassuming, as well as bright and curious, but she was neither spoiled nor conceited. All signs pointed to a great future, limited only by her dreams and her parents' meager resources. Yet, that Elga was seemingly unaffected by the adulation showered upon her was most remarkable. Every parent prays for a child like Elga, but in this rare case, the prayers were fully answered.

This Wednesday morning was much like all the others at the Olson home, beginning with a hearty meal provided by the farm's bounty, followed by daily chores. Elga followed her father through the fields, into the barn and down to the creek. With the work completed, the tall, lanky, and deceptively strong twenty-nine-year-old Sven hitched up a team of horses to a sixty-year-old wagon to make his weekly trip to town for supplies, leaving his wife and only child alone for a few hours.

As crime was unknown in this small, tight-knit community, he was unconcerned about his family's safety. As fate would decree, he should have been. He had no way of knowing people had been watching the house for weeks, their eyes drawn strongly to Elga. These were not the eyes of harmless admirers, but rather the eyes of those with intentions too evil to imagine.

Fifteen minutes after Sven left, Anna had cleaned up the kitchen, finished the breakfast dishes and started the laundry. The petite, blue-eyed woman was scrubbing her husband's soil-stained shirt on a washboard when she heard a knock on the door. After setting her laundry to one side and drying her hands, she made her way from the back of the tiny four-room home to the front door, where

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she smoothed her apron before opening the wooden entry. On the other side, she found two strangers.

“May I help you?” Anna asked, her tone showing both innocence and trust.

The taller of the two men, dressed in a long, dark leather coat, looked beyond the woman to where Elga played with her doll in the corner of the small living room. His expression stern, he studied the child for a few moments before nodding. A second later, his short, stout companion pulled a handgun from under his blue coat and without saying a word, fired three shots. In rapid order, the bullets entered Anna's chest, piercing her heart before exiting her back and digging into the wood-covered walls. As soon as the mother, her welcoming smile still on her face, slumped to the floor, the taller man stepped over Anna's now limp and bleeding body and roughly grabbed the stunned child. Before Elga could move, the stranger retrieved a syringe from his pocket, seized the girl's left arm and pushed the needle under her skin. Within ten seconds, she went limp. Sweeping the child up and stepping over Anna, her eyes open but unseeing, he stormed out of the house toward the road where his car was parked. Within five hours, the child with the startling blue eyes was on her way to Germany, leaving those who lived around the Olsons to ponder a horrific mystery that would likely never be solved.



CHAPTER 2

Monday, July 10, 1942

2:16 p.m.

The Wallace Estate, Wilmette, Illinois

In his twenty-seven years of police work, Roger Richards had seen death more times than he could count. Still, some crime scenes had crawled under his skin and into the deep recesses of his mind to resurface as haunting memories on long, sleepless nights. Most involved the murder of children; almost all the others were suicides. As he stood in the study of millionaire industrialist Michael E. Wallace's Chicago mansion, he leaned over to study a small woman—Asian, dressed in a kimono, appearing to be about forty. She rested on her stomach, her legs gracefully extended toward the desk. Her features were fragile, and her skin was pale. Her face, turned to the right, revealed a small bruise and scratch on her left cheek, likely caused when she struck the hardwood floor. Dried blood no longer seeped from a single bullet wound to her head. Yet, even viewed in a most horrid death, she was beautiful. Her tiny frame and delicate yet distinctive

features gave the appearance of a porcelain, oriental doll, the kind popular before the war but relegated to attic storage or trash heaps after Pearl Harbor. And in 1942, all things Asian, perhaps even this small woman, now seemed tarnished.

About two feet from the woman's body was a snub-nosed thirty-eight. The black barrel shone in the afternoon sunlight now cascading through French doors. If things were as they appeared, Richards doubted there would be fingerprints on the weapon as the woman was wearing white lace gloves.

After unbuttoning the jacket of his blue, pinstriped suit, the cop crouched beside the body but touched nothing. Rocking back and forth on his size eleven, scuffed brown wingtips, his gray eyes took in the scene and imprinted on his brain the geometry that played into every case involving a gun. To fully comprehend a crime, to clearly picture the scene in his mind, there were angles to be figured and distances to be ascertained. They had to be combined with physics, including the strength needed to pull the gun's trigger and the force of the exploding projectile as the bullet left the barrel and entered the victim. In this case, the math and science didn't seem to add up.

What the cop observed showed the woman should have initially been sitting in the chair behind the desk. She then would have placed the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger. If that had been the case, she would have fallen forward onto the floor. But why was the weapon out of her hand? Shouldn't the gun have dropped under her as her hands had? Shouldn't it still be in her grip?

The cop leaned closer. The woman had evidently not

moved after she fell; nothing indicated anything but a dead drop, so she had to have died the instant the bullet entered her brain. If that were the case, why was the gun so far from the body, and why was there no blood on the barrel? And where were the powder burns on her skin?

Richards turned his eyes to the desk chair, a high-backed swivel model, upholstered in maroon leather. Surprisingly, there was no blood apparent on the cushion, arms, or back. In fact, the only blood obvious at the scene was the pool around the woman's head.

Standing behind Richards, observing his every move, was the home's owner. Michael Wallace—"M.E.," as he was known around the city—was a large man with graying hair, a stern face, soft jaw, and deep wrinkles likely caused by too much frowning or maybe a habit of sucking on cigarettes. As Wallace lit a Camel, the fourth in the past ten minutes, Richards could easily see he was agitated and impatient. But what Richards didn't observe interested him most. The man seemed neither stunned nor shocked and as years investigating homicides and suicides had proven, stunned and shocked are two distinctly different emotions.

Rising to face his host, the cop frowned and shook his head. Something smelled. In fact, everything about this business stank. With science and math, as well as human instincts not producing the right answers, he needed to shift his investigation in a new direction.

"What's the woman's name?" the cop not too gently demanded.

"Mayu," the man answered. His voice was strong, almost stoic. If he'd never seen death before—and how

many businessmen had been around a gunshot victim—this was a bizarre reaction.

“And who was she to you?” Richards prodded.

“My wife.”

“Your wife?” The answer came as a complete surprise. Richards expected the dead woman to have been employed as a servant, but never in his wildest dreams did he consider her to be married to the millionaire. As soon as the words were uttered, the cop wished he could have couched his response differently. They sounded too judgmental and harsh. But with no way to pull them back, there was now only time to wait for a reaction. He didn't have to wait long.

“Yes,” Wallace barked, evidently offended. “Do you have a problem with my having been married to a woman from Japan?”

“No,” Richards quickly assured him, “I'm not going to condemn you for that. In my way of thinking, everyone has a right to marry whom they please. But when a wife dies, the death is personal and takes the case in whole new direction, so I do need for you to tell me about her.”

Wallace frowned. “Not sure what that has to do with anything. She was a woman I met on a business trip two decades ago. We fell in love, married, and I brought her back here. That's the whole story.”

Richards shrugged. Emotions mixed in with math and science made him uncomfortable, yet even in times when anger and grief collided, he had to dig for answers. If he held back, he was not serving the victim.

“Mr. Wallace, what you've told me is only the outline and a short one at that. I need much more. In cases like this, I have to know possible motives, even for suicides.

No,” he corrected himself, “especially for suicides.” Though he doubted the woman had killed herself, for the moment, he thought it best to allow that explanation to stand, so he added a reinforcing phrase, hoping to bring out some vital information. “Mr. Wallace, I’m a couple of years too old to be drafted. The military doesn’t want a man of my age. I’ve been in this business since 1928, working homicide for a decade. In that time, I’ve learned this. The act of taking one’s own life is not something to be treated lightly. So why don’t you explain to me why Mrs. Wallace decided to stop her own clock?”

Nodding, Wallace nodded, moved over to a chair placed next to a window and eased down onto the deep cushion. As the sun highlighted his graying hair, as he took a long drawn from a cigarette and allowed his eyes to roll toward the ceiling, with as his free hand, he drummed on the chair’s arm. For a few seconds, he remained mute; and then, in a voice still devoid of emotion, spilled out the story of a marriage that sounded perfect until international events came into play.

“We were born in much different worlds,” he began. “She was a descendant of Samurai warriors and very proud of her heritage. I was about as far from nobility as you can get. My father worked in sanitation, and I often wore clothing he dug out the trash. Somehow Mayu and I complemented each other perfectly. Our happiness only started with the two of us, but went well beyond us.”

Wallace paused and looked at Richards. His expression suddenly became emotional, and his tone was sincere as he continued the story of a union that was both normal and exotic. “Sure, they doubted us at first, but in time my old friends enjoyed my wife’s company almost as much as

I did. In fact, because of her intelligence, wit, and charm, she pretty much became the star of our social circle. While never the leader—she was too reserved for that—Mayu was the one person women turned to when they needed ideas on decorating. She even helped them with their children's weddings and coming up with new ideas for parties. She also arranged the flower displays for almost every social event in their homes and clubs. Over time, she became their go-to friend, the one they could always depend on. If they were sick, she brought them soup. If they lost a loved one, she was first to visit them. I thought they used her, but she never saw things that way. She just wanted to be accepted and needed. I believe she was."

"She sounds like an extraordinary woman," the cop suggested.

"She was that and more. Despite the fact she wasn't white, our friends even invited her into their clubs. She played golf and learned the latest dance moves. She was as much or more American than Carole Lombard or Bette Davis."

He paused, his brooding eyes pushing into slits. "And then Pearl Harbor changed everything. Suddenly, Mayu was shunned. People even went so far as to completely ignore her when we were out together. They'd greet me, but they wouldn't even say hello to her. Many suggested my wealth and influence was what was keeping her from being shipped to an internment camp. They were too stupid or blinded by prejudice to know that internment camps were only for Japanese living on the West Coast. So, our lives went from sunshine to dark in the blink of an eye." After smashing his spent cigarette in an ashtray, he added, "Needless to say, the party invites stopped, as

did the drop by visits and phone calls. All of this was made even worse by the demands of war. As production increased at my plants, my business kept me away from home much more than before the war.

“If only we'd had kids. That might have helped fill her days. But we couldn't have children, and suddenly, she was alone. In a real sense, she was a prisoner in this big old house.” He paused, then added, “I guess you could call her a prisoner of war.”

Wallace pulled out and lit another cigarette. “She couldn't go home. Her childhood friends would have seen her as a traitor. They'd never approved of her marrying outside her kind. And yet, what could she do here? She couldn't go shopping, out to eat or even to church without being accosted or treated like a leper. Imagine her loneliness!”

Wallace's eyes went back the ceiling. For several moments, he watched the cigarette smoke hovering above his head. Then, with no prompting, he continued.

“You have to understand the Japanese mind to grasp what happened to her. She was consumed by guilt. She believed that, because she was my wife and she was from Japan, she was costing me all I held dear. I heard her once refer to herself as a cancer. And certainly, when my company began getting war contracts, I was investigated a lot more deeply than most are, simply because of her. And I'll admit to you, and everyone else, being shunned did bother me. I carried a lot of bottled-up rage over the way Mayu was treated. I can't deny that. I felt like I was being cheated and abused by my friends and even my own country.”

The cop nodded. Without knowing, Wallace had given

him a motive for murdering his wife. But his words had also convinced Richards the man loved Mayu. So, did love trump the motive? Too soon to tell. More questions had to be asked.

“Mr. Wallace, how did your wife feel about the war?”

“She hated the war. Despite what she chose to wear when she ...” He paused as if trying to control his emotions before once more finding his voice. “Despite what you see her in now, she always dressed in modern western style. She loved classy suits, pumps, and hats. She closely followed the dress styles of that movie actress ...” He snapped his fingers, trying to recall a name before continuing. “She was in that big film about a decade ago, *It Happened One Night*.”

“Claudette Colbert,” the cop offered.

“Yeah, that’s the one. She bought movie magazines and watched all her films to see what Colbert was sporting.” He pointed across the room with his cigarette. “The outfit she died in was the one she was wearing when I first met her in 1920. Today was our anniversary. She told me this morning that when she finished volunteering at the local kitchen that serves bums and outcasts—which she did every Monday and Thursday for a decade—she was going to make me a very special dinner.” He paused and shook his head as he focused on his wife’s dead body. “Maybe someone said something this morning that set her off and robbed her of her will to live. Perhaps putting those clothes back on was symbolic. Maybe she was ending our life together as we began. I don’t know. None of this makes any sense to me except it’s all the fault of this stupid war.”

Wallace stood and walked over to the French doors, looking out on his grounds. “I can tell you this, she was an

American citizen, and she loved this country. She found her voice here.” His tone softened as he turned to look once more at the limp body on the floor. “But a part of her was still Japanese. Perhaps the shame of what her people did weighed her down to the point where she couldn’t live with it anymore. Maybe her death was actually a product of guilt—for something she had nothing to do with.”

“Was there a note?” Richards asked.

“Not that I’ve found.”

“And I don’t think you’ll find one,” Richards spoke solemnly as he turned back to the body. He had as much information as he was likely to get, so now was the time to reveal what the math and science told him and then gauge his host’s reaction. He sighed deeply before speaking. “I’m betting when we test her gloves, we’ll discover she didn’t shoot herself.”

Wallace gasped, genuinely shocked. “What are you saying?”

The cop raised his eyebrows. “I’m not staking my reputation on my conclusion, but I think she might have been murdered.”

Wallace looked from the body to Richards. “Then why did you ask me about motives for suicide?”

“Based on your call to the station, I assumed her death was suicide,” Richards explained. “You told me a woman had killed herself in your study. Weren’t those your exact words?”

“I was sure that was the way it had to be.”

“Okay, then let me ask you this. Whose gun is that?”

“Mine,” he replied. “I keep it in the side drawer of the desk.”

“Did she know the gun was there?”

“Of course, she did. She'd watched me pull it out when I went on business trips and put it back when I returned. My friends knew my weapon was there too. Heck, everyone who knows me knows where I keep that gun.”

“Did you move the gun when you found her body?”

“No!” he quickly and vehemently exclaimed. “I didn't touch anything.”

“You just left her as she was?”

“Yes. I'd been at my office downtown. I came home, walked into this room and discovered her. I immediately called you.”

“You didn't hear the shot?”

“No. As I just explained, it happened while I was gone.”

“What about the servants?”

“We don't have any. Mayu insisted on taking care of the household chores and doing the cooking. She wouldn't have things any other way.”

“So, she died alone?”

“I guess so. I mean ... that's the only thing that makes sense.”

Richard moved closer to the widower, set his jaw and fired off a completely unexpected question. “Mr. Wallace, did you love your wife?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Did you love your wife?” the cop repeated, staring directly into the millionaire's face.

“Yes.”

Richards grimly smiled. “My years of experience prove, more often than not, when a loved one finds the body of someone who has taken their own life, they rush over and pick up the victim in their arms as if trying to will them back to life. Most even admit to asking the dead person

questions about why they did what they did. It takes a few minutes for a person's head to clear enough to call us, and when they do, their voice is either filled with emotion, or it's almost zombie-like. Also, they're almost always confused and lost. You displayed none of that when you talked to me on the phone. You sounded as if you were telling me about something no more important than discovering your mailbox had been knocked over."

"Are you suggesting I killed my wife?"

"I'm suggesting someone might have, and your reaction makes you the most likely suspect."

"I didn't," Wallace protested. He tossed the cigarette into the ashtray. "There is no way."

"Then you have nothing to worry about," the cop replied.

"I would never hurt her," the millionaire whispered. "Never once did I slap Mayu."

"Mr. Wallace, I hope you're telling me the truth. If you are, and if we find she didn't kill herself, then, in this war climate, you can likely give us the names of many people who had come to dislike or mistrust your wife since December 7th of last year. Maybe some of those are even in your social circle." Richards glanced back to the body. "There are people who see any person of Japanese origin as the enemy. They have come to the unsettling conclusion that by killing them, they are showing patriotism. I'm not suggesting you are the only one with a motive, but you did admit your wife's race was now affecting and limiting your life. You even pointed out just a few minutes ago how lonely you were and how angry you sometimes became."

Wallace didn't respond but instead reached for another cigarette. His hand was shaking as he lit up.

The cop shrugged as he once again turned his attention to the body. He took a few moments to reaffirm his earlier observations, then added, "Or maybe the medical examiner will prove my hunch wrong and the poor woman did kill herself. But even then, if she did find a way to fire the gun at the angle needed, and it somehow dropped where it dropped—which doesn't make mathematical or scientific sense to me—what likely drove her to suicide were the attitudes of those narrow-minded people in your social group who suddenly stopped calling her a friend. In a way, it is still murder!"

"I didn't kill her," Wallace forcefully spat, "but if someone did, I'll track them down and make them pay."

Richards looked at him and frowned. "That's my job!" Then he glanced around the room, doing a quick inventory, "Have you searched to see if anything's missing?"

"Of course not. I just assumed ..."

"Do you keep large amounts of cash or perhaps jewelry in your home?"

"Not really. Mayu only wanted to wear simple things. I offered to buy her fancy bracelets and rings, but she'd have none of them. The only thing I own that has any real value is a piece of jewelry I bought some years ago on a European trip."

"Describe it."

"It's called 'The Cat's Eye'—an antique necklace supposedly owned by Marie Antoinette. As you would guess, in the middle of the setting is a large piece of blue sapphire that looks like the eye of a cat. Mesmerizing. I've grown so fond of the piece I named my yacht after the

jewel. According to legend, the necklace is supposed to supply the owner with great luck.”

Richards considered this new information as he walked over and looked at the French doors leading to the patio. At one time, the landscape of the estate was likely considered among the finest in the city but now had gone to seed. Bushes needed to be trimmed, furniture to be painted and a water fountain to be repaired.

“I need a gardener,” Wallace noted from his chair. “I let ours go last year and just haven’t had time to find another one.”

“That small painted brick wall at the edge of the patio looks nice,” Richards observed.

“I did that myself last month. I should have worked on other stuff at the same time, but I got wrapped up in plant work again.”

Richards turned back to his host. “About *The Cat’s Eye* ...”

“What about it?”

“Where is it?” the cop asked.

“It’s in my wall safe, behind the desk.”

“Would you do me the favor of opening the safe and showing the necklace to me?”

“But ...”

“Humor me. I just want to make sure the piece is still there.”

Wallace moved slowly behind the desk, past his wife’s body, to the back wall. He pulled a hinged photo away from the wood paneling, revealing a gray wall safe with a small circular red label just above the combination dial. He spun the dial using a four-digit code and opened the door. Reaching in, he retrieved several envelopes, along

with what appeared to be stock certificates and a pocket watch. His jaw dropped as he examined the booty. Seemingly panicked, he pushed his face almost into the safe before exclaiming, "It's not here!"

"The necklace is gone?" Richards asked?

"Yeah."

"When was the last time you saw it?"

Obviously stunned, Wallace turned to face the cop. "Last week. That's when I had my father's pocket watch fixed. I remember looking at *The Cat's Eye* before replacing it and locking the safe."

"Who else knows the combination?"

"Just me and ..." His eyes dropped to his wife.

"No one else?"

Wallace shook his head.

The fact the jewelry was gone might not be tied to the woman's death. A professional thief could have stolen the piece earlier. The safe would not be that hard for a professional thief to open. Still, the cop's hunch that Mayu Wallace did not commit suicide became a bit more plausible. Until he heard from the medical examiner, Richards was going to treat this as a murder investigation.

"Mr. Wallace." The cop's words shook the industrialist from his mental fog. "When the crime scene boys get here, I'd like you to submit to a paraffin test to determine if you have fired a gun recently. Will you do that?"

Wallace, caught between rage and grief, nodded.

"Good. Now, for the time being, put the stuff back into the safe, but leave it open. Then, let's move to another room and wait."

Wallace replaced the watch and papers, then shuffled through the study door. Richards turned back to the

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body. Perhaps Mayu Wallace really had killed herself. Even though her death stretched the bounds of math and science, there were ways for the wound to be self-inflicted and the gun to fall and bounce or slide to where it ended up. But if Richards' hunch was correct, and she didn't kill herself, despite the missing piece of jewelry, he figured the husband was the logical one to have pulled the trigger. If that were the case, would a jury convict Wallace of murder when the victim was Japanese?



CHAPTER 3

Monday, September 28, 1942

3:40 p.m.

13th Floor, Lincoln Hotel, Chicago, Illinois

As she placed the phone receiver back into the cradle, Helen Meeker felt like a high school girl who was chairman of the prom committee but didn't have a date. She'd once called the shots, but now others were calling to inform her what tasks needed to be done. So many of the investigations and operations she'd started while working for the President in Washington were now being handled by others. Even her latest assignment, one that would again put her into the thick of the action, would not become a reality until she completed a job better suited for low-level FBI operatives.

Then, there was the state of her team. There were no original members left. Henry Reese was with the underground in Germany, Becca Bobbs and Clay Barnes were heading up their own units, and she never even got to talk to them for fear of blowing their covers. Yes, the three who worked with her now were solid, but each of

them had been thrust upon her, not picked by her. She felt as if someone else were pulling the strings, and she was just a puppet.

With Napoleon Lancelot and Dizzy Vance out trying to find the local Nazi contact who had been working with Bauer, her one-time nemesis now buried in a Wisconsin pasture, she and the extraordinary but mysterious Teresa Bryant were literally cooling their heels in their secret, thirteenth-floor headquarters at the Lincoln Hotel. At this moment, Bryant, outfitted in dark slacks and black sweater, had her feet propped up on her desk as she filed her nails. The operative word for today was *bored*.

“Teresa, did you have a date to your high school prom?” Meeker asked.

The American Indian’s dark eyes lit up as she answered the question with a question. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It doesn’t,” Meeker replied. “It’s just that I’m uninterested in and not at all enthused by our ongoing assignment.”

“Which is?” Bryant asked, continuing to put her file to work.

“In a way, we’re already working on it. But back to my question, did you have a date to your high school prom?”

“I didn’t have a high school prom.” Bryant was obviously uninterested.

“I had a date with Robert Wilson. Everybody called him Bobby.”

“That’s nice, Helen. I’m happy for you.”

“Don’t be,” Meeker said. “I wanted to go with John Akins. I guess all the girls did.”

“Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't care. Why don't you just tell me about the assignment?”

“I'm getting there,” Meeker assured her. “Just give me a second to tie this all together.”

“Tie what together?”

“Just hold on. Teresa, Bobby and I had a ... what would my sister call it ... yeah, a vanilla time. Going after Bauer was never vanilla, but with him dead, the folks we're assigned to track down are like spending an evening with Bobby while watching John kissing Betsy.”

“Helen, please. I can't take any more.”

Meeker shrugged. “Fine, let me put it this way. For our next *date*, we're not going after Public Enemy Number One or tracking down a lost gold shipment. We have to find out what low-life was feeding Bauer his information.”

Bryant nodded. “Lancelot and Vance are on that right now. The person has to be working for or have contacts at Central State Bank. It's just a matter of researching the employees and tracing down the leads. I doubt if the task will take more than a week. So, considering all we've been through, I don't deem that much of a problem.”

Meeker frowned as she moved from her desk to a wooden chair by the far wall. After smoothing her jade-green, pleated wool skirt, she sat down and gazed at the ceiling. From her desk, Bryan studied her partner for a full minute before breaking the silence.

“It's so dull. Whoever we find is not going to be the menace Bauer was.”

“Oh, you're wrong there. Just because he was the worst and smartest you've dealt with doesn't mean there aren't scores who are even more devious, desperate and dare I say it, evil.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll give you that. But we have a shot at doing something really special, and we can’t until we find the mole. Until we find and take that person into custody, we’re stuck in Chicago. And if we take too much time, they might find someone else for the other mission, and we could be stuck in Chicago forever.”

“There are worse places to be stuck. London, Berlin, and Paris are three examples. Bombs fall in those cities on a regular basis. Pretty much all we have to deal with is the smell coming from the stockyards.” Bryant put her nail file down and leaned back in her desk chair. “Besides, where else do we have to go? After the blow up in DC, we seem to have been exiled here. Or at least you have. I guess I’m still free to go anywhere I want. The heat’s not on me like it is you. But then again, the President did assign me to be your babysitter.”

“Hey!”

“You know what I mean. You know I respect you. I usually trust your judgments and your abilities, but FDR did place me with you for a reason. You have a bad habit of attempting to do too much on your own. You need to quit trying to prove yourself.”

“Or what? Do I just fade into a world where I’m just like every other woman ... a bit of eye candy who can whip up a great apple pie?”

“You know that’s not what I mean. The President and I don’t want to see you take needless chances. You need to learn to take a deep breath and depend on others for a change.”

“We’ve been through this. I want to play alone because that way ...”

Bryant finished the sentence. "That way you don't have to feel guilty when someone on your team dies. Right?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "You never knew Dr. Spencer Ryan. He was a surgeon who joined my team. He was killed in a shootout. He wasn't trained for that and had no business being there. But who placed him in that position? I did! And he was the first of how many?"

"I don't know, but you never took on anyone who didn't believe in you or didn't want to be with you. And none of them died needlessly. They all gave their lives for something they believed in. Now stop griping about bland prom dates and our current assignment and go back to something you hinted at a few minutes ago. You indicated when we catch the mole, there's something important waiting for us. Unwrap that package and give me something to look forward to."

Meeker explained the news casually as if she was talking about taking in a Chicago Bears football game. "Okay, here it is. We have a chance to go behind enemy lines in Germany. The OSS would love to have us join the underground in taking out a Nazi research center."

Suddenly much more interested, Bryant leaned forward. "The atomic lab mentioned in The White Rose diary? The one Sophie Scholl wrote about?"

"Yeah. After all, we were the ones who told the President and the OSS about the lab. We deserve to be there as they go in for the kill. But we can't join that mission until we find the stinking mole who was Bauer's stool pigeon."

Bryant laughed. "I think you're mixing metaphors or something. You can't be both a mole and pigeon. Now, back to going on a mission behind German lines. Why us? Let's be honest, we don't have any more skills than a

few million others, so why are we needed? I mean I'd love to go, but why not just drop in a unit of elite, specially trained members of the Army or the Marines?"

"Apparently," Meeker explained, "the powers that be in the intelligence department don't want anyone else to know the Germans are attempting to develop atomic weapons. Thus, because we already know, we got chosen." She shook her head and added, "I'm not even sure how much those on the underground's team will be told about the atomic research."

"So, behind the lines and keeping our team in the dark," Bryant said.

Meeker, her expression steely, said, "I want this job, Teresa. I worked with Holsclaw when I was on an earlier mission in Germany. He will be the leader. Henry will likely be on the team as well."

"I see." Bryant raised her eyebrows in irony. "How sweet, a lover's reunion. Now remembering your prom date suddenly makes sense."

"It's not that. I just trust those guys and feel we could add something special to the team."

"So, some folks do believe women have intrinsic value!"

"I wouldn't go that far. They seem to want women in the group because we will have a far easier time blending in."

"There are lots of females in the OSS. Why you and me?"

"How many have our experience and our training? How many can shoot and fight like we can?"

"Why not just bomb the place? Why put a ground team at risk?"

"According to Intelligence, it's too deep under the

mountain for bombers to do any damage. The mission has to go into the facility and set off explosions on the inside.”

“That’s likely suicide,” Bryant cracked as she eased up onto a table and crossed her legs. “I have lots of courage, but I also have lots to live for.”

“Dying’s not an option. We’re supposed to bring all the documents on the research back to Washington.”

“So, we’re really joining the underground just to be the human carrier pigeons that bring the information. We’re not going along to do any of the dirty work?”

“That’s the way it’s supposed to play out,” Meeker said. “But nothing happens until we unveil the mole. They want to know his contacts and what he’s shared with Germany. They’re especially interested in learning if he knows anything about our atomic research.”

“Wait. We’re developing atomic weapons as well? I’ve heard nothing about this.”

“It’s all hush-hush, but millions of dollars and thousands of our top minds are working on the project right now.”

“Where?” Bryant asked.

“I don’t even know,” Meeker admitted, before adding a caveat. “You’ll find this interesting. The German atomic research lab is not that far from Hitler’s Bavarian retreat. Maybe we can stop by for supper while we’re there.”

“Yeah. I look so Aryan. He’d love me.”

A warning buzzer caused both women to tense and turn their gaze toward the entrance to their secret headquarters. Silently they moved to their desks, retrieved their guns and stood ready to fire. After a series of preassigned taps on the door, a large black man entered.

“Mr. Lancelot,” Meeker greeted him as she placed her Colt back on the desktop. “Do you have news?”

"I think I've got the name of the mole," the man replied.

"Do tell!"

"Dollars to donuts he's the vice president of the bank. His name is William Elliot."

Bryant eased into a chair, then asked, "And why do you think he's our guy?"

"Poker and the ponies," Lancelot explained. "He's up to his ears in debt, and it seems his one way to pay off the mob is by working for the only force in the world worse than organized crime."

"How was he recruited?" Meeker asked.

"My guess is Esther O'Toole knew about his debts," Lancelot continued, "and sucked him in. She likely introduced him to that guy who tried to kill you. What was his name?"

"Bauer."

"Yeah, the guy Big Jim called 'Darkness.' Anyway, based on what Vance and I've been able to uncover, Elliot's been working on smuggling secrets to Germany for at least a year."

"Even before the war?" Bryant asked.

"Oh, yeah," Lancelot replied. "We found some microfilm at his home that deals with something called the Manhattan Project. Wonder what that is?"

"Something we shouldn't know about," Meeker suggested.

Lancelot reached into his pants pocket and, after juggling it as if it were red hot, quickly tossed the small silver capsule toward his boss. "Then I sure don't want this."

Meeker caught the peanut-size container and studied it

for a moment before dropping it onto her desk. "Did you find anything else?"

"Some envelopes and small boxes with the same Buffalo, New York, address written on each ... John's Antique Shop, 1012 Front Street. That capsule was in the first one I opened. At least we got there before that information could be passed on to the next contact as it works its way back to Germany."

"I'll see that Alison gets that address to the FBI," Meeker noted. "I'd guess there will be a going-out-of-business sale at 1012 Front Street very soon. Now, what about Elliot?"

"He never came back from lunch," Lancelot explained. "Vance is trying to track him down right now."

"Think he was tipped off?" Bryant asked, looking at Meeker.

"Maybe he has good instincts," Meeker suggested. "After all, the newspapers ran a story this morning on O'Toole's arrest. Perhaps he read the report at lunch and realized the mob queen might be talking." She turned back to Lancelot. "What can you tell me about Elliot?"

"He's thirty-five, athletic, well-educated, not married, and his parents are dead. Since I found boxes of ammunition at his apartment, I'd guess he owns a thirty-eight and likely carries the piece with him. And based on racing forms and notes we discovered during our search, he's still playing the ponies. I found a telephone number on a pad by his phone. I called and was connected to a bookie."

"Interesting," Meeker noted. "A normal guy gets a bad habit and suddenly finds himself in bed with Hitler. So, where is Vance now?"

“He’s likely on the move. He has a list of Elliot’s friends and is working his way through them.”

“Helen,” Bryant chimed in, “I’m guessing you’re thinking what I’m thinking: It’s all about numbers and odds.”

“Yeah, we need to visit a bookie,” Meeker admitted. She turned back toward Lancelot. “You still have that phone number?”

“I have a thing about numbers. If I read them once, I can remember them forever.”

“Good,” Meeker said with a smile. “Give me the number, and I’ll get us an address. I want to close this thing out and get to Germany before the snows come.”

“What’s this about Germany?” Lancelot asked.

“It’s a girls-only trip,” Meeker replied. “We’re going to ski in Bavaria and go to Oktoberfest.”



CHAPTER 4

Monday, September 28, 1942

7:19 p.m.

Mock's Diner, one block south of the Stockyards, Chicago, Illinois

Since her 1936 Packard was still being repaired, Meeker used a leased 1935 Hupmobile for the drive to the address linked to the bookie's phone number. Arriving at the destination, she parked the gray sedan on an almost deserted street directly across from the greasy spoon known as Mock's. The red, blinking neon sign in the dingy window promised the freshest meat in town. As the stockyards were just a stone's throw away—and the odor carried by the north wind proved that—there was likely some truth in the advertising, but the place was all but empty during the normally busy dinner hour, causing Meeker to question the quality of the diner's fresh beef.

"So," Bryant wisecracked, "I guess we should have worn formal dresses."

"It's the kind of dive that draws rats," Meeker quipped. "Both the human and rodent varieties."

"Our glamorous lives," Bryant returned. She eyed the

building a second time, then asked, "You think the bookie is on the second floor?"

Meeker nodded. Lights were showing through the five upstairs windows and from time to time, silhouetted the men walking behind the shades.

"Got to be. Too many folks pacing back and forth up there to be a residence. And note the phone lines from the pole to the building." Meeker took a deep breath and frowned. "I'd have to guess most of the bookie's patrons work in the meat-packing business."

"I don't think this joint would attract the white-collar crowd," Bryant agreed. "I'm betting Hoover was in office the last time those windows were cleaned."

"Guess I should have sent Dizzy on this outing," Meeker added. She grew serious as she looked over at Bryant. "You didn't know him when he wasn't sober. Before he cleaned up his act, this would have been Dizzy's kind of place. I'm glad it's not now."

"Helen, why do you think Elliot drove clear over here to bet? There are probably a dozen places much closer to the bank."

"Most likely, he was afraid of being caught. Bank officers aren't supposed to gamble. Frightens the stockholders and the customers."

Bryant raised her eyebrows. "How do you suggest we get up there?"

"Well, in the past three minutes, four guys have gone into the diner. Three have already come out. That's not enough time to eat, and they haven't been carrying any to-go orders. Let's assume they're being paid off for bets they won or making good on those they lost."

"Do you want to just go in, grab a booth and order?"

Bryant's tone reflected her distaste for what she was suggesting. "Then we can watch to see where the bettors go? I mean, that would be my plan, but I'm sure hoping you have a better one."

"Good idea," Meeker agreed. "It's simple, straightforward, and I hope we won't have to use our guns. Do you have the photo of Elliot Napoleon found at his apartment?"

"It's in my pocket. I'm not really hungry, so why don't I just wait out here."

Meeker laughed. "You have diffused bombs and faced down cold-blooded killers, but you don't have the stomach for a diner?"

"Stomach is an accurate description."

"What are you afraid of, Teresa?"

"Food poisoning. It's the worst thing in the world. It's like swallowing a rabid rat that has to eat its way out of your gut to get free. I speak from experience."

Meeker shook her head. "You'll live. Besides, suffering is good for the soul. Now let's go!"

As she opened her car door, Bryant shot Meeker a dirty look. Meeker saw and smiled. Maybe Bryant was starting to relax a bit.

"This is not a good idea," Bryant said for a final time as the women crossed the street and stepped up on the sidewalk.

When they pushed open the diner's front door, Bryant's concerns were suddenly in twenty-twenty focus. The dirty windows had only given a slight hint as to the condition of the floors and walls.

"I'd guess the health inspector doesn't know about this place," Meeker whispered.

“He might be afraid of it,” Bryant cracked. “I’m speculating rats see this place and walk on by. Remind me not to go the restroom.” Glancing at the floor, she frowned and asked, “Do we walk to the booth or just slide?”

Meeker ignored the observation as she stood in the entry and inventoried the building. The main room was forty-by-twenty, booths were placed along the street windows, and across the aisle, a long counter had stools for fifteen. The floor was too stained to determine its color, but the walls were dark green, the shade due more to accumulated grime than paint. While there was not a single customer in the joint, the same couldn’t be said of the roaches. They appeared to be massing for a convention.

“This might well be the most dangerous mission I’ve ever been on,” Bryant grumbled.

“Yeah,” Meeker agreed, “let’s take the booth back by the jukebox. That’ll give us a good view of the door.”

“I wonder how long I can hold my breath,” Bryant muttered. “What is that smell?”

Meeker wouldn’t even hazard a guess.

Behind the counter, a heavysset man—balding, fiftyish, wearing a stained apron over a white shirt—eyed the woman as they made their way to a booth. Only after they’d slid in, one on each side of the table, did he grab a couple of menus and amble in their direction.

“We serve tomatoes,” he cracked, showing an all-but-toothless smile, “but rarely do they come as fresh as you two.”

Bryant frowned, “How long did you take to work up that line?”

Raising his eyebrows and pushing the menus their way,

he countered, "Just my way of saying you babes are a lot better looking than our normal crowd. The last time a woman in a suit and heels came in here was before the Depression."

"Not surprised," Bryant sniped, "and I'd guess we're a lot cleaner than your normal crowd too."

"And you smell good," he said, laughing. "Welcome to Mocks. Now, what do you fine ladies need?"

"I take it you're Mock?" Meeker asked.

"No, I bought this place off Mock. My name's Bub."

Bryant forced a smile before asking, "Is Bub short for something?"

"What?" The man looked confused.

"Is it a nickname?"

"No, I was named after my dad."

Bryant cocked an eyebrow. "Your father's name was Bub?"

"Yep."

Bryant shrugged. "That may explain a lot."

"What's your grub choice?" Bub asked, apparently missing the meaning behind Bryant's barb.

"Bring me a burger," Meeker ordered. At the same time, she noted two men dressed in suits enter the front door. The pair waved at Bub, then strolled toward the back wall of the building. They rapped three times on a door, and a buzzer sounded. The men then disappeared through the door.

After the pair had exited the room, Meeker added, "Hold the onions and give me a Coke to drink."

Glancing toward Bryant, Bub asked, "What about you?"

"The same, and I want it done all the way through!"

"I'm the cook too," Bub proudly announced, "I'll get

back to the kitchen and put the patties on the grill. You want me to bring the drinks with the meal or do you need them now?"

"Keep them cold until you finish cooking," Meeker suggested.

"Whatever you desire, I will comply."

Meeker watched Bub mosey behind the counter and through a door she assumed led to the kitchen. Then she turned her attention back to the far wall. A minute later, the two men who had just entered reappeared. Smiling, they walked back to the front entry and exited.

"I know where we need to go," Meeker said to Bryant. "I also think I know the code to get in."

"You ready to make our move? I'm not real crazy about actually sampling what we just ordered."

"Hold off, Teresa. Let's wait for our food and see if anyone else comes and goes."

"You must have an iron-clad stomach."

A dozen men and two women passed in and out of the diner before Bub brought their burgers. None of the patrons ordered anything. They simply sauntered to the back wall, knocked three times and waited for the buzzer.

"You need anything else?" Bub asked as he set the food on the table

"No, thanks," Meeker replied, "this will do for now."

The bun looked relatively fresh though getting limper by the second due to the grease still oozing from the meat. On the bright side, the lettuce was almost green and the slice of tomato, close to red.

"Are you really going to eat this?" Bryant whispered.

"When you're undercover, you have to go with the flow."

"Remind me to never go undercover with you at a

mortuary,” Bryant cracked. She waited for her partner to pick up the lubricious burger and take a few bites. “So, what do you think?”

“I don’t think it’ll kill you,” Meeker announced.

“That’s good to know. By the way, I’m picking the next place we eat.”

As the women slowly consumed their burgers, four more men came into Mock’s, strolled to the back wall, knocked three times and disappeared. Again, none of them ordered food.

“Isn’t it amazing,” Bryant noted, “we’re watching folks who have no problem betting their hard-earned cash on ponies and numbers, but none of them feel confident enough to bet on the food in this place. That speaks volumes!” She paused to glare at Meeker. “If I get sick, you’re holding my hand!”

“Just finish up the sandwich and quit grumbling. It could be worse.”

“Fill me in on how?”

After Bryant forced down the last few bites and drained her Coke, Bub reappeared from the kitchen. Sporting a smile and a few more spots on his apron, he lumbered over to their table, his belly jiggling like Jell-O with each step.

“You need anything else?”

“No.” Bryant jumped in before Meeker could reply. “What do we owe you?”

“Beef’s hard to get,” Bub explained.

“Don’t even tell me what this was,” Bryant protested in horror.

“No,” he assured her, “it was beef. I even met the cow

before it was turned into burgers. I just meant with the restrictions and rationing, it's not easy to find or buy."

"So, you dabble in the black market?" Meeker suggested.

"I didn't say that. I'm just warning you things aren't as cheap as they were before the war."

"What's it going to run?" Meeker demanded.

Bub shrugged, "For the burgers and the Cokes, it's sixty cents."

Meeker reached into her purse, retrieved three quarters and tossed them on the table. "Keep the change. Let's go, Teresa. We have work to do."

While Bub turned his back to pick up the coins, Meeker, with Bryant hot on her heels, slid out of the booth and moved to the back of the diner. She pulled out her Colt and eased the gun to her right side, out of Bub's view, then knocked three times. A second later, the buzzer sounded. She turned the now unlocked knob and smiled.

"This is too easy," Bryant whispered.

The open door revealed a worn, dusty staircase leading to the second floor. Knowing Bryant had her back, Meeker fixed her eyes on the objective and began the climb the wooden steps, bowed from years of use. The twelve stairs led to a large open room. Sitting at six oak desks were half a dozen men, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. Each was talking on a phone and scribbling notes. None of them bothered to look up as the women appeared. So far, so good.

Meeker, with Bryant peering over her shoulder, observed the operation for a few seconds before a small, gruff-looking man dressed in a gray suit barked, "I don't recognize you." As he puffed on a cigar, his frown turned

into a smile. "But I'll never turn away new customers who have your kind of curves. What can I do for you ladies?"

Keeping her gun out of sight, Meeker closed the distance to the man she assumed was behind the illegal operation. As she approached, he unbuttoned his suit coat, revealing a pronounced bay window lapping over his belt. His eyes took a complete inventory of her anatomy.

Meeker ignored his stare. "Are you in charge here?" she asked.

"I am," he replied, running a hand over his bald head, his eyes now somewhere between her waist and neck.

"Well, I need some information."

"On a horse?" he asked, his gaze still fixed on the same appealing spot.

"No, a man."

His demeanor markedly changed as he looked at her face and held up his hands. "If your husband's been losing money, that's not my business. You might as well turn around and head back to your kitchen. Folks who work with me trust I won't talk about my clients. Trust is what makes this business work."

"I think you'll want to talk to me," Meeker continued. She produced her gun and aimed at the man's suddenly concerned face.

A few seconds before, the room had been filled with voices asking for horses' names, racing venues, and numbers, but when Meeker showed her weapon, the joint became as silent as the grave. All six men manning the phones put the receivers down and became as still as statues. While Meeker continued to hold her gun on the manager, Bryant aimed hers in the direction of the hired help.

The manager finally worked up the courage to break the silence. "You a cop?"

"No, but I know some. And to ease your mind, I assure you that you won't have to break your pledge to your clients as you call them. I don't have a husband who plays the ponies. In fact, I don't have a husband at all."

The bookie whistled, "Somebody's missing out. I'll bet you're a tiger ..."

"Don't go there," Meeker suggested. "Once again, and let me emphasize this, we came here for information, not action. Now, what's your name?"

"William."

"Just William?"

"My last name is Williams. My folks weren't too imaginative."

"Well, it's better than Bub," she assured him. "Okay, William. I just need to know about one of your clients who's in big trouble with the law. If you give me that information, we'll leave here and never tell Chicago's finest about your little operation. If you don't come clean, then you might find yourself using the showers at the local jail for a very long time. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah," he answered, his eyes once more trailing down her body.

"William," she warned, "Keep your focus on my face. My father told me a long time ago there's no using looking at things you can't afford. You got that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

With her free hand, Bryant pulled the photo from her jacket pocket and showed the man. "Have you ever seen this guy? And don't lie. I have no problem reading men, and I don't react well when I don't like the story."

“She means what she says,” Meeker assured him. “And by the way, she’s a Caddo Indian, and I don’t think she has ever recognized any peace treaty between her tribe and us. On top of that, she has a surgeon’s skills with a knife.”

“You’re some kind of dames,” Williams noted as he nervously grabbed the photo. He studied the picture for only a moment before shoving the paper back at Bryant. “That guy’s not coming back, so I’ve got no reason to lie.”

“Spill the information,” Meeker demanded.

“Okay, fine. He calls himself Dan. He’s not real good at picking winners, but today he got lucky on some horses that ran in California. His long shots made him almost a grand.”

“What do you know about him?” Bryant quizzed.

“Only what I told you. Look around, this ain’t no social club. We don’t ask who your parents are or where you live. He told me his name was Dan, and he paid his debts. That’s all I needed to know. Still, hate to see him go. I made a lot of money off that guy.”

“What did you mean by his not coming back?” Bryant asked as she kept an eye on the other employees.

“He told me he was getting out town,” the man explained, “and it had to be a one-way trip.”

“Where was he headed?” Meeker asked.

“He just said he had to disappear. There was another guy here who overheard and jumped into our conversation. When Dan told the guy he was hot, Spoons explained for a couple of hundred, he could get him on a boat to Canada. As they left together, I’m guessing, if he was lucky, that’s where he was headed.”

“Who is Spoons?” Meeker asked.

"He's a low-life. You could call him a cockroach in a suit."

"His family lives downstairs," Bryant cracked. "What's he do to make his dough?" Before Williams could reply, she belched. "That burger's going to haunt me all night."

"Did you actually eat downstairs?" Williams asked.

"Yeah."

"You two are real gamblers. Now, what did you ask?"

"What does Spoons do to earn a buck?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes!" the women answered in unison.

"First, I need to know who you guys are. There is stuff I can't just spill without making sure you're on the level." He glanced at Bryant and added, "Believe me or not, there are things worse than Bub's cooking."

Glancing at Bryant, Meeker shrugged before turning back to their host. "We're private investigators."

He snapped his fingers, "Yeah, I knew I'd seen your face somewhere. Your picture was in the newspaper a few days ago. You're the one who used to work for the President. Helen, Helen, Helen"

"Meeker."

"Yeah, that's it." For the first time since they'd drawn their guns, the smile returned to the man's face. "So, this is really government business then."

"You could say that."

"And you're not going to rat me out to the cops?"

"Not if you help us," Meeker assured him.

"Well, you've got the firepower, so I guess I'll have to trust you." The ringing of three different phones stopped the conversation. "Can my guys go back to work?"

"Sure," Meeker replied.

“Okay, boys,” Williams announced. “Everything’s under control. Get back to making us some money.” As the men picked up their pencils and answered the phones, Williams leaned closer to the women and spoke in a hushed tone. “Spoons is a hired gun. The mob uses him when they want to take someone out. He’s strictly local, but that doesn’t mean he’s not lethal.”

“You sure about this?” Bryant asked.

“Yeah, real sure. And he’s good. He doesn’t leave clues, and he’s not going to rat out those he works for. Because of what he does, I try to make sure he wins enough to keep him happy. In other words, all my inside tips are shared with him.”

Meeker, her Colt still directed at the bookie, concluded, “So, Spoons hangs out here a lot.”

“No, he just places bets or picks up money and leaves. But he hung around today. I didn’t question him, just let him drink our coffee and sit on the corner of my desk. He didn’t say anything worth noting until the guy you’re looking for came in. Then he became strangely talkative. And that’s not like him at all.”

Meeker glanced toward Bryant, noting her solemn expression. She figured they were both on the same page. The hit man had likely been assigned to take out a possible leaker. Who was Spoons working for? She was sure the bookie wouldn’t know that, so there was no reason to ask.

“Okay, William. What does Spoons look like?”

“Skinny, redheaded, about five-six, and he’s as pale as a ghost. Today, he was wearing a brown suit, gray shirt, and no tie. Every time I’ve ever seen him, his shoes shine like new silver dollars, and he always drives a dirty gray, dented Chevy sedan. He lives about a block from Indiana

Harbor. I was there once to deliver some winnings. The place looks like a shack until you go inside, then it's real nice. When I was there, he showed me his collection of jazz records. He's real proud of those."

"I guess we need to go put a fork in Spoons," Bryant suggested.

Williams shook his head. "I'd rethink that if I were you. Remember, he kills people for a living. He's been doing the work since he was fifteen, so he's had lots of practice and is really good at his job. On top of that, he's as mean as a rabid wolf and has no conscience. I'll bet he makes gutter scum feel clean and streetwalkers think they're novice nuns. If I were going after him, I'd head over to the Great Lakes Naval Base and bring about a hundred of those boys with me. This isn't a job for girls."

"Thanks for the advice," Meeker noted. "And I think your roving eyes proved we're women, not girls. Now, you just go back to work. And if you'll forget we were here, we'll forget what you do for a living." She grinned. "Mr. Williams, do we have a deal?"

"You got one. But if you run into Spoons, don't tell him I was the one who gave you the dope."

"If we run into Spoons," Meeker replied, "we'll escort him to a new address where he'll have lots of roommates."

The women backed from the room, guns ready, then quickly turned and hurried down the stairs, through the diner, and out the front door. Once they were on the street, Bryant voiced what Meeker was thinking.

"Odds are Elliot's not going to make Canada."

"Let's hope we get to the dock before Spoons has a chance to make him disappear."

melodic sound, he looked back to his guest. Elliot had finally found a chair and eased into it.

"You're a godsend," Elliot announced. "I had no idea how to get out of town without being spotted. And then you popped up at Williams's, and everything fell into place."

"Timing is everything," Spoons quipped.

"Still, I appreciate it. When I read that ..."

"When you read what?"

"Nothing," Elliot answered. "Just a story in the newspaper that kind of warned me the game was up."

"Well, at least you had a warning. I've known a lot of folks who don't get any advance notice. One moment they're on top of the world, and the next moment they are under the ground."

Elliot nodded. "I guess I am pretty lucky at that. After all, I had a great run on the ponies today. That must have been a sign." Seemingly a bit more relaxed, he glanced around the room and observed, "You must have a good job."

"Why do you think that?"

"This is really nice furniture, and the carpet is like a mile deep. That record player is top of the line, and the console radio must have set you back a lot of change. They don't give this stuff away."

"I do okay," Spoons assured him.

"If you don't mind me saying, I'm surprised you don't drive a nicer car or live in a better part of town."

"I drive what I drive and live where I live simply because I don't like to call attention to myself. In my line of work, it's not healthy."

“So, what do you do?” Elliot inquired. He was now feeling much more tranquil.

“Contract work. I’m a specialist. I get a call when someone wants me to help them make a business problem go away.”

“You mean like cooking the books?”

“No,” Spoons replied with a grin, “my line is not numbers, it’s people. When someone has an issue with someone, they call me.”

“What do you do with the people?” Elliot asked, confused. “Do they call you in to fire them, or do you just retrain them, so they fit in with the other workers or the job requirements? I always hated to can folks. Wish we’d called in an outsider to do it.”

“Actually, I don’t retrain them or fire them. I kill them.” Spoons waited for the shock to register on his guest’s face and then smiled. “In fact, I got a call on you today. Seems you’ve become a problem that can only go away when you stop breathing.”

Elliot’s face went ashen as his hands grabbed the arms of the oversized chair. With his unconcerned host looking on, he pushed himself upright, but rather than run for the door, he wavered, as if trying to gain his balance.

“You’re dizzy,” Spoons said as the music stopped. After reaching over and clicking off the record player and replacing the arm, he added, “Your drink was laced with enough poison to kill a herd of cows.”

“But ...” Elliot whispered.

“Your gut will start burning in a minute or so. My experience suggests you’ll soon be in a lot of pain ... intense agony ... but it won’t last long.”

“You ...” Elliot groaned as he reached for his stomach.

"I took care of a problem," Spoons explained as he casually walked into a bedroom. He returned a minute later with an eight-by-eight-foot piece of carpet. After dropping and unrolling the rug on the floor, he looked back at his guest and explained, "I replaced this last week. I got some bloodstains on this one, so I bought a new one for the area in front of the fireplace. It's imported. What do you think? Did I make a good choice?"

Elliot was still standing in front of the chair. Spoons casually strolled over and grabbed his guest under his right arm. "I'll bet you are having problems seeing, and you no longer have feeling in your hands and feet. Don't worry, that's normal. Still, I think you can manage a couple of steps. I'm going to lead you over to that carpet."

Elliot offered no resistance as he was dragged across the room. When he was in the right spot, Spoons let him go. With no one to lean on, Elliot staggered for a moment before falling to his knees and once more grabbing his stomach. In a few seconds, his strength gone, he collapsed on his side. He was still breathing, but for all practical purposes, he was gone.

Kneeling beside his victim, Spoons quickly went through Elliot's pockets, pulling out cash, identification, and a few sealed letter-sized envelopes. He pocketed the money and after moving back across the room tossed the other items onto the table. Easing into a reading chair, he turned on the light, grabbed the phone and dialed seven numbers.

"It's me. The job's done," Spoons announced.

"Have you gotten rid of the body?"

"No, but I will be in a while. My trusted friend is going

to take our guest out on his boat tonight and dump him in the lake.”

“Did he have any stuff on him? By the time we got to his place, someone else had already cleaned it out.”

Spoons glanced at the table, “A few envelopes. I’ll let you decide if they’re important.”

“Anything written on them?”

“Just a second.”

Setting the phone aside, Spoons reached over to retrieve the letters. After glancing through them, he once again grabbed the receiver.

“They are light. They couldn’t have much of anything in them.”

“Everything’s on microfilm,” the voice on the other end explained. “Now what’s written on them?”

“Well, the first one has Bauer scribbled on the flap. The next one says B.S.” Spoons laughed. “Now that pretty much sums things up.”

“It means bombsight,” the voice explained. “What about the other two?”

“DC is on the third one, and the last one says Manhattan.”

“That’s good, really good. You have what I gave him. I need the envelopes back so I can route them another way. They have to get to Germany along with another piece I have. They all need to be there in a week or so.”

“Why the hurry?”

“I’ve already been paid,” the voice explained.

“I’ll give them to you when you pay me,” Spoons cracked. “And, if what I found is that important, perhaps I deserve a bonus.” He paused to check on Elliot before

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adding, "Oh, make sure I'm paid in dollars, not marks. I'll see you later this week."

Spoons hung up the phone and glanced back to the floor. His guest had expired, so the time had come to package him for shipping.



CHAPTER 6

Monday, September 28, 1942

9:33 p.m.

Indiana Dock, Waterfront, Lake Michigan, Chicago, Illinois

The air was cool, hinting of fall, and was bitter and brisk coming off the lake. Meeker and Bryant were ready for action but not dressed for the cold. After parking the rented Hupmobile sedan under a street lamp by a warehouse, they stepped out onto a brick street and cautiously made their way toward a pier. They had no reason to talk. They knew what and who they were looking for, though finding either was a long shot. How often did that happen?

As Meeker studied the deserted streets, a sobering realization set in, as chilling as the breeze. If Spoons had been assigned to knock off Elliot, the job had likely already been completed and whatever the man carried in his pockets long gone.

“Dead ends and dark alleys,” she whispered.

“What?” Bryant asked.

“I don’t like our chances,” Meeker explained.

“I think they are better here than surviving the meal at Mocks,” Bryant cracked.

Ignoring her partner's comment, Meeker continued, “We've got two choices in directions to search. I'll take one, and you take the other. We'll meet back here unless we hear fireworks. Then we race to the noise.”

Meeker pointed to the street to their right. Bryant understood the directive and with gun drawn, slowly headed in that direction. Meanwhile, Meeker, sticking close to the old clapboard buildings, made her way down the nearer avenue. Except for the clicking of her steps on the bricks and an occasional moan of a foghorn, there was no sound. In the first half block, the only living things she saw were two cats under a street lamp and a possum perched on an alley garbage can. He was likely in for a much better meal than Meeker and Bryant had paid for two hours earlier. For the moment, along the Indiana Dock, Meeker and Bryant appeared to be the only people around. That realization was hardly comforting. They needed information to shut down the organization Bauer had served. They had to find out whom the group was working for and whether the mob or the Nazis were in control. They needed Elliot alive, and the clock was ticking.

As she stopped to assess the environment and inventory her eerie surroundings, Meeker shook her head and smiled. A grand joke had been played on her. She'd gone through college and law school and landed a job working for the most powerful man in the free world, but now, here she was walking down streets that even ladies of the evening avoided. The irony was as thick as the fog she'd once seen in London and seemed to be taunting her. She'd

passed up marriage, motherhood, and a normal life to eat at cheap diners and dress down bookies and cons. Now she was trying to keep a lousy gambler who had sold out his country from being killed by a cockroach in a suit. What a life.

After watching a calico cat chase and catch a rat, then play with the hapless and terrified creature for a full minute before inflicting a lethal bite, Meeker once again moved forward. She walked past three warehouses, a small storefront that hadn't been open in a decade, and two shanties before noting a well-used and badly dented gray Chevy parked beside a junky, rambling shack. Lights shone through the paned glass. Bingo! The table was set. She'd found Spoons.

Meeker's instincts told her to wait for Bryant. The other woman would surely complete her search in five minutes, but her gut demanded action. After all, if there was a contract on Elliot, his time for breathing was limited. And, if Spoons was not going to kill him but help him escape, time was still not on her side. Every second counted. She stood in the shadows in front of a deserted house and studied the scene. Knocking on the front door was out, but waiting and watching was an invitation for Spoons to punch Elliot's final ticket. She had to get a look inside that house.

With her Colt drawn and ready for action, Meeker stepped out of the shadows and moved quickly across the street to the car. Crouching beside the sedan, she popped open the rear passenger door and glanced into the shadows of light framing the scene. On the back seat was a rolled-up carpet. Pulling a small flashlight from her purse, she shined it toward the end of the rug. The beam

caught two brown shoes that just happened to be attached to legs.

Climbing into the vehicle, she crawled across the floor and shined her light at the far end of the roll. This time the beam illuminated a face, frozen in agony.

“Darn,” she whispered. She was too late.

With Elliot dead, there wasn't much else to do. Even if he were captured, Spoons providing the name of the person who assigned the hit was highly doubtful. After all, a stretch in prison was better than walking the streets after ratting out either the Nazis or the mob. Still, Elliot might have had something on him he was going to pass along, something dealing with national security. So perhaps this wasn't a complete waste. Unrolling enough carpet to get to the man's front pockets was like wrestling a bear in a closet. Worse, the search was fruitless; the pockets she could reach were empty. Thus, to find out what had been there, she was going to have to take on a man with no morals and few fears. If only this could have been easy.

Putting away the flashlight, she crawled backward out of the car and set her Colt on the Chevy's running board. She then grabbed the end of the carpet, set her feet on the pavement and pulled the body and rug out of the sedan and onto the ground. After retrieving her gun, she went through each of the dead man's pockets a second time. She found one stick of Beechnut gum.

Elliot was past saving. Meeker tossed the gum aside, eased back onto the running board and safe from being seen from the house, tried to formulate a plan. Charging into the home would be suicide, and the city would frown upon her setting the shack on fire. The only smart option was to wait for Bryant. While killing time, she eased

around to the front of the car and popped the hood. Spotting the coil that led to the stovepipe six-cylinder engine's distributor, she yanked the top wire out and tossed it under the car. She then eased the hood closed and moved back to the running board. At least if Spoons made it to the Chevy, he wasn't going anywhere.

Meeker focused her eyes on the far end of the street where she expected Bryant to appear. Suddenly, she heard a door open. She frowned; nothing was working in her favor. Glancing around the car's nose, she noted the gunman locking his front door. Like it or not, now was the time for action. Positioning herself behind the sedan's fender, she aimed her weapon and waited.

As Spoons turned toward the street, she barked out an order. "Raise your hands or face the consequences!"

As her words echoed along the empty street, the hit man dropped and rolled behind a tree. The odds now seemed to be back in his favor. He knew the turf, and she only had the Chevy for cover.

"What do you want?" he called out.

"You," she answered. "We need to talk."

"I've got nothing to talk about."

"The body in the back of your car says otherwise. Who put the mark on Elliot?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Who's Elliot?"

"The dead guy I just pulled out of your back seat."

This time there was no immediate answer. The man hiding behind the oak remained mute, likely contemplating his next move. One second became ten, and an eternity later, the clock had counted off another minute.

"You shouldn't try to make a break," Meeker warned.

She glanced back down the street, looking for Bryant. Seeing she was still alone, she added, "I'm a really good shot."

"It's hard to hit a moving target in the dark," came Spoons' calm reply. "I know."

"I'll bet you do," Meeker agreed. "But I've managed more times than you can count to bring folks down in both day and night. In fact, my hauling in O'Toole is likely the reason you knocked off Elliot. Now here's the score. You can come out of this alive, wounded, or dead. The choice is pretty much yours. I'd rather not have to shoot my Colt, but I will."

"You're Helen Meeker!"

"In the flesh!"

"I've read about you," Spoons assured her. "In fact, there's a price on your head. I could retire on what I'd get for your scalp. So, you coming my way might be the biggest break I've had in a long time."

"Always happy to accommodate," she sniped. "Now, if you try to make it back to your front door, I'll nail you before you can get it unlocked. You obviously can't use your car. So that means your only exit that includes continuing to breathe involves trying to outrun the lead from my Colt. How lucky do you feel?"

Spoons' answer was both rapid and potentially lethal. From behind the tree, he squeezed off three rounds, two bouncing off the Chevy's bumper and the other piercing the radiator. As coolant began to drain onto the pavement, the man hustled across the shadowy yard and down the street. As she stood in place and followed him with her eyes, Meeker realized he was headed for an alley just thirty paces ahead.

“Stop, or I’ll shoot!” she shouted, rising to her feet.

He answered by firing two wild shots over his shoulder as he sprinted toward what he was sure would be freedom. He was ten feet from his goal when Meeker frowned, then set her jaw. Leaning against the Chevy, she aimed and squeezed the trigger twice. Spoons stumbled forward and dropped. Why did everyone seem to think getting shot was better than giving up?

Her gun still ready, Meeker stepped around Elliot’s car and, from thirty feet away, studied the scene. Spoons lay face down on the edge of the dirty, deserted waterfront street, his breath labored. Blood dripped from two gunshot wounds, staining the pavement. His life expectancy appeared to be measured in seconds. As always, Meeker felt regret. She hated killing, but this time she didn’t feel any sadness. Spoons’ final exit was appropriate. He’d spent most of his thirty-odd years wading through gutters, and now he was dying in one.

After waiting a full minute to be assured the killer was completely out of commission, she covered the twenty feet from the sidewalk to where the hood was fighting to breathe. His right hand still held the Smith and Wesson. Leaning over the body, she observed the places where the bullets had pierced his back, making two neat holes in his brown jacket.

After kicking the revolver to the middle of the street, she grabbed his shoulders and turned him over. His eyes were open, but unseeing. There was no time for last rites, much less any questions.

As she watched his chest rise and fall a final time, she thought of something her father had told her when she was a child. Those who carry a gun as a calling card

almost always end up in the gutter, a prison, or a grave. There was rarely another option. This punk had paved that final route for who knows how many other men, including Elliot. She felt no pity, but there was no glory in killing, even a human cockroach. How she wished she'd had a chance to talk to him, to get the information he was taking to his grave.

Meeker glanced up as she heard footsteps rounding the corner. Bryant jogged over to Spoons, picking up his gun in her gloved hand. She approached her partner, shaking her head.

"I saw what happened and called the cops from the booth down the street. They're on their way." She then grimly added, "I told them with your pinpoint shooting, they'd need the wagon and not an ambulance."

"I preferred to have him alive," Meeker noted.

"He'd have still ended up in the ground. The state would have executed him before the snow melted." She shook her head. "Men with small brains should never play with guns."

"No one should," Meeker observed before shifting to what was now the most pressing issue. "We probably have five minutes before the cops get here. I'll go through his pockets; you take his keys and search his house."

"What am I looking for?"

"Anything that might have been in Elliot's possession. I don't want any government information to slip into the local police department's hands. If he knew about the atom, then someone likely fed him more information as well. Let's hope that hasn't slipped out."

"Helen, do think the Nazis have that good of a spy network in the States?"

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“No,” she replied, “but I’m convinced someone near the top of our chain of command has sold us out. They fed information to Bauer, and now they are feeding the line to others to take back to Germany. We have to find and stop that person before any more damage can be done. Millions of lives depend upon it.”

Just before Bryant headed toward the house, she observed, “The bookie was right.”

“About what?”

“Spoons made sure he had the shiniest shoes in town.”



CHAPTER 7

Tuesday, September 29, 1942

6:41 p.m.

**Mountain Top Estate, twenty miles north of Berchtesgaden,
Bavaria, Germany**

Henry Reese stood in a grove of trees and studied the postcard-worthy surroundings. The team's new mission took them into a part of Germany so tranquil he could almost forget the world was at war. The scenery was breathtaking with fall colors, picturesque villages, mountaintop castles, locals wearing unique native dress, and clear streams running through deep valleys. Best of all, for two days he had not heard a single gunshot. Now, as darkness enveloped the landscape, the moon lit up a large German estate where an impressive and massive brick house rested on a plateau.

A half-dozen outbuildings, including an arena-sized barn, surrounded the mansion. Several acres of grass were so neatly trimmed they could have served as greens on a golf course. Reese noted a flat spot where a soccer field had been lined off and another place between the

house and the barn with an elaborate array of playground equipment. Closer to the house was a swimming pool, and not far from the barn, an area was set aside for archery.

"They must have some amazing views from that third-story balcony," Gail Worel remarked as she eased up next to Reese.

"No doubt," he whispered, forgetting the huge estate as his senses filled with the woman he'd grown to love more than anything on the planet. After gently sweeping her into his arms and drawing her close, he observed, "It's a crazy world."

"It always has been."

"But more so now. People are killing each other for sport, or at least that's the way it seems."

"I don't think the war will last forever," Worel noted wistfully.

"It seems like it will last until there is no one left to kill. When you think of all the blood, suffering, and rage we've seen, there's no way we should be in love. There's simply no room for that now. Life is far too fragile, and this war is much too important to take the risk of giving away a heart." He shook his head. "That line was so bad it would have been ripped out of a movie script. Perhaps, before acting and sounding like a teenager with a bad crush, I should have stopped with 'there is no way we should be in love.'"

"Maybe there should be a way," Gail suggested. She laid her head against his shoulder and looked up at his face. "And I don't care if it is corny. I love all those things you said. You see, I think love might be our only real hope to drown out all the hate we've seen."

He nodded and looked back at the estate. "I do love

you. Someday we'll have a real wedding, not just a quick trip to the local constable's office."

"It was a nice trip," she assured him. "But I'll take you up on the other offer someday. I'd love to march down a church aisle in a white gown with my friends and family there to celebrate with me. I'd like to hear the organ play the wedding march and dance with my father. I think I'd even enjoy rice in my hair."

He filed those wishes into the recesses of his mind and vowed to make them come true. Pointing to the estate, he said, "Maybe we can live in a place like that. We can play lord and lady and raise a dozen children."

"I think two is enough," she replied. "When this war is over, I'm not going to have the energy to chase a dozen."

"Those people up there on that hill," Reese mused, "what do you suppose they do?"

"They breed." Underground leader Hans Holsclaw joined the two lovers, still locked in an embrace. "I'm sorry if I interrupted anything, and I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I noticed you weren't at the camp and decided to see where you'd gone."

"I'll forgive you," Reese said with a laugh. "At least we didn't share any embarrassing fantasies."

"You said they breed?" Worel asked as she slipped from Reese's arms. "You mean like cattle? I haven't heard any sounds of livestock. Are German cows quieter than those we have in England? Besides, there are no fences or pens."

The Dutchman mournfully shook his head and looked toward the home. "Have either of you ever heard of Lebensborn?"

Reece replied, "If my German's any good—and it has to be for this mission—it means 'fountain of life.'"

“That’s exactly the meaning,” Holsclaw agreed, “and this is one of the several places across Germany where the children, products of that special breeding program, are being raised.”

“I don’t follow,” Worel said, sweeping a strand of hair off her face. “What kind of children live there?”

“In 1935, the Nazis developed Lebensborn in an effort to create a generation of perfect Aryan youth. They went about this in a couple of ways.” He held up two fingers as he explained. “The first involved literally mating blond-haired, blue-eyed SS officers with females who possessed the same characteristics.”

“You mean the government arranged marriages?” Worel asked innocently.

“Hardly,” Holsclaw replied. “In many cases, the women and SS officers were already married to other people. In other cases, teenagers were taken from their parents and housed in special places for officers to use.”

Stunned, Reese cut in, “So these girls were provided for the men’s pleasure?”

“No,” the Dutchman answered, “this was about creating a master race, not giving the SS recreational rewards. The women were told this was their duty, and the SS officers were simply there to fulfill a job.”

“That’s mind-boggling,” Worel noted in disdain. “In fact, it’s perhaps the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard.”

“In the world of the Nazis,” Holsclaw assured her, “this likely is one of the milder crimes against humanity. I would argue it pales in comparison to other ways the children of Lebensborn were obtained.”

“How’s that?” Worel looked back toward the estate.

“They couldn’t breed enough children, so they

kidnapped kids who displayed what were deemed the ideal Aryan traits. Those that were stolen from their parents were taught the Nazi way. The propaganda never stops. Their schoolbooks and even their bedtime stories reflect the ideals of the Reich. The skills they are taught are meant to shape them into warriors. If Germany is not defeated, many of the children living in that home on the hill will become the next generation of Nazi leaders.”

“That’s ghastly,” Worel whispered in horror. “You mean to say these children are being raised by the state for the purpose of becoming the human show stock of a nation?”

“It’s actually more than that,” Holsclaw continued. “The values they’re taught, the ideology that’s poured into their minds each day, and the way they’re treated create an impression they are superior to everyone else. In a very real sense, they are made to see themselves as vastly superior to all those who don’t possess their traits and characteristics.”

Reese took a few steps toward a meadow and looked out at the estate. Just like his new bride, this news was beyond his ability to fully grasp. He struggled with the thought of breeding a master race. “Just when you think there’s nothing that hasn’t been tried, you get a big surprise,” he muttered.

“My friend, what you’re having problems grasping is really nothing new. Some American slave owners did the same thing in trying to create a bigger and stronger generation of workers. The Romans had breeding programs for their gladiators. History is littered with other examples. This is simply an outcropping of that kind of thought.”

“But this perfect Aryan look makes no sense,” Reese

protested. "It goes against fact. Look at the Nazi leaders—Hitler, Himmler, Speer, Goring, and Goebbels—none of them fit that mold. Almost all of them have dark hair, they possess all kinds of body shapes, few of them are athletic, and show me one of them who any woman would consider handsome.

"It's ironic," the Dutchman agreed. "Those who decide what the perfect man looks like look nothing like the perfect man. If you think about the logic, that was also true of the American slave owners and those in charge of the Roman games. But you have to understand when Hitler sees himself in a mirror, he doesn't actually see his true reflection. He sees a person who is superior in every way. In his mind, he is a mental giant, a man with inexhaustible energy. The face he sees in the glass might not look like the children in this home, but in his mind, he is their father. Henry, I've found that extreme ego blinds even those with twenty-twenty vision." He let his words hang in the air before adding, "And that works in our favor."

"I get being blind to the truth," Reese replied, "but explain how that helps us."

"My American friend, those who are blinded by ego believe themselves to be godlike. They no longer look at things logically because they think with a wave of their hand or a pronouncement from their lips, they can wipe away everything that stands in their way. In their minds, they are always right, and nothing can stop them."

Holsclaw leaned against a tree and pulled a pipe from his pocket. He tapped in a bit of tobacco from a tin and lit up. After a few long draws, he blew the smoke into the air before continuing. "With America now in the war, the

only real chance Germany has is to find a way to broker peace. When the Nazis were facing the Brits, they really had the upper hand. The English had no oil reserves and limited natural resources. They could only hold off Germany for so long before they would be fighting the war on grit and fumes. Yet the British were stubborn, and that frustrated Hitler, so he chose an easy target to pump his ego and attacked the Reds. But Russian winters were something he hadn't planned on. And, as you know, when supply lines broke down due to weather, that not only delayed victory, but losses began to mount. The Nazis were literally stuck in the snow. And then came December 7th. I think up until that day, the Germans still had an opportunity to control all of Europe. They still had the chance to take England and turn things around in Russia."

"A sleeping giant was awakened," Reese added, "and the America First movement, led by the likes of Charles Lindberg, was finally silenced."

Worel cut in. "On our side of the pond, we recognized the America First movement was driven by fear and prejudice as much as not wanting to be a part of the war. Many in your country blamed the Jews for every world problem. I remember how much that organization ridiculed Hollywood and Wall Street."

"That's in the past now," Holsclaw noted. "Having the United States in the war means the Allied machine has almost unlimited resources. The Yanks will just keep building and building in factories all over your huge nation while Germany slowly runs out of raw materials and fuel to keep up the fight. And all of this happened because one man was blinded by his own ego, and another

fool decided to attack a giant that really didn't have the stomach or will to fight."

"Still, winning won't be easy," Worel countered.

"Winning will indeed take resolve and many years," the Dutchman agreed, "but in the end, the little god in Berlin will be taken down as long as we can stop them from building a super weapon."

Pointing to the estate, Worel asked, "When we win, what happens to those kids?"

"My guess is they will be reviled," Holsclaw said. "I think that's the only possible outcome. When the war ends, the SS and Hitler will be viewed as the devil's backbone. So those children in that house will be hated due to their association with the cruelest elements of Nazi Germany."

Worel's face went white. "Then we need to kidnap them and take them back to Britain." She pointed to the hill. "Look, there's practically no security. We could call for a plane, drop it in, and remove these poor kids from their horrible fate. We could succeed!"

"We have the men," the Dutchman admitted. "We might even be able to get them to a place where they could be picked up. But many of these children have been brainwashed for seven years. How do you erase that mental garbage from their minds?"

"It could be done," Worel argued. "We have to try."

"Could it be done?" the Dutchman asked. "What if one of them is the next Hitler? Would you want to unleash that on the world? There are likely some heading up the Allied movement who think it best to just bomb that home and wipe all those kids out rather than deal with the poison that has been thrust into their minds."

"You can't be serious!" Worel shot back.

Holsclaw glanced back to the house on the hill and took a few more puffs on his pipe. "I don't want to see them dead. If fact, I'd love to be noble and save them. But we're not here to save lives; we're here to take down a research center that might be creating weapons that could turn the tide in Germany's favor. The lives of those twenty or so kids pale in comparison to our mission."

"But ..." Worel began.

"He's right," Reese agreed. "I'm sorry those children are in that environment. I wish we could get them into a place where they might escape the cloud of Nazism. But, the fate of the world is at stake. We have to get to the mountain, do our scouting, come up with a plan, call in our orders for the needed materials, and be ready when the rest of the team is dropped to our position."

Worel was crushed. "It's not right."

"Right or not, it's time to move," Holsclaw said. "The safe house where we'll be staying is still several miles down the road, and we need to be there before dawn."

Worel looked longingly back at the estate, a tear running down her cheek. Reese wiped the tear away before resting his chin on her head. As he embraced the woman he loved, he noticed a blonde girl who looked about ten, standing in front of a window.

"I wonder who she is?" Worel asked.

"Likely a child who was kidnapped," Reese suggested. "She's too old to be a part of the breeding program."

Worel quietly wept. "That means somewhere, right now, her parents are missing her and wondering if she's alive."

Reese thought back to a case he worked with Helen Meeker and the toll two separate kidnappings had

taken on their families. Guilt swept over him with the suddenness of a spring storm—a crying shame they couldn't bring a few children home, but regretfully, there were other things much more important that demanded their attention.

“Let's go,” he whispered as he grabbed Worel's hand and headed back toward the bottom of the hill.

“Promise me something,” she demanded.

“What?”

“When all of this over, when there's no more war, we'll save one of those kids and bring him or her home to our house.” She looked up into Reese's eyes. “You see, I still think love can fix any problem.”

“If it's possible,” Reese assured her. “Now let's get going.”



CHAPTER 8

Wednesday, September 30, 1942

9:15 a.m.

13th Floor, Lincoln Hotel, Chicago, Illinois

As she raised her eyebrows, Helen Meeker's face displayed a mixture of disbelief and amusement as Napoleon Lancelot tried to steer three Scottish terriers into the group's secret headquarters. The energetic canines were pulling the muscular man forward, backward, and sideways. He might be able to handle almost any size man—he'd proved that several times since joining the team—but the canines were completely overwhelming him. One terrier had managed to wind his leash around Lancelot's right leg while another was all but yanking his left arm from its socket. The third terrier was showing far too much interest in his shoe.

Meeker leaned back in her chair and grinned. "What in the world are you doing?"

"It's a long story," the ebony-skinned man announced. He dropped the leashes and collapsed into a chair, allowing the dogs to explore the main room. The largest of

the short-legged, black bundles of energy raced between two desks and down the hall. The smallest strolled directly into the wall, his blunt snout leaving a wet circle, before regaining his bearings and moving under a desk. The last of the trio ran into a coat rack, knocking it sideways, but he didn't react when it fell to the floor with a loud clang. If this kept up, the office would likely be in shambles by the end of the day. What started out as cute was quickly becoming ugly!

Meeker became concerned. "Napoleon, what in the world were you thinking? These pups are going to ruin this place in a matter of minutes!"

"Fala hasn't ruined the White House," he argued, "and he's the same breed of dog."

"Unlike the President, I don't have the Secret Service and a large staff to look after a trio of living fur balls. If these pups get into the lab, we'll be in real trouble. Equipment worth thousands of dollars is in there. And, if someone calls while they're barking, the consequences won't bode well for them or me."

While Meeker waited for an explanation, the most energetic of the group came racing back down the hall. He barked three times, then knocked over a wastebasket, spreading trash everywhere. Meeker crossed her arms and tapped her foot before setting her jaw and hissing, "Napoleon!"

The big man sighed. "It's not really my fault."

"Not your fault?" She pointed to the growing chaos. "This isn't your fault? Then whose fault is it? When you give me a name, I'm personally going to haunt them!"

"I didn't ask for the dogs. They were thrust upon me."

"You should have thrust them right back."

Napoleon shrugged. "That would have required more digging than thrusting."

"What are you talking about?"

"My uncle died and left me the pups in his will. I don't know what he was thinking. I mean, he left my sister three thousand dollars and a five-year-old Hudson. My cousin Joan got his house, and another cousin, Johnny, was given the furniture. I got the dogs. So far, I can't find anyone to take care of them. The way my luck's going, I might just get stuck with them forever. So, you see, it wasn't my fault."

Meeker got up from her desk and walked over to the pooch hiding under the desk. She kneeled in front of him and extended her hand, but he didn't respond. At least being ignored was better than being bitten.

"He's blind," Lancelot explained.

"Blind?" Suddenly, Meeker was concerned.

"Yeah, he was born that way. You have to talk directly to him, and you also have to help him get used to new places." Lancelot glanced around the large room, filled with a desk, tables, and file cabinets. "It would likely take him a few days to map this place out, so he won't run into anything. His blindness is likely the reason he's shy. But on a positive note, his hearing is amazing. In fact, my uncle trained him to find sounds."

Confused, Meeker looked back at the dog, "Find sounds?"

"Yeah, let me show you." Lancelot walked over to the door, "Come here, Samson." On cue, the dog walked to where he stood. "Now listen to this." Lancelot took off his watch and placed it near the dog's head. After tossing the timepiece to Meeker, he ordered, "Find that sound."

The dog barked once, then stood perfectly still. After

a few seconds of apparent deep concentration, Samson closed the five feet separating him from Meeker, now sitting on the floor, and gently put his nose against the hand holding the wristwatch.

"I'm impressed," Meeker admitted as she scratched Samson's head. "Now, I'm not sure what good that skill would do, but it's a great stunt. Do the other dogs know any tricks?"

"Yeah, Zeppo, the one over by the far wall that knocked over your trash can, is a great scent dog. He can trail almost anything. And Keller is deaf. She can't hear anything, but her vision is amazing. She seems able to see even in the dark, so she serves as Samson's guide."

"They make a good team," Meeker admiringly agreed as she pushed off the floor and returned to her desk. "Maybe someday our team will function as smoothly, but with a lot less noise and destruction."

"I can't break up that team," Lancelot insisted. "That was in the will. If I give them away, all of them have to go to the same home. I guess I'm going to keep them together with me. My new apartment allows pets, but I just didn't feel like I could leave them alone today."

"I understand," Meeker replied. "I'll give you a pass today, but let's not make this a habit. We don't need to be *terrierized*—pardon the pun—on a regular basis. Why don't you put them in the room where you stayed while we checked out your story? That would be safer than letting them roam free." The ringing telephone pulled her attention from the three dogs.

"While you get that," Lancelot said, "I'll round up the mutts and get them situated."

By the third ring, the dogs were on the way down the hall. Meeker answered with a chipper, "Helen here."

"It's Alison."

"Good to hear your voice, sis."

"Rising at your pipes as well," came the expected slang-filled reply. "You want the heads up on what the G-men dug up at the frog's pad?"

Meeker frowned. "I'm guessing you're asking me do I want to know if the FBI found anything in Elliot's apartment. But what does a frog have to do with it?"

"Elliot croaked."

"That's too bad. But yes, I do want to know if they found anything we missed."

"You're still the teacher," Alison assured Meeker.

Meeker guessed that being the teacher meant the others still had things to learn. "So, nothing new?"

"No, the go-to guy or gal in this caper is still very much like Claude Rains."

"I'm lost again," Meeker admitted.

"Helen ..." Impatience was evident in Alison's tone as she was forced to explain what should have been obvious. "Rains starred in *The Invisible Man*."

"Okay, I'm following now. Anything else I need to know? And please translate as you tell me."

"Fine. There's a businessman in Chicago who has been involved in making bombsights for the Army Air Corps. He's been in a blue funk since his wife died."

Before answering, Meeker recalled finding an envelope in Spoons' home with a set of microfilm plans for a new bomb sight hidden under a stamp. Although seemingly not as significant as the information they'd discovered on the Manhattan Project, the plans that had been hidden

on microfilm of the Pentagon or the docks of New York Harbor, perhaps this would put that tidbit in a more significant light. But what did this have to do with a dead wife?

“Alison, what does a grieving widower have to do with me?”

“That’s the problem, Helen. His depression is affecting the way he does his job. The cops ruled his wife committed suicide last July. One of those investigating, a guy by the handle of Roger Richards, argued there was probable cause for murder, but when the clothes came out of the washer ...”

“Clothes? Washer?”

“Okay, when they sifted through all the evidence, the DA didn’t find enough grounds to justify overruling the ME. By the way, don’t you find getting information in black and white kind of boring? I mean, it’s so vanilla pudding, no flavor, no beat, doesn’t soar. If it were a book, no one would buy, much less read it.”

“No, plain vanilla is fine. I like when we speak the same language. Now, where do I fit into this picture of a mourning man?”

“That’s good,” Alison suggested.

“What is?”

“The line about a ‘picture of a mourning man.’ It tells a story.”

“Back to the facts, sis.”

“Okay, once again in your native tongue, the rich guy whose wife cashed it in is Michael Wallace.”

“Ah, he’s known as the ‘Big M.E.’ in social circles,” Meeker cut in, “a man with both power and money.”

“Like Astaire and Rogers, they usually go together,” Alison cracked.

“I guess you’re right. Now spill with the rest of the report.”

“I like the way you’re yapping, Helen. Here’s what else you need to know. Wallace has set up a cruise tonight on Lake Michigan. He’s invited all those people he thinks might have murdered his wife, along with the investigating cop. So, the guest list is filled with suspected suspects. Don’t you dig that?”

“Not really. Get to the part where I’m involved.

“Okay, sis. Wallace and the cop want you and Teresa there to help determine if Mayu Wallace did commit suicide or if she was murdered. Both men value your opinion so much, they’ll let things ride with your assessment of the case.”

“Mayu, interesting name.”

“She was Japanese.”

As she considered this unexpected bit of new information, Meeker’s dark blue eyes were drawn to Lancelot, who had reentered the room. Thankfully, no dogs were with him.

“Alison, why is my decision about what happened in this matter so important?”

“Because the government needs Wallace to have his head in the game. As long as he suspects his friends and business associates of murdering his wife, he’s not going to be fully focused.”

Meeker shook her head. “Teresa and I are supposed to leave for DC tomorrow and then travel to London the following day. We can’t afford to put the trip off.”

“The Big Cheese ...” Alison paused before correcting

herself. "The President knows that, but this is only going to be a three-hour cruise."

"A three-hour cruise?"

"Yes, a three-hour cruise! I mean, what could possibly go wrong?"

"Okay, fine." Meeker was obviously put out. "But how is Wallace managing to get all of those he suspects to attend this floating party?"

"They think he's organized a pleasure jaunt to get away from the bad news of the war. A big meal has been planned, and the dress is formal. And in case you need some muscle, Napoleon will go along as your butler."

"I have a butler?"

"Just for tonight."

"The yacht's leaving at 6:00, so be at the Windy City Marina in plenty of time to board. By the way, the boat's name is *The Cat's Eye*. Wallace keeps the vessel in slip 213."

Resigned, Meeker replied, "Okay. I'll let the team know, and we'll get the garb necessary for the junket. Can you have Wallace get us a list of everyone who will be there?"

"I already have a list. I like boat rides and dressing up. Wish I was going."

"I wish you were taking my place. I'll do some research on Wallace and let Teresa or Napoleon study the guests. As soon as we finish, I'll hand him the phone, and you can give him the names."

"Anything else?" Alison asked.

"No. Bye, sis, love you."

"Smiling exit and sunshine to you, Helen," Alison replied.

"Hang on, here's Napoleon." As the big man got up to take the phone, Meeker explained, "She has a list of

names. Jot them down. We only have a few hours to get a full work up on each.”

“Got it.”

Frustrated, Meeker got up and moved toward the door. She was being asked to play a game to cheer up a man when she should be preparing for a mission to take out a potential game-changing facet of the Nazi's war machine. The last thing she wanted was to slip into a gown and mix with Chicago's elite, but plenty of things she didn't care to do were required as long as she was in the President's service. Once again, she was reminded of going to the prom with the wrong date!



CHAPTER 9

Wednesday, September 30, 1942

5:55 p.m.

Windy City Marina, Slip 213, Chicago, Illinois

The lake wind was almost bitter cold, hinting at a winter that might arrive sooner than normal and with much more bite than usual. After parking, Helen Meeker, Teresa Bryant, and Napoleon Lancelot walked a hundred yards down the pier to the spot where *The Cat's Eye* was tied to the dock. Sea-going cargo ships would have felt minor league compared to the yacht. *The Cat's Eye* was long and sleek, with polished mahogany decks and enough chrome to outline a twenty-story art-deco building. As Meeker knew firsthand, M.E. Wallace's rig made the President's pleasure boat, *The Potomac*, look like an antiquated, stripped-down tug.

"So, this is how the wealthy live," Bryant cracked as she adjusted the hem on her jade-green evening dress.

"Would someone remind me what I'm doing here?" Lancelot asked, carrying one Scotty. "And why didn't someone tell me the party was on a cruise ship?"

Meeker, dressed in an emerald-blue gown, explained, "You're my butler."

"Yes, that's right. All butlers have college degrees," Lancelot replied, displaying a touch of the bitterness. He struggled over having to act the role of a second-class citizen.

"It's not my idea," Meeker assured him. "I need you here for both your brains and your protection. The fact that you're seen as a servant means folks really won't notice you. That gives you the opportunity to go places Teresa and I won't be able to visit and do things we can't do."

"Pardon me if I don't revel in being considered invisible," he announced.

"It works to our advantage," Meeker assured him. "If Mayu Wallace was murdered by one of those on board, I suspect you'll figure out who they were well before we do." She frowned as she looked at the bundle in the man's arms. "And why did you bring the dog?"

"I couldn't leave Samson at home," he explained. "He hasn't mapped out my place yet, so he keeps running into things. I mean he's blind, you know?"

"Yeah, I remember," Meeker assured him. "It might be good to have him around. I'll explain that he's mine, and I don't go anywhere with him."

"So now the dog is yours! As if a butler would be allowed a dog of his own."

Meeker smiled and cooed, "No, he's yours, all yours, but for tonight, both you and Sammy are undercover. Besides, if Wallace hates dogs, then perhaps this trip can end almost as soon as it begins." Turning to Bryant, she asked, "Did your homework reveal anything about this boat?"

“Yes, the yacht is a tribute to excess,” Bryant began. “There are six bedrooms—each with its own bath, a full kitchen, a dining room, and a gathering room that includes gaming tables. There are two levels, three if you count the observation deck, and there is a four-man crew: a captain, a first mate, and two stewards who will likely serve the meal tonight. *The Cat's Eye* is powered by twin Packard twelve-cylinder engines. Wallace is a compulsive man and pays great attention to details. My research uncovered each bedroom is outfitted exactly the same way, and he inspects every room before guests arrive to make sure even the clocks are all wound and set to the same time. He also puts on gloves and checks for dust. Each gaming table sports new, sealed decks of cards. With his wife dead, he has even taken over determining the dinner menu and has specified a precise number of ice cubes in each glass.”

“Not the kind of person I enjoy being around,” Meeker noted. “What was the cop’s name?”

“Richards,” Bryant answered, “Roger Richards.”

“Why does that name make me want to sing?” Lancelot asked.

“Don’t,” Bryant ordered. “It might cause the dog to howl.”

Ignoring the warning, Lancelot began humming “Fly with Me.” Samson whimpered along.

Ignoring the bizarre duet, Meeker asked, “What do we know about Richards?”

Bryant didn’t have to check her notes. “He’s single, bright, has a good record, and is the kind of person you’d want on your team if you were dealing with a complex case. By that, I mean he has a reputation of having an eye

for details. As per Wallace's orders, Richards is supposed to have his case files with him, including notes, photos, the gun used in the crime, and even the clothes the victim was wearing the day she died."

Meeker's gaze returned to the yacht. A gray-headed man, wearing a white dinner jacket, stood on the deck, waiting for the trio to make their way on board. She knew from photographs this was M.E. Wallace. A few feet to the millionaire's right was a tall, good-looking man in an ill-fitting, thus likely rented, tux. He looked like a fish out of water or a cop off his beat, so she pegged him as Matthews.

"Keep Samson on a leash," she suggested as she led her team toward the gangplank. She then whispered what almost sounded like a prayer, "Perhaps we can quickly move through the evidence and determine if her death was murder or suicide. Then maybe we can turn this three-hour cruise into a sail around the harbor and back home."

"You are far more optimistic than I am," Bryant replied.



CHAPTER 10

Wednesday, September 30, 1942

6:10 p.m.

Windy City Marina, Slip 213, Chicago, Illinois

“Miss Meeker,” Wallace greeted, extending his right hand, “I’m so glad you can join us. I’m anxious for you to meet those in attendance and talk to Mr. Richards about the evidence.”

Meeker forced a smile. Wallace appeared to possess the strength and energy of a man two decades his junior. After pulling her hand back and making sure nothing was broken, she offered a greeting of her own, hoping her words didn’t sound forced.

“Miss Bryant and I will be happy to look at your evidence and give our views. But I hope you won’t be upset if the conclusion is not the one you want.”

“I will accept what you say,” he assured her. “Have you, during your well-chronicled adventures, ever met Mr. Richards?”

“No,” Meeker quickly replied, her eyes moving from the industrialist to the gray-eyed cop. “But first, allow me to

present my partner, Teresa Bryant, and our aide, Napoleon Lancelot." She figured Lancelot would be pleased to be called anything other than a butler. "Oh, and my dog, Samson. It will become obvious later why we couldn't leave him behind."

After shaking hands with both of his guests, Wallace directed a comment to Bryant that caused Meeker to cringe.

"I've been told you're as good as any male detective in the city."

Bryant raised her eyebrows. "You must have been misinformed."

"Really?" Wallace replied, surprised.

"Yes, the men might not measure up to Helen's and my standards," she quipped, tossing a biting grin toward Richards.

Obviously not sure how to respond, Wallace turned his attention to the dog Lancelot held. "He looks sweet."

"He's my secret weapon," Meeker told him. "Samson often discovers things we miss. By the way, Mr. Wallace, I understand you were in the service the first time we fought the Germans."

"I was in the Navy," he answered with a hint of pride.

"I've read your file," Meeker noted. "Munitions, I believe." She then turned to the cop and extended her hand. "I'm Helen Meeker."

"Roger Richards," he replied. "It will be a pleasure to have your and Miss Bryant's insights. By the way, the medical examiner on this case is also here. I thought you might want to interview him."

"The more facts we have, the better off we are."

Suddenly, Meeker felt the yacht moving. By instinct, she grabbed the rail and looked back toward the dock.

"All my other guests are already on board," Wallace explained. "Unless you want to stay on the deck and watch as we head out, we can join them."

"Normally," Meeker said, "I might just stay and enjoy the view, but as cool as it is tonight, I think it would be best to go inside."

Wallace led the way into the large dining room. Thirteen people were gathered in the room, eight men and five women, all dressed in formal wear. Most appeared to be in their thirties or forties except for a younger woman wearing a tight, red dress, and a stout, gray-headed gentleman in a wheelchair whose glasses partially covered his dark, beady eyes. His face was deeply lined, but he had a full head of hair that would be the envy of most men in their thirties. He was also surprisingly solid for a man who was either injured or handicapped. Wallace must have noted the object of Meeker's gaze because he leaned closer and gave her a full profile.

"That's one of my main competitors. His name is William Decker. Bill is likely the wealthiest man on board today. He has a number of different manufacturing interests and over the years has consistently beaten me on most bids."

"I take it he doesn't make devices like the bombsight you are currently producing," Meeker said.

"How did you know about that?" Wallace asked, obviously stunned. "That's supposed to be top secret."

"Don't worry," Meeker assured him. "It is. Now, why didn't Decker get the bid on the sight?"

"He wanted that one," Wallace assured her, still taken

aback by Meeker's knowing so much about his business, "but he was a few dollars too high. Yet, with the delays my plant has been experiencing, unless I can get things back on track, he might well have that contract soon. He has all kinds of other interests to keep him busy as he circles over my head like a hungry buzzard. His companies make safes of all sizes, burglar alarms, forklifts, mechanical doors, and even tractors. He's also into lumber, ball bearings, and sporting equipment. He's spent a small fortune over the past few years in expansion. In other words, he's made all of us borrow up to our necks just to keep up. In fact, he's bought out three of the companies that used to challenge me."

"Why's he in the chair?" Meeker asked.

"He was in an automobile accident a decade back. The accident killed his wife and left him crippled. It hasn't kept him from his work. He has a specially equipped car, and his office is set up for him to roll wherever he needs to go."

Meeker faced her host and spoke bluntly. "You sound like a man who doesn't care much for Mr. Decker. How's your relationship with him?"

"It's more one of mutual respect than friendship. We both recognize who the other is and know that keeping close is the best way to stop the other from getting too far ahead. We were once good friends, but that changed after his wife died."

Meeker looked to her left to make sure Bryant and Lancelot heard everything that was said. Bryant nodded slightly, acknowledging she was in step.

Meeker leaned close to Bryant and whispered, "I think it's time to begin unwrapping some packages. What do you say we start with the guy in the chair?"

“One pigeon is as good as the next,” Bryant cracked.

Not waiting for her host to make the introduction, Meeker led her trio across the room to Decker. She smiled as she gently held out her hand.

“Mr. Decker, I’m Helen Meeker. This is Teresa Bryant and our associate, Napoleon Lancelot.”

“I’ve heard a great deal about you, Miss Meeker,” he replied, taking her hand in his. Like Wallace, Decker’s grip was solid and strong. After admiring Meeker’s dress, he turned to his right and charmingly noted, “And Miss Bryant is becoming a familiar figure in Chicago, as well. In fact, with so many of the best Cubs White Sox, Cardinal, and Bears players going into the service, you two might be the heaviest hitters in town.” He paused and looked toward Lancelot. “What does your man do?”

“He’s not actually our man,” Meeker explained. “I’ll let him speak for himself.”

“About anything,” Lancelot announced. “I have a college degree, I’m good with languages, and I serve the agency in whatever way it needs.” He added with a grin, “The dog here is our resident bloodhound.”

Bryant, who had been mute until this moment, chimed in, “We know a great deal about you and your many businesses. Decker Industries has been a part of this country for decades.”

“More than eighty years,” Decker responded with pride. “My grandfather began everything. He was a machinist. He was producing gasoline motors for farm equipment when most folks were still using mules. My father built the business from there.”

Bryant nodded. “I see you’re a fan of the color red. I know your company trademark has your name printed

over a bright red background, and you're the only man in the room with a red tie and red socks."

"My wife was the reason the company changed its colors from dark blue to red. She convinced me that red stood out more. Since she died, I've always worn something red as both tribute and remembrance. I also find, as I am confined to a rolling chair, the bright red gives me a chance to be noticed."

"Your shoes are unique," Bryant added. She bent closer before asking, "Is that eel?"

"You have a fine eye," he replied. "I love the way eel shines. I have them made by a shop on the west side. The eel skin is brought in from the Gulf of Mexico."

"How long have you owned this pair?" Bryant quizzed.

Decker glanced down at the almost reflective shoes and shrugged. "I guess about two months."

"Look at those shoes, Helen," Bryant urged. "I don't think you'll ever see another pair like them."

Meeker smiled, but wondered why in the world was Bryant blabbering about footwear when tomorrow they were going on a mission to head off Germany's work on a super weapon? Nevertheless, Meeker quickly glanced down and nodded. "They're nice. Now if you'll excuse us, Mr. Decker, we need to meet the rest of the guests."

"What did you think of Decker?" Wallace asked as he guided the two women toward more guests.

"He's far more than he seems," Bryant offered, not bothering to explain what she meant.

"Molly and Jim Castle," Decker announced as he approached the four guests. "You no doubt have heard of Helen Meeker and Teresa Bryant. The Negro with the dog is one of their employees."

Meeker swallowed her words and reset the fuse in her brain rather than defending Lancelot. She had to remind herself this worked to her advantage. She wanted those present to underestimate the man with the dog, but she still found not saying something difficult.

“Very nice to meet you,” Meeker said, speaking for everyone in her trio. She then casually scoped out the couple.

The Castles reeked of money. Jim’s tux was tailored, his nails polished, and his dark hair far too perfect. He was much too pretty to be a man. Molly was a bit over five feet tall, outfitted in a black dress and at least three grand in jewelry ... that is if the gems were actually real. Her eyes were clear and her makeup a touch overstated. Meeker pegged Molly as a former cheerleader and sorority officer.

Evidently sensing a need to bring the detectives up to speed, Wallace pointed out, “Jim’s in stocks and bonds. Those who follow his advice almost always find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow—and Molly is into spending everything Jim makes.”

If the diminutive woman took offense, it didn’t show. She just kept smiling like a beauty queen. Meanwhile, her husband sported a barely discernable grin as if he had already been assured the title.

Wallace began a second round of introductions. “And here we have Greg and Melody Steinforth. Not that long ago, Melody, using her maiden name, White, was a star on Broadway. Greg is a theatrical agent who also dabbles in diamond sales. You can’t have a Windy City gathering without including these two.”

As greetings were exchanged, and the couple made small talk, Meeker sized them up.

Greg, looking uncomfortable in his tux, puffed on a cigar. His hair was receding and what was left appeared to be dyed black. He was about thirty pounds overweight. Melody, about five inches shorter than her husband's six feet, had deep-green eyes and fair skin. She wore thick makeup and was a bottle blonde. Her gown would have looked good on her twenty years earlier, but tonight the outfit revealed way too much skin.

"I imagine the diamond industry is somewhat fluid right now," Bryant commented, attempting to peek into the couple's minds. "As I recall, most of the work used to be done in Holland, but with the war, I guess some of the cutting has moved to the States."

"We have seen an uptick," Steinforth agreed, "but getting the rare diamonds from South Africa is not easy. The U-boats have sent some shipments to the ocean floor."

Meeker nodded, "I see that Mrs. Steinforth has managed to corral a few for this evening. They are very beautiful."

"Thank you," the woman replied. Then she offered a glimpse into the family history. "Gregory used to buy me a new bracelet every time I had a starring role on Broadway. He did keep Tiffany's very busy."

"I'm sure," Bryant said. "As I recall, you did manage at least two starring roles."

As expected, the conversation immediately died.

Looking at Melody's glowing eyes and flushed cheeks, Wallace suggested, "You can visit more later. I want Helen and Teresa to meet the rest of our guests."

As their host stepped into the middle of the room, he pulled the trio close to him. "In the far corner are two more couples. The tall, graying man with the short, plump

wife is Roscoe Taylor. He's a distributor of automobile parts. With no new cars being sold and old ones wearing out, he should be in gravy, but I hear he's still paying off debts from the Depression. Tolly's sweet, but her mind and a blimp have a lot in common—they're both filled with hot air."

Wallace cast his eyes slightly to the right before continuing his discourse. "The other pair is a bit more interesting. Andrew Bellford is a retired banker. The young thing by his side is not his wife. Bella Bellford is out of town, so Andrew opted to bring his daughter-in-law, Janet. His son, the woman's husband, in on a destroyer somewhere in the Pacific."

"What are you implying?" Meeker asked.

"Only that Andrew hits on everything that moves. And with his movie-star looks and grace, he often scores. There is talk that Janet is his latest."

"Class act," Bryant noted, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Wallace continued, "Off to the port side, sitting at the table, are our final four guests. The Wickmans are on the right. Joshua is a broker who drinks too much. His wife, Kathleen, is the real brains of the family. She has a master's degree in art, and before the war, she made some important sales with paintings obtained from Europe. He is as crass and vulgar as he appears. She is elegant but has a sting like an angry wasp when provoked. The other couple is from New York."

Meeker eyed the pair. The man was small, slightly built, with curly hair and dark eyes. He resembled a weasel. His wife, with her closely cropped bob, appeared more rabbit-like. She was tall, plump, and nervous.

“Don’t let their looks fool you,” Wallace warned. “The Van Elffands are opinionated and loud. Scott would knife you in the back if it could make him a dollar. By the way, his business centers on importing furniture. Ellie’s business is spending Scott’s money, and she loves to discuss her family’s supposed royal roots. She only has friends to use them. She is as loyal as an alley cat.”

“Lovely crowd,” Lancelot chimed in. “I think I prefer the folks in my neighborhood.”

“I will say this for all of them,” Wallace explained. “They’re all patriots. They love America and wrap themselves in the flag every time they get the chance—for whatever that’s worth. Hence, they now all hate the Japanese. And each of them turned on Mayu after December 7th. So, if she didn’t take her own life, then each of them is a suspect. And because they all have money, they likely had no fear of being caught. If the cops get too close, there are people they can bribe.”

“You don’t have much regard for the local police,” Meeker suggested.

“I feel about the same as I did back in the Capone era.” He eyed his guests before continuing. “Money talks and that’s the best reason to always have it. Being broke is worse than being dead.”

“There are some,” Meeker offered, “who wouldn’t agree with you.”

“That’s because they’ve never had enough to really know the power money brings,” he retorted.

“How about the man in the brown suit?” Bryant asked, wanting to move the subject beyond the value of wealth.

For the first time since they had entered the room, Roger Richards spoke. “The man leaning against the bar

is the city's top medical examiner. His name is Stanley Renshaw. Renny, as we call him, can answer any questions you might have about the autopsy. I still think he's wrong in his assessment of Mrs. Wallace's ability to pull the trigger at the angle needed to inflict the wound."

Renshaw was likely in his late thirties. Nothing about him stood out other than his dramatically pale complexion. Bela Lugosi looked sun-kissed compared to this guy.

"I'd guess he never gets outside his morgue," Meeker quipped.

"Not often," Richards verified. "In this city, a lot of work comes his way, and he's understaffed."

"We'll have time to visit with him later," Wallace suggested. "Dinner is about to be served. After we eat, we can move to the gaming area, and the questions can begin."

"No," Meeker interjected, "we eat and then my team examines the case files and evidence. Then we'll go to work." She paused and glanced around the room before asking, "Do these people know the real reason they're here?"

"No," Wallace assured her. "They think it's just another of my outings. I've been having them for years."

Meeker smiled and said, "Good. When setting a trap, it's best to have ignorant prey."



CHAPTER II

Wednesday, September 30, 1942

6:50 p.m.

Lake Michigan

As Wallace signaled that dinner was about to be served, Teresa Bryant pulled Helen Meeker and Napoleon Lancelot to the side. Once assured no one would overhear, she made her pitch.

“I think Napoleon needs to take Samson for a walk.”

“So, I just skip supper? That doesn’t seem like a very good idea.”

“You’ll be going hungry for a good cause,” Bryant assured him. She glanced around the room before adding, “It would be wise if you were to look in every room on this yacht. Get a feel for the layout. If Helen agrees, I’d like you to find the case files and evidence Richards brought with him so you can study them even before he shows the materials to us.” She stopped as the boat pitched a bit to the stern side and then observed, “The wind’s coming up. That likely means a storm’s brewing. Wallace isn’t going to take us home until Helen gives him a verdict, and I’d like

to get back to the dock before a real nasty bit of weather hits. After all, there have been about as many shipwrecks on the Great Lakes as in the Atlantic. In a storm, these are dangerous waters.”

“Great,” Meeker grumbled, “a three-hour cruise becomes a recipe for seasickness.”

“I sensed the storm even as we boarded,” Bryant explained.

“How?” Meeker asked, before waving off the answer. “You have to have some kind of gift from your ancestors, so I’ll just accept the fact and move on.”

“Should I do what she said?” Lancelot asked.

“Her plan sounds good to me,” Meeker agreed. The yacht rolled a bit. “So, Napoleon, walk the dog and make sure you take a very long walk. Over dinner, Teresa and I will get an even deeper feel for the guests. Knowing their temperature and views might enable us to limit our suspect list. That is if the evidence really does indicate Mayu Wallace didn’t kill herself.”

“Fine,” Lancelot grumbled, “but I’m taking some grub from the galley for the hound and me.”

As the man and dog unenthusiastically exited the room, Bryant turned back to Meeker. “We’re all going to be at the same large table. You take one end, and I’ll grab the other. As you’re the celebrity, I think you need to direct the conversation, and I’ll try to read the body language.”

“You suddenly seem very interested in this case,” Meeker observed. “Care to tell me why?”

“Just a hunch and I’m not ready to share yet.”

“You also seem to be suddenly in charge?”

“I didn’t think you wanted this case anyway. But, I’m now finding this very interesting. I’m going to enjoy

watching skeletons jump out of the rich folks' closets. And I'll bet there are going to be a lot of them. Not only is a storm brewing outside, but I also sense one building in here."

Meeker frowned. "Still seems like a redo of my high school prom to me."

As promised, Bryant remained mute during the meal, her eyes and ears fixed on those seated around the table. After the salad, one of the stewards set plates filled with vegetables, and another brought in a platter piled high with sirloin steak. The cuts had been prepared so a guest could request anything from rare to well done. Decker chose a steak that was almost raw, while beside him, Kathleen Wickman requested a cut that was nearly burned. As Kathleen watched the man in the wheelchair cut into his bloody piece of steak, her skin turned ashen. While Decker eagerly devoured the raw sirloin, she set her fork to the side, evidently having lost her appetite. She didn't look like she had the stomach for blood, but a quick look around the table indicated everyone else did.

As the guests filled their stomachs and drank imported wine, the conversation became a bit livelier. Having spent four hours that afternoon in a newspaper morgue, digging up everything she could on the guests around the table, Bryant had an advantage in reading those around her. She was aware of how many children they had and where they went to school. When the talk was directed toward business, she was also a step ahead of the game. During dessert, when Meeker steered the conversation to news of the war, new territory was finally covered.

"Are we going to win?" Meeker asked.

"You're the one who knows FDR," Scott Van Elffands pointed out. "What do you think?"

Meeker smiled as she dabbed her mouth with a cloth napkin. "We'll win, but the length of time it takes will depend upon the support we get on the home front. Our industry has to outproduce the Nazis and Japan, and our workforce, which now includes women, has to realize that each line worker's contributions are vital. We can't have plants that aren't efficient."

Decker grumbled, "You mean like those breakdowns that Wallace has been experiencing? What a sorry excuse for a factory! He's giving the war to the Japs and Huns."

"Just a minute," Wallace shot back, "I seem to remember some delays in your plants as well. Very few of us are used to working twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. All of us have many people on our lines with no experience. If I were you, I wouldn't be pointing fingers."

"I'll point mine where they need to be pointed," Decker assured him.

Bryant looked from one rival to the other. Decker was smug though not agitated, but their host was beet-red and angry. If the table hadn't separated the pair, Wallace might have even slugged the wheelchair-bound man. Secretly, Bryant wished he had. The cad deserved a good lashing. After stretching his neck, Wallace glanced at his watch and cut a bite from the chocolate pie that had just been served. For the moment, an uneasy truce appeared.

Breaking the awkward silence, Meeker turned to Joshua Wickman and asked, "Who do you fear the most ... Japan or Germany?"

"The Japs."

"Why?"

“They’re not even really human,” the broker barked as he took a gulp of coffee. “They don’t think like we do. They don’t have the same values. They’re monsters who want to see us wiped off the face of the planet.”

Meeker paused and took a sip of water, before calmly inquiring, “So I guess you looked upon Mayu Wallace as being a monster too?”

Wickman’s eyes lit up. “I thought M.E. was crazy to marry her. She had no business being in this country. Kathleen and I only put up with her because of good manners. We should have spoken up much sooner. We all should have.”

Meeker turned to Wickman’s wife. “I’d guess he speaks for you as well?”

Kathleen looked uneasy as she glanced from her husband to Wallace. After ten seconds of awkward silence, she phrased her thoughts in carefully measured words. “It would have been better if she’d never left Japan.”

Once more agitated, Wallace interrupted, “When you needed help with your insipid art shows, who was the only one who’d help you? Who was there when your kids both got sick at the same time, and you were buying art in Europe?”

Kathleen Wickman shrugged but didn’t answer. She was ill at ease and growing more uncomfortable by the second. Soon others would likely share that feeling. This was now like a family reunion gone bad, and Meeker was about to open the door for even more ill feelings. Too bad they hadn’t brought a ship’s doctor. They might need one very soon.

“What about you, Mr. Bellford?” Meeker asked, looking to her left. “How did you feel about Mayu?”

The retired banker smiled, then spoke. "I had no contempt for the woman, but M.E. could have done better. And none of us appreciated having her forced upon us. He used his money to ensure we allowed the foreigner into our circle. If he hadn't been rich, it wouldn't have happened."

"Andrew's right," Roscoe Taylor added, as his wife nodded in agreement. "At various times, Wallace, because of his standing in the community, all but owned us and he, therefore, had the power to push us into doing things we didn't want to do. And associating with that Jap woman was one of them."

Greg Steinforth added, "But after December 7th, we were finally able to exclude her from our lives. In a way, the country's worst day was also our best."

Bryant observed the others quietly nodding in agreement. Only Molly Castle remained stone still. Taking a deep breath, the woman quietly offered a different point of view.

"Mayu tried hard to be one of us, but in the long run that was impossible." She glanced around nervously before adding, "I grew up on the West Coast around Japanese people, and I found them to be just like us in most ways."

"You what?" Wickman shouted. "You think they're as good as us?"

"Yes," Castle quietly but firmly replied. "Just like the Germans are as good as us too. The fact the world's at war doesn't mean that people aren't good. Some are just following the wrong leaders."

"That's unpatriotic!" Decker chimed in. "You should be ashamed!"

Jim Castle stood, tossed his cloth napkin down on the

table and yelled, "You can't call my wife that. She's as good as this country has."

Decker shook his head, "Then we're all doomed."

Meeker stood and waved her hands. Once she had everyone's attention, she asked, "Mr. Steinforth, your last name interests me. Where are your people from?"

"My grandfather come over from Germany in 1903."

"Whose side was he rooting for in the First World War?" Meeker asked.

"The US."

Meeker shook her head. "Despite his being born in Germany, he was still an American patriot then?"

"Of course."

"Then why should it have been any different for Mayu? Why do you judge her by a different standard?"

"Because she didn't look like us," Melody Steinforth admitted.

"So, the mere fact she didn't look like us means she was not one of us?"

"Yeah," Jim Castle added, "and you know that is true because the man you worked for, the President of the United States, has placed Japanese Americans in internment camps. That pretty much proves you can't trust any of them. But why are we wasting time talking about this?"

Meeker glanced at Bryant before sitting back down to drop the bombshell. In a calm and assertive tone, she announced, "We are here tonight because the lead investigator in the death of Mayu Wallace does not believe she killed herself. He thinks it was murder, and it seems that those around this table are the best suspects. Now, before Miss Bryant and I excuse ourselves to study the

THE CAT'S EYE

evidence, would any of you like to take back the words you just said?"



CHAPTER 12

Wednesday, September 30, 1942

7:01 p.m.

Lake Michigan

Napoleon Lancelot watched Samson curl up in a corner and close his unseeing eyes before turning his attention to finishing the last half of a steak sandwich. Beside him, Roger Richards spread out his notes on the suicide of Mayu Wallace, placing them on a table in Wallace's shipboard study.

"So, you're not a butler?" the cop asked as he stepped back to look at the evidence.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't think Meeker and Bryant would have confidence in a butler reviewing this case file."

"What about you?" Lancelot demanded. "How do you feel about that?"

"I work with lots of good Negro cops. I trust their judgment just like I do the whites. Being smart has nothing to do with skin color."

"Okay, I'm not a butler," Lancelot admitted. "You must

not have heard when I explained earlier, but I'm a college grad, an expert in codes, and I am an agent in Helen's agency. She trusts me completely, or I wouldn't be here with you right now. So, turning to the evidence at hand, what makes you so sure this wasn't a suicide?"

"I never claimed to be sure," Richards corrected. "I just have a hunch."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you have a hunch?" Lancelot repeated.

Richards rubbed his chin and shrugged. "Things just don't really add up."

"Add up?"

"Suicide is about emotions, but it's also about math and science. The angles have to be right, and there needs to be a formula that can be proven by scientific means."

"Okay," Lancelot conceded, "you have me interested now. Preach on!"

"May I ask you a question first?"

"Sure."

"If you're so bright, why aren't you in intelligence or something?"

"The FBI and OSS wanted me until they found out my skin was darker than yours. And even you'll have to admit that Negro cops don't work on white crimes. In Chicago, the black police are limited to their own areas of town. And we know they don't make the same money as whites do."

"Sorry," Richards said. "I've ignored the obvious for so long that I'm now blind to it."

"I'm not blaming you," Lancelot assured him, "though it wouldn't hurt for folks like you to speak up to your

superiors and spell out the unvarnished truth and how unfair it is. Now show me why things don't add up."

Still uncomfortable, Richards nodded. "First of all, the angle of the wound. I don't see how a woman with arms as short as Mayu Wallace's could shoot herself in the temple in this fashion and not leave powder burns and bruising."

As Lancelot leaned closer to study the crime scene photos, a strong wind rocked the boat. The storm was picking up.

"It's really raining now," Richards noted as he glanced out a porthole. "Hope the crew knows what they're doing."

"Well, if they don't know how to get us home, your medical examiner likely does," Lancelot added as he studied a second photo.

"What kind of crack was that?"

"Renshaw spent four years as a pilot in the Coast Guard," Lancelot explained.

"How do you know that? He never told me."

"Today, Bryant dug up information on our guests, and I studied up on you and Renshaw, as well as all the newspaper coverage of the case. Renshaw had a spotless record while in uniform. So, you see, we've done our homework."

His earlier apprehension in sharing a stage with a Negro gone, Richards strolled back to the table, "So what's your verdict?"

As he picked up another photo of the dead woman's wound, Lancelot pushed Richards to explain more of his murder-not-suicide theory. "You said there were other things beyond the lack of powder burns and bruising that concern you in this case."

“Yeah, when we examined the gun, two bullets were missing.”

“Did you ask Wallace about that?” Lancelot picked up the revolver as he waited for the reply.

“I didn’t in our initial interview at the scene, but I did ask him when I took his statement downtown. He had no explanation. He claimed the gun was fully loaded the last time he checked it.”

“Maybe she fired once before using it to take her own life.”

“If that were the case, I couldn’t find where that first shot went.”

Lancelot put the gun down and turned his attention to the clothes Mrs. Wallace was wearing the day she died. As he examined the oriental dress, he urged Richards to continue. “What else makes you think this was murder?”

“There are two other things. First, there was no blood on the chair where she must have been sitting when she shot herself. Her head would have been well below the top of the cushion, but it was clean.”

“Did you find blood anywhere else?”

“Only underneath the head where it had seeped out and on the wall behind the chair.”

“Maybe she wasn’t in the chair.”

“That’s what the ME thinks, but if she were lying down when she killed herself, the spray from the exit wound would have been much lower.”

“And what was Renshaw’s reply to that?”

“That she was kneeling, close to the floor, and the angle she fired was the reason for the blood flying as it did. The bullet ending up on an upper shelf, buried, ironically enough, in the Sherlock Holmes novel *A Study in Scarlet*.”

Lancelot noted the book in the evidence box but didn't pick it up. "Do you have anything else?"

"If you look at the photos, you'll see her hands are under her body, but the gun is above her head on the floor. I know there are ways that could have happened, but the floor is wood and has no scratches. I think the odds against the gun bouncing or sliding to that spot are long."

"I'm curious about something else," Lancelot added, "but I'll hold off on that until Helen joins us." He then picked up the ME's notes and final conclusions. After reading through them, he looked back at the cop.

"The notes say here that tests on her right glove proved she fired the gun, so all the long odds you're talking about seem to have been trumped by this fact alone."

"Yes," Richards admitted, "and that was why Renshaw overruled every inconsistency I pointed out and closed the books on my hunches."

Lancelot reached into the box, retrieved a paper bag and pulled out the two gloves. The right one had a circle of bloodstains on the palm, while the left remained clean. Though the stitching on the bloody glove was slightly stretched, both appeared to be almost new. After placing the gloves back into the bag, the big man sat at the table, pulled out a pad and pencil and jotted down a half page of notes.

"What are you doing?" Richards asked.

"Just providing Helen and Teresa my thoughts on what you and I talked about and what I've learned. That will give them a chance to ask fewer questions and go right to the most important elements of this case. It is a time saver!"

"And what do you think?" the cop asked.

“Let me stew on it for a while. Now, have you had a chance to fully explore this boat?”

“Wallace showed me around when we first came on board.”

“And your impressions?”

“Huge, well-appointed, comfortable, and very powerful.”

“I agree.” Lancelot placed his notes on the table. “But did you find the uniformity a bit unsettling?”

“What do you mean?”

“Follow me.”

They exited Wallace's study and moved along a hall to a bedroom. After they entered and turned on the light, he asked the cop, “What do you see?”

“It's large, the furniture is high dollar, and it beats what most folks have in luxury mansions.”

“Did you know there are five more just like it. They're all the same size, and they are all arranged the very same way. The curtains, the bedspreads, the paintings on the walls, and even the wind-up alarm clocks on the nightstands are exactly alike. Every painting on this yacht is precisely eighteen inches from the ceiling. Mr. Wallace seems to be a man who is compulsive about uniformity.”

“They are all just like this room?” Richards asked.

“Before I met you in the study, I walked the dog to every corner of this boat and looked carefully at each room. It is almost eerie.” As a sharp wind rocked the yacht again, Lancelot glanced back at the cop. “The storm is getting more intense. I hope we can wrap this up and get home before we find ourselves clinging to lifeboats.”

“They're likely close to finishing dinner. As you didn't

find anything that can confirm my theory, we should be heading back to the dock soon.”

Lancelot nodded. He could see the disappointment in the cop's expression, but for the moment, there was nothing he could do to change that.



CHAPTER 13

Wednesday, September 30, 1942

7:30 p.m.

Lake Michigan

M.E. Wallace led Meeker and Bryant, along with Cook County Medical Examiner Renshaw through a maze of passages to his study. With each step, Meeker sensed the man was becoming more tense and angry. Even when they began sifting through the evidence and studying Lancelot's notes, their nervous host kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The way his lips sometimes moved, he seemed to be silently talking to himself.

"Are you all right?" Meeker, distracted by his behavior, finally asked.

"What do you mean?" he snapped back.

"You can't stand still. You keep wringing your hands and playing with your shirt collar. And the color in your face indicates your blood pressure's obviously elevated."

"Those people were supposed to be my friends! I could live with them feeling uncomfortable after Pearl Harbor. I understood that, but to say what they felt about Mayu

before the war—that really eats at me. Every one of those jerks needs to die.”

Ignoring their host's threat, Bryant noted, “War and pressure tend to bring out insecurities and suspicions. There are two of us in this room who are well aware of that. We have faced them many times.”

Meeker raised her eyebrows, and Lancelot smiled and nodded. Seemingly everyone, including her team, was ready to tear down all sense of decorum and reveal their innermost thoughts, fears, anxieties, and even prejudices. She wondered how long before this blunt honesty erupted into a volcanic rage.

Wallace checked his watch before adding, “I guess my nerves are on edge because of this unexpected storm. The weather report in this morning's paper didn't mention it. Tonight was supposed to be cloudy but calm. Where are all our competent meteorologists?”

“Probably in uniform,” Bryant suggested as she studied a photograph taken at the crime scene.

“If the storm's getting worse,” Meeker said, “I guess we'd better get moving.”

That was far from her only reason for wanting to wrap this mess up quickly. Beyond having a plane to catch for DC, she had no desire to stay with any of these refugees from high society any longer than necessary. At this point, except for Molly Castle, all of them made her skin crawl. Did these people represent the America she and millions of others were fighting to preserve? Surely that wasn't the case. Most of those in Chicago and around the nation had to see things much differently. Shaking off her distaste, she turned back to Napoleon's written observations. Her

intuition had been right about him. His instincts were dynamite.

Directing her gaze toward Wallace, Meeker demanded more than inquired, "Give me more information about your wife."

"I've got that in my case notes," Richards eagerly cut in.

"You have the basics," Meeker replied, "but I'm looking for things I don't see. Perhaps I'm even searching for things a man wouldn't think to ask about." She eased up on the corner of the sturdy oak table and crossed her right leg over her left before continuing. "A woman has to have a lot of courage to marry a man she barely knows, even if they live in the same town and have the same friends. How many of us would go halfway around the world to live in a culture we've never experienced? I know enough about the Japanese to realize that a native marrying outside her race and religion is simply not accepted nor done. What Mayu did would seem to be an act of either panic or rebellion. So here are my questions. Was she running from something at home? Did she marry you to escape something? Were you the love of a lifetime who caused her to toss out everything she'd been taught? Or were you, perhaps, a lifeboat, offering her a last chance to escape someone who was after her?"

Wallace pointed to a long shadow box on the far wall. "Do you see that sword? That was a part of her family for generations and was carried by her ancestors five centuries ago. She was from a family of Samurais, and she was very proud of that fact. She knew the family history better than most of us know American history. Her wisdom sprang from what that history taught. Her people were a proud group who clung to old traditions while also having the

vision to see a new world. She wasn't afraid nor was she running from anything. In fact, her courage as much as her beauty caused me to fall in love with her."

"Still, it would seem tradition would require her to marry someone within the Japanese culture. If she so embraced her heritage, how could she toss that away?" Meeker asked.

Wallace shook his head and frowned. "In another time, that answer would be yes, but Mayu's family had fallen under great suspicion because they had the courage to question the decisions of royalty. Accidents began to happen, and her brothers began to die. When I made that trip to Japan, she was the last of her generation still alive."

"So, you brought her to the United States to save her life?" Bryant observed.

"No," Wallace argued, "I fell in love with her because she was not afraid to stand up for ideas and concepts she believed in. I assure you, she wasn't using me. She was running from nothing. If I had not come along, she would have spoken out until they tossed her in jail. It was her love for me that caused her to leave. Nothing else. I could also see she needed to be set loose from a tradition that barred her from fully becoming the person she was meant to be. She deserved to live in a place where people are free to state what they believe."

Meeker prodded further. "She was a woman of courage, who was also running for her life?"

"Courage, yes, but she wasn't running. She never ran from anything. If only I had her convictions." He shook his head and set his jaw. He seemed to want to say more, but for the moment, he remained mute.

Meeker observed Wallace for a few moments before

turning to Richards. "Your notes indicate you initially suspected Wallace might have killed his wife. Is that correct, or am I reading too much into it?"

"No, Miss Meeker, you're spot on. When I conjectured it might not have been suicide, and it could have been staged, I began to assess who could have done it. Later, Wallace gave me the list of suspects, each of whom is here tonight, but I discounted those because of one reason."

"Which was?" Meeker demanded.

"The doors and windows were all locked," Richards explained. "And the doors have to be locked with a key. You can't just pull them shut and have them lock. He claimed he came home, unlocked the front door and went immediately to the study. There he found the body and called the police. In my viewpoint, he had to have killed her, or it was suicide."

Bryant chimed in, "I remember watching a Philo Vance movie where there was a locked-room murder case. I've read books with the same premise. Each proved there are ways for a locked-room murder if the murderer is clever enough."

"True," Meeker replied, "but it would take a lot of planning and preparation. The folks on this cruise might have had what they viewed as patriotic reasons to dislike Mayu Wallace, but I can't see any of them having the desire to plan the perfect crime just to act on that misguided sense of patriotism and hatred of the Japanese. And, while our files prove that Wallace ..." she glanced at their host "is a greedy and unprincipled businessman who puts power and money ahead of everything else, I honestly believe he loved his wife."

Meeker walked over to the desk and picked up the

gun. After making sure it was empty, she turned toward Renshaw. "Prove to me that Mayu killed herself! Show me how it was done."

"You have to be very flexible," the medical examiner explained as he took the weapon. He got into a fetal position, lifted his head about six inches off the floor, then extended his arm to a point where the barrel was about six inches from his temple.

"Now," Meeker ordered, "drop the weapon and fall." After observing Renshaw, she shook her head. "The hand you held the gun in didn't fall under your body."

The ME stood, then explained. "I know, but she was a small woman. The gun's kick would have caused her to drop the gun, and that reaction might have also caused her arm to land under her body before her head dropped. After all, her head would have been driven upward by the blast before it fell back down."

"Did she die instantly?" Meeker asked, taking the gun and placing it back onto the table.

"No doubt," Renshaw acknowledged.

Meeker picked up the bloodstained glove, studied it for a moment, then pitched it to Bryant. She observed her associate for a few seconds before turning back to Richards.

"Your only real suspect is Wallace?"

"Yes."

"I tell you," Wallace screamed, "I didn't do it."

"Not only is there no way in the world to prove you did," Meeker responded, "but your motives for wanting Mayu alive are much stronger than the motive for wanting her dead."

The cop sadly shook his head, "So I'm wrong. All of this was for nothing!"

Meeker took the glove from Bryant and returned it to the table. After picking up Renshaw's final report and glancing through it a last time, she frowned and looked over at Lancelot. He nodded. She then glanced at Bryant. Her dark eyes told Meeker all she needed to know.

"Mr. Renshaw," Meeker announced, "your final conclusions, based on the way you read the evidence, are logical."

"Is there anything else you need from me?" Wallace asked, disappointed and still angry.

"No," Meeker assured him. "You have given me all I need."

"Then, if you will excuse me, I'm going to go check with my crew and make sure they're prepared for the weather."

After their host had departed, Meeker made what seemed to be, considering what she'd just said, an unusual suggestion. "Mr. Richards, assemble everyone in the game room, including Mr. Wallace. Before we close this case for good, there are a few things I would like to clear up."



CHAPTER 14

Thursday, October 1, 1942

3:07 a.m. (8:07 p.m. Chicago time)

Bavarian Mountains, Germany

Lying flat on his stomach, Henry Reese peered over the top of a rise at the research facility's entrance several hundred feet below. He had figured on seeing more activity. Yes, Nazi troops were guarding the underground facility, but they showed no more interest in their duties than sentries outside military bases in the United States.

The road leading to the facility had been paved recently and was wide enough for large trucks to meet and pass in each direction. The sentry hut had electricity and phone service. About a hundred yards to the north were a large, almost vacant parking lot and a garbage dump. Otherwise, there was nothing to give away what was under that mountain. The site looked like nothing more than a small mining operation.

"They're obviously not expecting company," Gail Worel commented from her position just to her husband's left.

"They believe no one knows about it," Reese whispered.

He scanned the area again, noting a barracks-style structure a quarter mile north. "I see where the German troops are housed. The building they've constructed would appear to hold about a hundred, but I really doubt if there are that many assigned to the mountain. My question is where do the scientists stay? For that matter, where do they keep the slave labor?"

Hans Holsclaw, also on his belly to Reese's right, solemnly provided the answer. "Our area contacts report the slaves never come out of the hole. At least not as long as they're breathing." He pointed to some railroad cars and a line of track just west of the entrance carved into the mountain. "The supplies come in via rail. They are unloaded there and taken into the mountain. The workers come in boxcars, brought here from concentration camps. They choose only the strongest men in those camps for this project. Within a matter of months, they are dead. The Germans either work them until they drop, or they become poisoned by radiation and die in pain and agony beyond what we can imagine. Both the work and what they are working with causes healthy men to literally waste away in days or weeks."

The Dutchman's ominous words were sinking in when they heard a motor. Reese grabbed his field glasses and looked down the road. "Looks like they've got company."

A minute later, a Mercedes sedan rumbled down the road and pulled up to the sentry post. After checking the driver's papers, the guard waved the vehicle forward. Once parked, two men, dressed in what looked like something out of a Buck Rogers movie, emerged from the back seat. Each held a helmet covered with matching material. They

spoke briefly to the sentries before strolling through the entrance.

“Those men are either scientists or engineers assigned to create the ultimate weapon,” Holsclaw explained. “They spend very little time in the facility with the workers. They have a separate lab where they do their experiments on splitting the atom. We’re guessing they just come to inspect the work.”

“How close are they to creating the ultimate bomb?” Reese asked.

“They’re not there yet,” Holsclaw assured him, “but I think they’re further advanced than either the Americans or the Brits. Of course, all we know about this project, as well as those of the Allies, are rumors. No one who actually knows anything is talking about it.”

Worel nervously shook her head before asking, “What else takes place in there?”

“The Germans are tired of having their labs and development facilities bombed by the Allies,” Holsclaw explained. “The most important ones are now in that mountain. One reason slave labor is needed is to construct new rooms. You can see the mounds of dirt and rock they have removed, now waiting to be hauled off by rail. The lumber stacked beside the road is used to reinforce their work. One of our contacts, a barmaid in a local town where the men go on leave, has learned the rooms are fully ventilated and have walls and ceilings. In other words, they look very much like rooms you would see in an above-ground facility. This isn’t just some dirt hole. This has a large series of sterile labs and offices for support staff.”

"They're working on things beyond just the atom?" Reese asked.

"Our sources have revealed that the experiments in that mountain include new propulsion systems, work on firearms development, and even radar."

"So, most of the area is not poisoned?" Worel asked.

"Not as far as we can tell. The work with the atom is isolated to certain areas. The men we saw in the suits were obviously going into that area, or they would have dressed normally."

"Then why are there issues with radiation sickness for the labor force?" Reese asked.

"Because they handle the radioactive materials without any protective gear. We believe they are also subject to tests involving how a human body responds to exposure," the Dutchman explained.

"They are both mules and lab rats," Worel noted.

As that bit of news sank in, Reese returned his attention to the security around the mountain. "This doesn't look like it will be a tough job. It appears much easier than I expected."

"Never judge a book by its cover," Holsclaw warned. "Inside that mountain are scores of highly trained troops, many of them SS. And, with the type of construction you will find in the facility, we will have to plant explosives throughout the mountain to fully destroy it."

"Then how can we possibly bring it down?" Reese asked.

"We'll have to dress like scientists. We will have papers proving we've been sent by Berlin to inspect the facility and upgrade its defenses. We will also have our supplies with us. Therefore, our cover is viable, and because of

that cover, we will be able to carry in the explosives. The problem will be distributing them.”

“Have you got a plan for that?” Reese asked.

“Radiation detectors.”

“What?”

“The bombs will be packed in boxes marked as radiation detectors. We will assume the role of inspectors dispatched to make sure no radiation is getting into the labs or other areas where the SS and the scientists work. Then we will distribute detectors throughout the facility to accomplish that task.”

“Will they be on a timer?” Worel asked.

“No. We don't know how long getting them all in place will take. They will have to be wired in series. We can explain that precaution as a way of powering each detector. When we are ready to leave, someone has to push the buttons to begin the explosions. That person will have to be inside that mountain and then race for the exit.”

“I'm the explosive expert,” Reese dryly noted, “so that will be me.”

“We will talk about that later,” the Dutchman said.

“What about everyone who is inside?” Worel asked. “You've told us there are hundreds of innocent workers in that facility. They live, work, and sleep there.”

“And,” Holsclaw sadly noted, “they will die there.”

She gasped. “You can't just kill them! That's murder!”

“We can't get them out and accomplish our mission,” the Dutchman answered. “Yes, they will die, but that will enable many more to live. In fact, our work might just save the entire world.”

“But ...” she whispered.

“It's war,” Reese noted. “Just like we can't help those kids

back in the home, we can't save the conscripted labor in the facility. But better to have the mountain crush them than to be worked to death or die of radiation exposure." He allowed that bit of truth to sink in before turning back to Holsclaw. "Making bombs that look like these radiation detectors is going to take some time and a lot of material. I would guess it would be weeks or even months before we're ready to pull this job."

"We aren't making them," Holsclaw assured him. "They are being assembled in England. The rest of our team will bring them when they join us. Until then, we go back to our safe house and wait."