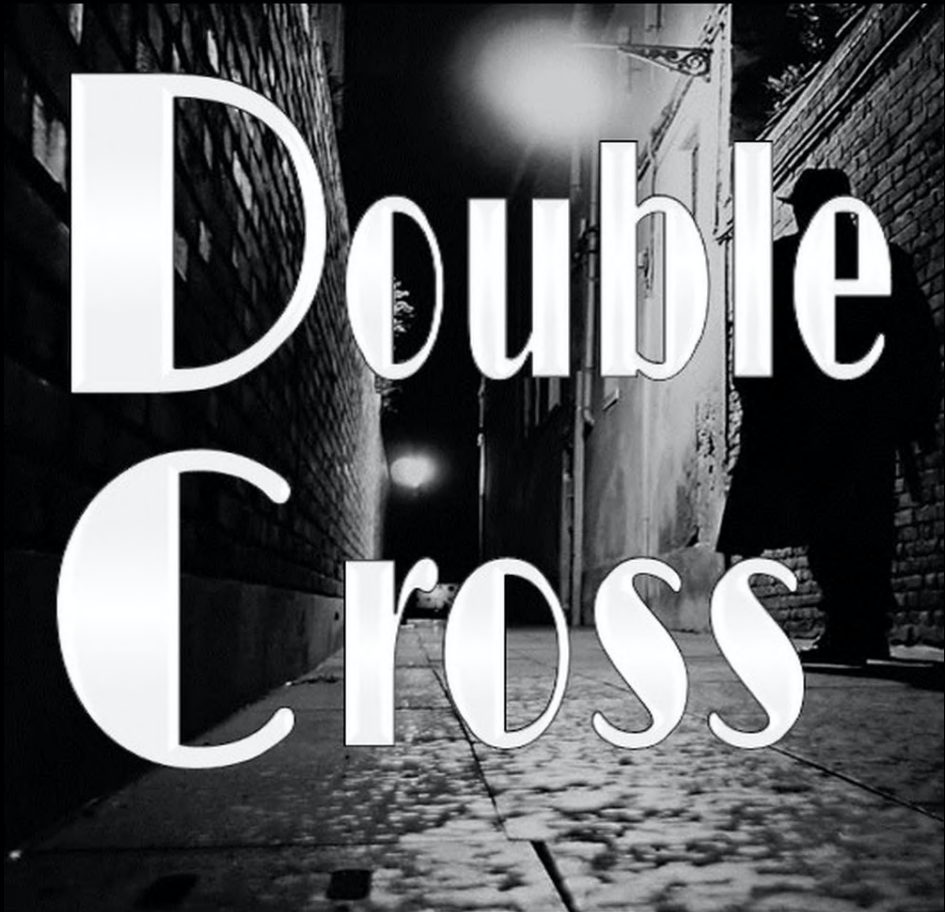


**Jack Stoner
Private Eye**



**Double
Cross**

D Ray Van

Double Cross

By D Ray Van

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Chapter 1

Wednesday, November 6, 1940

San Diego, California

The *Stoner Detective Agency* wrapped up its last case months ago, and Jack Stoner vividly remembered the date: Thursday, June 20. It was when the bank notified him that the client's check had bounced and that he had been overdrawn. After covering the overdraft from his savings, his accounts were as empty as *Oliver Twist's* bowl, and he owed everybody. This wasn't the first time a client played him for a sucker, but he vowed it would be the last. Yet if things didn't take a turn for the better by month's end, he'd be forced to close the agency and find work driving a delivery truck or spend Christmas sleeping in the park on a bench. Despite his bleak outlook, Stoner religiously went to the office. A client might call, or someone might get lost and wander in, needing directions.

The day started with a hopeful spring in his step, but it soured when he had to park four blocks away and hike to the intersection three doors from his office building. His misfortunes worsened when he noticed two gorilla types pacing by his entrance—the last time he visited the zoo, the ape pen had better-looking occupants than these two. He hid and watched them for a few minutes.

Sid didn't waste any time letting loose his debt collectors, Stoner thought.

He didn't habitually bet the ponies, but when the grapevine said, "The *fix* was in," he called his bookie, Sid Devar, and laid a C-note on *Leading the Charge* to win. Yesterday's temperature was one of the year's hottest, and as luck would have it, the horse and jockey stopped for a mint Julip on the far turn and came in dead last.

Stoner didn't mind losing, but Sid's credit limit was twenty-four hours, and he didn't have enough to cover his wager. So, he left those two

apes sweltering in the hot sun, crossed the street, and ducked into a nearby alley.

Today's luck fared no better than yesterday's, and Stoner ran headlong into two more of Sid's Neanderthal debt-collection goons: Theo and Leo. Theo's bloodshot eyes were deeply set in their sockets, and his brow jutted far enough to shade his entire face. Innumerable fights pancaked the bridge of his nose, and his cauliflower ears were past harvest time. His chiseled chin could chip granite, and his two o'clock shadow could sand it smooth. Nature made a mistake in creating one of them but made a bigger mistake in creating a carbon copy, his twin, Leo!

Before Stoner whimpered a cry for help, Theo grabbed and slammed him against the building—his tiptoes floated inches above the pavement.

“Going somewhere, Stoner?”

Theo's gruff voice might scare Frankenstein's Monster, and his breath reeked of cheap cigar and everything bagel—extra onion and garlic—and rank enough to wilt a rose.

“Easy on the shirt, pal... It's the only good one I've got.” Stoner feigned defiance. “Besides, you got the wrong guy.”

“Says you, welcher,” Theo said, spraying onion and garlic-saturated spittle with every word.

He loosened his grip, and Stoner's feet landed on solid ground.

“What's this Stoner guy look like, Leo?” he asked without taking his eyes off him. “This deadbeat says he ain't him.”

Leo unfolded a crumpled slip of paper. “Medium build, fifty-ish, graying hair, paunch, and—”

“Yeah! Me and a thousand other guys, you lug-heads.” Stoner attempted blustering with as much bravado as he could muster. “But that doesn't make me the sadsack you're looking for. So I'll say it again,

but slower this time... And maybe... Just maybe it'll get through those thick skulls of yours." Stoner took a deep breath and shouted, "You. Got. The. Wrong. Guy."

But his plea fell on deaf ears.

"And a cross-shaped scar above his left eye," Leo said, poking Stoner's forehead with his hairy finger. "That's 'im, all right, Theo."

"The cross nailed it, chump," Theo said, grabbing Stoner's lapels again. "Pay up, or we'll pound every nickel out of yer hide."

'Roughing up' someone was a lost art, and a true artisan of the craft never went for the face where bruises showed; instead, they concentrated on the softer or hidden places like the arms, legs, abdomen, or back. Stoner knew Theo and Leo. Neither struck him as the artistic type, and he didn't relish being worked over by two cavemen who didn't know what to do with a stick of colored chalk.

"I ain't got it," Stoner said with a confident grin. But he felt his lower lip quiver.

"Says he ain't got it," Theo said, cocking his head toward Leo.

"The boss don't like ta hear them words," Leo said with a grin that grew until it stretched from ear to ear but quickly morphed into tight lips. His brow furrowed. "Lemme pop 'im one."

"Not this time, brother," Theo said, wagging his head from side to side. "He's all mine. Next time, he's all yers."

Theo released Stoner's lapels, made a fist the size of a football, and let it fly. It came at him like a runaway freight train, and with nowhere to run, he stood waiting in the middle of the tracks for the crash.

He didn't have to wait long.

Theo landed a solid punch just below Stoner's solar plexus that knocked the wind out of him. The pavement reached up and whacked

his chin, and he saw nothing but stars against a darkening background. Once on the ground, he curled up Roly-poly-wise, holding his gut.

“Looky ‘im, Theo,” Leo said laughingly. “All crumpled like a pile of dirty laundry. Hold ‘im up, so I can pop ‘im a good one, too.”

“Not today, Leo. Ya’ll get yer chance tamorra.”

Leo smacked his palm with his fist, and a flock of birds roosting on the overhead phone lines took flight. Meanwhile, Stoner lay on the pavement, faking some, feeling most, and hoping Theo knocked off work early today.

Theo bent close to Stoner’s left ear and showered him with more onion and garlic-laced spittle.

“Here’s how it’s gonna be, pal. We was friendly and nice today. But we’ll be back tamorra, and it’ll be Leo’s turn fer two more reminders ta pay up. Next day will be my turn fer three more, and we keep comin’ back till ya pay up. And if ya can count that high, pal, ya ain’t gonna be feelin’ too good in a week or two... If ya last that long.”

Stoner lay still, not even blinking an eye.

“Get the picture, Stoner? Huh?”

“He’s too dumb ta figure it out,” Leo said, watching him closely.

Stoner nodded to let those apes know he had enough.

“See, Leo, Stoner ain’t so dumb after all.”

“Is, too. He’s dumber than he looks,” Leo said, not buying Stoner’s act. “He’s fakin’. Fakin’, I’m tellin’ ya.”

“No, he ain’t. He got the message, all right,” Theo said, wagging his head. “One look’d tell ya.”

“Don’t believe ‘im.” Leo stepped toward Stoner. “Ya should’ve hit ‘im harder. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

Theo signaled the gorillas by the office building. Stoner figured Theo's punch ended today's beating, so he got to his hands and knees. But Leo's walnut-sized brain decided Stoner faked some of his pain and let him have it with his size twelve, knocking him against the wall.

"Not in the face, Leo!" Theo said. "Aim for the gut... Like this."

Theo's size thirteen landed square in Stoner's mid-drift. He wasn't faking now: he hurt from his head to his toes. The gorillas arrived just in time to join the party.

"What we miss?" the first gorilla asked.

"Nuthin' much," Theo said. "Just showin' Stoner how we collect Sid's debts."

After they yucky-yucked standing over him, Theo said, "Let's blow befer we draw a crowd."

"Yeah. Blow." Leo bent close to Stoner's ear. "Be seeing ya tomorrow, chump." He stood to leave. "And if ya don't have that C-note... Ya know what's comin'," he said, slamming his palm with a tight fist and cackling as he walked away.

The foursome hightailed it and left Stoner lying on the pavement.

Hopelessly outnumbered and out of his league, Stoner clenched his jaw, gritted his teeth, and swore. He didn't move; instead, he swallowed his pride, which came easy, considering he had no dignity left. He waited for the worst of his pain to subside, dusted himself off, and felt above his right eye. Sticky blood oozed from a cut.

Stoner stumbled to his office building across the street and headed for the washroom. After a few splashes to his face, he felt better. But a glance in the mirror told the story of his morning: matching scars.

Chapter 2

Stoner stopped to catch his breath on each landing. When he reached the third floor, he staggered to his office's door and leaned against the wall to let his heart rate calm down and his dizziness pass. After a few moments, he felt better.

He opened the door and stepped inside to sauna-like temperatures. He opened the window, hoping for a breeze and some relief. Instead, more hot, humid air blew in. So he eased his sorrowful, aching behind onto the swivel chair, leaned forward, and stared at the stack of past-due bills on his desk.

One with large red block letters caught his attention. A Dear John letter from the electric company, marked "Final Notice," threatened to take their affections elsewhere unless he coughed up his delinquent balance. They gave him until the end of the month to mend his ways—fat chance of that happening—or they would proceed with a divorce.

Notices from the phone and gas companies, landlord, and drycleaners joined the wolf pack, hounding him for payment of long over-due balances. Then when he thought the harassment couldn't get any worse, a letter marked "Urgent" told him to take his *jackass* to a different watering hole until he paid his bar tab in full.

Talk about whipping a guy when he's down, Stoner thought.

Depending on his mood, the bottle in his desk's bottom drawer either lifted his spirits or drowned his sorrows. Stoner experienced so many setbacks lately that it barely held enough for one stiff drink, but he managed to milk two fingers' worth before it utterly ran dry. He tossed the empty bottle in the trashcan, put his feet on the desk, and leaned back.

The aroma of cheap Scotch didn't smell all that appealing, but Stoner didn't drink the liquor for its fragrance. He liked its warm feeling and the numbing and forgetting effects on his brain cells. After enough Scotch, he didn't care anymore—for a while, at least.

Stoner reminisced about the past several years: discharged from the Army after ten years of service just in time for the crash of '29, parlayed his Military Police training into private investigative work for an up-and-coming agency until it folded after eight years of operation, and struck out on his own, starting the Stoner Detective Agency three years ago. Now, nearing his fifty-first birthday and trying to keep in shape before his paunch got out of hand, he wondered if he waited too late in life to assert his independence.

Can't turn back the clock, Stoner thought. Or cry over spilled milk.

He took a swig, swished it in his mouth, and swallowed. Before the burning cleared his throat, the phone rang. It hadn't rung in weeks—broken, he figured—and he owed the telephone company too much money to ask them to repair it.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and picked up the receiver.

“Stoner Detective Agency,” he said as calmly as possible, but his heart raced, so Stoner took another slug of whiskey.

“To whom am I speaking?” the caller asked.

He wiped the dribble on his chin with the back of his hand. “Jack Stoner.”

“Well, Mr. Stoner. Just the person I want an appointment to meet.”

“Wait while I get my book and see what's available.”

The caller laughed. “We both know you don't have any clients, do you, Mr. Stoner? And when will the utilities disconnect your services? When do you expect to pay your dry-cleaning bill and bar tab?”

“I'm between cases,” Stoner said confidently, “although things are looking up.”

The caller laughed again. “Come. Come, Jack. We both know you're not telling the truth.”

Stoner was caught off guard when the caller used his first name. He sat rigid, trying to feign innocence. Then he realized the caller couldn't see him through the phone, so he relaxed and leaned back.

He didn't appreciate the caller knowing so much about his affairs. His ex split up with him because of what she knew. His gut gurgled, thinking about the direction of this conversation.

"How do you know so much about my affairs?"

"I'm offering you a case, Jack," the caller said, ignoring his question. "Interested?"

Clients usually told their stories without hesitation, which allowed Stoner time to size them up and decide whether to take the case or let it pass. This caller went right for his weakest point, his Achilles heel—his wallet—without any explanation. But Stoner was wary; the caller went for the wallet too soon, with too many personal details and far too little information about the case for him to say yes, sight unseen.

"Can you give me a clue?"

Stoner expected the caller to spill his story but only heard the sixty-cycle hum. A wave of anxiety washed over him. Maybe he pushed too hard. He tried a softer approach.

"Uh... My crystal ball's still at the cleaners," Stoner said, adding a nervous chuckle at the end. "I'll need a little help guessing what kind of case you're offering."

"Hilarious, Jack," the caller said with a booming laugh. "But I asked you a serious question. Are you desperate enough to take this case on faith or not?"

Stoner didn't take cases without some explanation, except his bank account couldn't afford to let this one get away. The thought of another encounter with Theo and Leo and the unpaid bills on his desk made the decision for him.

“I charge fifteen dollars daily, two bits a mile, and expenses. Still want to hire me?” Silence. A chorus of moths made a louder sound than he heard in his phone’s receiver. Then, the thought occurred to Stoner that maybe the phone company picked that moment to get even for not paying his bill and cutting off his service.

After several long moments, the caller laughed. “You’re not as good as you think, Jack, so make it ten a day, ten cents a mile, and—”

“And an advance, expenses, and a hundred-dollar retainer,” Stoner said, tripping over the caller’s words.

“You drive a hard bargain, Jack.” He laughed again. “Okay, an advance, expenses, and retainer. Deal?”

The smile stretching across Stoner’s face might be the perfect Pepsodent billboard ad. He’d make good on his wager and get Sid’s collection apes off his back.

“Where and when would you like to meet, Mr...? Sorry, didn’t catch your name.”

“Reginal Pinehurst, but everyone calls him Reggie.”

“Well, Reggie,” Stoner said, suppressing the urge to chuckle, which was easy, considering any movement of his abdomen caused him pain.

“When and where?”

“Tonight. Eight-thirty. 1498 Bresa De Loma Drive, Escondido.”

Stoner grabbed a half-chewed pencil and the back of the past-due phone bill.

“Uh... 1498 Bresa De Lo... What part of town is that?”

“Foothills. East of town.”

“Okay. Eight-thirty sharp. I’m usually very punct—”

The line clicked, followed by a dial tone.

Stoner and Reggie didn't have their first date yet, and they were already calling each other by first names, which was a little unsettling. That didn't bother Stoner as much as the long drive to Escondido did—well beyond his usual territory. However, his empty bank account and the thought of reencountering Sid's apes just expanded his territory to the whole southwest. The drive and getting directions left time to slip home, shower, and change into fresh clothes.

Chapter 3

The hour-long trip to Escondido went smoothly, with time for last-minute directions and a quick cola before his appointment. When he reached Bresa De Loma Drive, his car's engine protested the long climb, coughing and sputtering to a stop. Its hood was hot enough to fry an egg.

Stoner felt no better than his car. His head throbbed even after drinking a cola—probably from Leo's kick, maybe from the heat, or both—and his gut ached from Theo's kick-the-can game, where he was the can. Then, adding misery on misery, sweat glued his clothes to his backside.

At the end of the long, winding road—and well off the beaten path—a weathered-white, stucco-covered wall ended with pillars flanking the entrance. Stoner drove on until the driveway forked. To his left, a gate with a “Bresa Gun Club, Members Only” placard blocked his way. He steered right and drove a quarter mile, climbing another steep hundred feet in elevation before a second gate blocked the driveway.

To his car's delight, he stopped, killed the ignition, and got out. His car gasped a sigh of relief.

The sunset set three hours ago, yet a brisk wind still blew up from the desert, hot and dry as if from an oven, but it smelled better than down in San Diego. Nobody wanted to breathe the air once the city got

finished with it. The breeze carried the faint aroma of wild sage, quite delightful if you cared for wild sage—Stoner didn't.

The towering, black-painted iron gate supported a high arching, ornate frame and pickets covered with wrought iron rosettes, topped with spear-like finials. The gate was bordered by tall, off-white stone pillars and walls, shrouded in trees and shrubbery. When Stoner attempted to open the gate, it wouldn't budge. He returned to his car and honked its horn, but no one responded. He tried to see through the bars using his flashlight, but the winding driveway disappeared into the darkness.

Stoner had been on wild-goose chases before, and this trip began to feel like another one. He flashed his light at the right pillar and then on the left once more before leaving.

A recessed intercom panel in the gate's left pillar reflected the flashlight's beam. A button under a wire mesh cover, looking as if it hadn't been used in a very long time, crunched when he depressed it—again, no response.

Stoner shrugged and walked toward his car. Before he got very far, the intercom crackled and sputtered to life.

"Yes... May I help you?" a harsh voice asked with a distinctive British accent.

Stoner ached all over. His clothes clung to him like he showered in them, and case or no case, his mood was as sour as milk two days in the scorching sun. He considered writing this adventure off to experience but pressed the intercom button just to be polite.

"Whoever you are, tell Reggie his date's here, and while you're at it, tell him his corsage is wilting."

As he listened to the words tumbling off his tongue, Stoner regretted saying them. The invisible guy at the other end of the intercom would decide whether or not he gained entrance, and if he couldn't get in, there would be no chance of a case.

Before Stoner could grovel for sympathy, the voice said with a tone rivaling an over-starched collar for stiffness, “I beg your pardon, sir.” He undoubtedly looked down his nose at the receiver while he spoke.

“Mr. Jack Stoner to see Mr. Reginal Pinehurst for an eight-thirty appointment,” he said, sounding more professional the second time.

“Oh... Very well, sir. Drive to the portico,” the voice said, and the intercom crackled, buzzed, and went silent.

Promptly, the gate’s lock clicked, and its motors groaned while it swung open. Stoner returned to his car, and the ten-minute drive to what was best described as a mansion was hair-raising: a narrow road, tight curves, and nail-biting drop-offs without guard railings.

The three-story mansion with a terra cotta tile roof and a white stone trim sat on a bluff overlooking the city lights of Escondido to the northeast, San Marcos to the northwest, and to the south, nothingness. Terra cotta-colored brickwork to match the roof outlined the floor-to-ceiling yet narrow windows. Flowering bushes and lofty columnar trees lined the front, and two football games could be played on the lawn without interference.

The thought crossed Stoner’s mind what their water bill must be. Then it occurred to him that he had contributed by agreeing to ten cents per mile instead of twenty-five—every little bit helps.

An acre of manicured gravel surrounded the portico. Stoner picked a parking spot closest to the main entrance, and after a short hundred-yard hike, he reached the front door and pushed the doorbell button. Saint Michael’s Cathedral would have been envious of the chimes.

The door’s hinges creaked as the massive, solid oak barrier opened. A mature, lanky butler with a protuberant Adam’s apple and a wispy, white-haired dome greeted him. He ushered Stoner through a door wide enough that a truck could drive through, deliver milk, and exit without spilling a drop.

“Mr. Pinehurst will see you in the drawing room, sir.”

His pursed upper lip matched his tight black uniform, and his nose was pointed high enough to have its own weather system. He cocked his head and looked down across the bridge of his thin beak at Stoner’s wrinkled suit and fedora. He brought his gloved hand to his puckered lips and stifled a cough.

“Ahem... May I take your hat, sir?”

Stoner’s mood hadn’t mellowed one iota, so he blurted before he could curb himself.

“Sure. If you promise to give it back.”

But as soon as the words left his lips, Stoner regretted saying them. The butler raised his right eyebrow and puckered his lips as if the household mutt had left its calling card on his pant leg.

“Pardon me, sir, but your attempted humor escapes me.”

Stoner shrugged, cracked a smile, and handed him his hat. The butler took it between his index finger and thumb, looked at it as if he needed to disinfect it, and put it in a nearby closet. Stoner expected to find it dripping with bleach when the butler returned it.

Then the butler ushered him down a long, wide, marble-tiled hallway with ceilings at least two stories high and antique-looking chairs scattered here and there against the walls. Old lamps and vases sat on pedestals and small tables, placed every so often. Larger-than-life portraits of grumpy old geezers and their miserable-looking families hung on the walls.

With all this money, Stoner thought, the least they could do was smile.

After a mile hike, they reached the drawing room.

Stoner imagined finding people sketching, doodling, and painting pictures. Instead, the double doors opened to an oversized living room with contemporary-style furnishings: sleek sofas, matching chairs,

avant-garde tables and lamps, plush carpeting, and a gigantic fireplace.

The room disappointed him—not one sketch or doodle, and only two painted pictures of... Looking at them, Stoner couldn't tell from any angle what they were supposed to be, copies of originals no doubt.

The butler stepped inside and motioned for Stoner to follow but to stand behind him and remain silent—he hadn't received these many instructions since kindergarten. One foot into the room, and he sank knee-deep into the carpeting.

Chapter 4

When they entered the drawing room, the butler announced Stoner with an accent only the upper crust of British society would appreciate. Reggie got up from his chair to greet him.

“Ah, Jack. So glad you came.” He checked his watch. “Almost on time, too.”

“It's easier breaking out of the slammer than getting into here.”

When Reggie laughed again, Stoner wondered if he had a medical condition, causing him to laugh at everything he said. He didn't mind Reggie's laughing, but he intended his wisecracks to be cynical rather than humorous.

“That's a nasty-looking bruise above your eye. How did you hurt yourself, Jack?”

“Checkers is a rough game in my neighborhood,” Stoner said, lightly touching his forehead.

“Heard you were a clever fellow,” Reggie said. Of course, he laughed again.

We waded through a half mile of carpeting so thick a giraffe could lose its way, met halfway, and shook hands. Reggie stood five-foot-six, with

broad shoulders and dark, slicked-down hair. His V-shaped frame reminded Stoner that his developing A-shaped frame needed more exercise. His charcoal-grey dinner jacket fitted his form better than a glove. Its creases, sharp enough to slice bread, puckered in all the right places. The contrast made Stoner's wrinkled suit coat look worse than a skid-row bum's trashcan pickings.

"What are friends for?" Stoner said with a nervous chuckle.

Reggie's face scrunched up, and a puzzled look swept over him.

"I don't catch your meaning."

"For starters, Reggie. You seem to know more about me than my ex, and I was sleeping with her. We ain't sleeping together, are we?"

Reggie stepped back with a booming laugh, and a woman's chuckle came from a chair facing the fireplace.

"Didn't mean to reveal our most intimate secrets, Reggie," Stoner said, turning toward her. "Who's the dame?"

A tall, shapely, thirty-something woman stood and slowly rotated toward them, her blonde curls sweeping across her bare shoulders. She held a cigarette and a cocktail glass. Her backless pink evening gown flowed with her every move, and if her neckline plunged any deeper, Stoner could have picked lint out of her navel. The slitted skirt showed legs that went all the way to her chin, and she didn't mind showing them off.

She put the cigarette to her plush red lips, took a drag, and blew gray smoke past her purple eyeshadow and dark eyeliner toward the ceiling. She raised her glass toward Stoner.

"Want a drink?" she asked with a sultry tone.

Stoner smiled and bobbed his head. "You have me at a disadvantage."

"Disadvantage?" she asked with a puzzled look.

"Yeah. You know me, but I don't know you."

“What a poor host I am,” Reggie said, stepping toward Stoner again with his hand extended. “Come, Jack, and meet Anne. Jack, this is Miss Anne Brewer. Anne, this is Mr. Jack Stoner.”

Anne gave Stoner a distant look and took another drag of her cigarette.

“Did you say something about a drink, Miss Brewer?” Stoner said, feeling the cold on his neck from more than the air conditioning.

Anne blew smoke toward the ceiling. “Reggie’ll mix us a batch of martinis,” she said with a smile. “You’ll enjoy these, Mr. Stoner. The best Russian vodka money can buy.”

Stoner heard about this new cocktail gaining popularity with the better establishments, not at the corner bars, especially the ones he frequented. Vodka wasn’t his favorite libation—he preferred his potatoes baked with lots of butter, chives, and sour cream, not bottled.

He fancied his old standbys: beer and whiskey, but to be polite and satisfy his curiosity, he said, “I’m game.”

“Remember, Reggie,” she said, glancing toward Reggie. “Make mine shaken, not stirred.”

“Everybody stirs except you,” Reggie said, pouring the concoction into a cocktail shaker. “Shaking will never catch on, my dear.”

“Please humor me, Reggie.”

He vigorously shook the mixture several times.

Anne held her glass. “I’ll have another.”

“If you have a beer chaser, I’ll have one, too... On the rocks.”

Both shot Stoner a glance as if he’d just farted during church.

Anne’s mouth turned up at the corners, suppressing a grin. “I’m sure Reggie can find a beer, Mr. Stoner.”

“Call me, Jack, please. My dad was Mr. Stoner.”

“Okay, Jack, it is...”

“So, what’s the case all about?” he asked, turning to Reggie.

“What do you care, Jack?”

They both got a quick glance from Stoner. He may have been desperate for a case, but he had a line he wouldn’t cross. After the playdate with the four horsemen of the apocalypse, he pushed his line back so far that he couldn’t see it from here; still, he had a line.

“As long as it’s above the law—well, pretty much above the law, I’ll tackle any case except divorce—too messy. This ain’t about divorce, is it?”

“No. No divorce involved.” Anne smirked and turned to face the fireplace. “Reggie will give you the details.”

Reggie filled three cocktail glasses on a serving tray alongside a beer, stopped by Anne, and swapped her empty glass for a full one. Then he swung by Stoner with his beer. He took the last for himself and set the tray on the nearby table.

After a quick sip, Reggie started his story.

“You see, Jack, the competition hired someone to take something precious from Anne, and we want you to help us return it to her.”

“Uh... The police are better equipped to handle thefts,” Stoner said, sipping his martini.

“No police,” Reggie said with a defiant shaking of his head. “I’ve encountered their ineptitude before, and this matter requires the utmost discretion and secrecy.” He leaned toward him until their eyes met. “Are you discreet, Jack? Can you keep a secret? You won’t fold under pressure, will you, Jack?”

“Sure... I mean, no.”

Potential clients often had questions about Stoner’s ethics, but none grilled a hamburger this much. The cross-examination gave the pit of

his gut a gnawing feeling. It told him to leave, but he chalked it up to a poor diet and stayed put—he needed this case and didn't cherish his two-fisted waltz with Leo tomorrow.

“Come. Sit,” Reggie said, gesturing toward the sofa on the right. “Sit with me, Anne.”

Anne got up from her chair, and together, they sat on the left sofa, facing Stoner.

“How was your martini?” Anne asked.

“Excellent beer.” Stoner put the cocktail glass on the table and kept the bottle. Martinis had to be a passing fad, and all the shaking and stirring couldn't salvage them—he thought his tasted just awful.

Reggie slid to the edge of the sofa.

“Now, to business,” he said. “Anne's father started a tool and die company and left it to her when he passed—Brewer Industries. Of course, you've heard of them.”

Stoner shook his head and shrugged. In his circles, tool and die shops never came up as a topic of conversation. Unphased, Reggie laid out the complete story.

“Unfortunately, major orders dried up, and the company was teetering on the brink, about to fold. Before he died, Anne's father created an innovative design to improve torpedo guidance and detonation. These designs were to be the company's lifeline, its rebirth.”

Stoner glanced at Anne to gauge her reaction while Reggie told her story. Madame Tussaud's wax figures showed more enthusiasm.

Reggie explained their value to Anne's competitors, the looming war effort, national security, and how her company wouldn't survive the scandal if word leaked that the competition had stolen them. They had no proof, but they suspected a Wicker Technologies operative, William Teller, had taken them or hired someone to take them.

Reggie stood. “Well, Jack. Will you help us get the plans back? There’ll be a thousand-dollar bonus if we succeed.”

The *Stoner Detective Agency* wasn’t your local lost-and-found, and Stoner should have followed his gut and walked out, but desperation will drive a man to extremes. Recurring thoughts of who he owed versus the prospects of a thousand-dollar bonus clouded his judgment, and to top it all off, those magnificent legs—he couldn’t get their image out of his mind.

Reggie opened his wallet; it had enough green to feed a herd of cows for a week. He plucked two Grants from the fold and held them toward Stoner.

“What’ll it be, Jack? You in? Or out?”

Stoner nodded and extended his hand for the money without hesitation. He felt the crispness of the new bills between his fingers as he slid them into his weatherbeaten old wallet. And for a few moments, it looked like luck was on his side, but reality hit him right between the eyes: now they would have to hijack Wicker Technologies. Tit-for-tat, maybe; illegal, probably, but in for a penny and about to be in for a pound. So before he left, they agreed to meet tomorrow over brunch at La Jolla’s La Valencia Hotel to hammer out the when, where, and how they would get back the blueprints.

Chapter 5

Stoner felt like an over-chewed wad of gum on the drive home. The heat and his lingering pains suppressed any desire to stop for food or drink. However, his mind raced: top-secret plans, national security, that dame, and two fifty-dollar bills gracing his wallet. It had been so long since one had come his way that he didn’t recognize the old geezer’s portrait on them.

He parked in the driveway of his rented house on Yacca Street in Mountain View, a suburb of San Diego. It often puzzled him why they called it Mountain View. On a clear day without any smog, he could see a mountain about two days' crow flight away if he stood on the roof of his car; otherwise, the mountains couldn't be seen regardless of which direction he looked.

Who has time to look at the mountains anyway? Stoner thought.

But Stoner couldn't complain: it was furnished, and the price was right—the lady who owned it left town to take care of her ailing parents and could return without much notice. Besides, the drive into the office took less than ten minutes—an ideal location.

The day's events and the drive had wrung every ounce of energy Stoner had left, but the thought of a stiff drink and a soft bed urged him on. A wave of dizziness swept over him when he got out of the car. He closed the door, staggered, and leaned against the fender.

The moon hung high above, and stars dotted the inky, clear sky. A cooler—relatively speaking—off-shore breeze made the heat tolerable. When Stoner's lightheadedness passed, his attention returned to a stiff slug of Scotch.

On his shuffle to the front door, Stoner stopped to fish the evening edition from the landscaping—the delivery kid couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. When he reached the top of the stoop, the door was ajar. He always double-checked the door when leaving, so he readied himself for intruders. Then, the familiar smell of the uninvited *guest* wafted through the crack in the door.

“Hello, Hannigan,” Stoner said, opening the door wide. “They arrest people for contributing to smog.”

In the darkness, Hannigan laughed. “Always with the wisecracks, Stoner... But Bob Hope, yer not.”

When the lights flipped on, Detective Wallace Hannigan's rotund frame overflowed Stoner's two-sizes-too-small easy chair. He fancied himself a Wallace Beery-type tough-guy character, the film actor, but behind his back, his colleagues, friends, and enemies called him "Wally the Walrus" after the bumbling, blubbery, comic-strip character.

A stogie the size of a fencepost hung from his puffy lips, and a wrinkled, sweat-stained fedora and frumpled oversized suit emphasized his unkempt style. Alongside him stood two tall, slim, fair-haired men with features so non-descript they wouldn't stand out in a lineup of little old ladies.

Hannigan blew a puff of smoke Stoner's way just to prove he could do whatever he wanted.

When the cloud cleared enough to see Stoner, Hannigan asked, "Don't ya ever have normal conversations?"

"When I talk to normal people," Stoner said, closing the door behind him.

"Knock it off, Stoner. I don't have time for yer one-liners."

"Why?" Stoner asked, hanging up his coat and hat and moving toward the center of the living room. "Don't flatfoots have a sense of humor?"

"Yer hopeless, Stoner." Hannigan flipped his hand toward him.

Stoner went to the kitchen, and all three watched his every step. He got a glass and turned on the water.

"Anyone want a drink... Of water?" Stoner asked, smiling while filling his glass.

Hannigan shook his head. The other two just stood there, unmoving. Stoner took a gulp and put the glass on the counter.

"Tell me something, Hannigan."

"What?" he asked, puffing on his cigar.

“How’d your chain reach all the way from downtown to my neighborhood?”

Stoner’s easy chair creaked and moaned as Hannigan squirmed to stand. His face flushed, but he calmed down and leaned back after chomping on his cigar butt several times.

“Uh... I’m on what ya’d call a special assignment,” he said, proudly gesturing with his saliva-soaked cigar butt.

Hannigan stretched his fat lips into a Cheshire cat grin as he grunted and groaned to get out of the chair. He stood and thumbed over his shoulder.

“And these are my associates, FBI agents Weber and Weber.”

“Oh?” Stoner asked with a chuckle. “So, you’re working with the Bobbsey Twins nowadays, are you, Hannigan? Which one’s Freddie, and which one’s Flossie?”

Locked step, the agents moved toward Stoner, but Hannigan extended his arms. They stopped on the same foot—like a mirror’s reflection, creepy.

“I’d gladly turn them loose on ya if we didn’t need yer help,” Hannigan said.

Stoner couldn’t control his laughter when he said that. They had been at odds for years, and Hannigan would jump at the chance to put him out of business—one way or the other, especially the other.

“In a pig’s eye, Hannigan... At every turn, you’ve tried to get my license revoked; now, you want my help. Yeah, right! You’re either joking, or you’re setting me up. Either way, stuff it your hat!”

Hannigan took a drag on his cigar and blew a cloud of smoke so thick it would have closed a highway. His face drooped and looked somewhat sad, even pitiful, an expression Stoner had never seen on him before. Then it quickly changed: tightening jaw, furrowing brow, and squinting eyes.

“Damnit, Stoner. Let’s bury the hatchet on this one and just listen ta me. Yer case is a setup, and yer the fall guy, the patsy. Yer clients are Nazi spies, and they’re tryin’ to steal top-secret military plans.”

Hannigan had Stoner’s attention, and his brain couldn’t think of one comeback, one wisecrack. That feeling he had at the mansion wasn’t hunger or indigestion. His gut told him to get the hell out of there, but he ignored it, and now he was up to his neck in something too big to handle.

“After they do, they plan ta get away scot-free and make ya out to be a traitor—the one holdin’ the bag. But they don’t know we’re on ta them... Plannin’ the old switcheroo, and yer gonna help us. And if ya play along, we’ll catch ‘em red-handed.”

Stoner stood in the middle of the ring, fighting for options, but his brain was on the ropes, waiting for the ten-count.

He uttered a lame retort. “Or?”

As soon as the word left his lips, Stoner opened himself for a one-two punch, and it came lightning fast.

“There ain’t gonna be no ‘or,’ Stoner! So make yer choice.” Hannigan looked around at Stoner’s meager furnishings. “I’d hate ta see ya lose the luxury ya’ve amassed here.”

He gurgled a laugh Stoner would have enjoyed shoving down his fat throat. But with the odds against him, he held back for once.

Hannigan wouldn’t let up.

“I can think of places worse than this if ya decide against cooperatin’... Not many, though.”

His annoying laugh stood the hair on the back of Stoner’s neck on end. The two agents joined in, each adding their non-descript chuckle to the chorus.

They struck Stoner as tagalongs when the lights first flipped on, and now, his opinion of them dropped a peg or two. Hannigan role as the pack's alpha dog left no doubt, and they fell in line as butt sniffers.

Stoner witnessed Hannigan roughing up a suspect or two, so he didn't want to cross him and didn't know what the other two would or wouldn't do. The phrase that came to mind was 'up the creek without a paddle,' but he didn't fancy being cornered either.

So, he tried to find their buttons, push them, and see what would happen.

"If these two are Flossie and Freddie Bobbsey, what part do you play, Hannigan? Danny, the school bully?"

That fat man moved quicker than Stoner thought possible. Hannigan's right fist missed his jaw by inches when Stoner juked right, but he remembered too late that he was also called "Lefty."

Chapter 6

The kitchen's overhead light hurt Stoner's eyes, and he couldn't focus. He squinted, trying to see. His body was spreadeagled on the floor like peanut butter and jam on toast. His tongue moved, but his fat lip and aching jaw left him mute as a mime. When his eyes finally focused, Hannigan's bulbous frame lorded over him. The two agents stood nearby, watching, and he didn't care one bit for the glimmer in their eyes. They seemed to enjoy Stoner's knock-out too much and would have gotten in a lick or two if alpha-dog Hannigan hadn't kept a tight grip on their chains.

"I told ya, Stoner, but ya don't hear too good."

Hannigan took a drag on his cigar, bent over, and blew a three-alarm fire's worth of smoke in Stoner's face.

"You sing off-tune, Hannigan," Stoner said, talking the best he could out of the left side of his mouth.

“Half the time, I need a dictionary ta understand what yer sayin’.”

“Four-letter words too big for you, Hannigan?”

“All right, Stoner, I’ve had enough. Let the chips fall where they fall.”

Hannigan turned to leave.

“We’re outta here. Let this chump get what’s comin’ to ‘im. We’ll work this deal alone.”

“Wait... Just wait a minute,” Stoner said, getting to his feet. “You got me all wrong, Hannigan. You bring out the worst in me, and once you get me started, I can’t stop.”

“Ya talk a good game, Stoner, but why ain’t I listenin’?”

“Okay, okay... I’ll zip it. So give it to me straight.”

“See, boys,” Hannigan said, taking another drag on his cigar and blowing the smoke toward Stoner. “He ain’t such a dumb puck after all.”

“Don’t get me started again, Hannigan. I’m offering you a peace branch here, so don’t step on my olives.”

“Okay, Stoner. Truce?” Hannigan asked, extending his hand.

Stoner nodded.

“What? No shake?” Hannigan took his cigar and used it as an accusing finger toward Stoner’s face. “All right then, have it yer way, Stoner. We work together on this case, and afterward... Who knows.”

“I can live with that,” Stoner said, rubbing his jaw.

“Ya got anythin’ besides tap water ta drink in this rathole of yers?”

Stoner nodded.

The thought of becoming drinking buddies with Hannigan made Stoner consider *taking the cure*, but the idea of becoming a patsy was even worse. He retrieved a bottle and glasses from the liquor cabinet. He

put three tumblers on the coffee table, kept one, and poured himself a double.

“Help yourselves,” Stoner said, setting the bottle next to the tumblers.

For a big man, Hannigan glided to the bottle with the nimbleness of a ballerina and poured a triple. Then, he offered the bottle to the agents. They declined and faded into the room’s decor.

Stoner never figured out why Hannigan always went for the chair too small for him, but he plopped in the easy chair with a wheeze and a grunt, all mixed into one guttural sound. Yet he never spilled a drop. Whatever could be said for Hannigan, he could hold his liquor.

“Okay, Stoner,” Hannigan said. “Start from the beginnin’. How’d ya meet yer clients?”

Stoner sat on the sofa and sipped his Scotch.

“Got a call earlier today offering me a job—a case.”

“And?” Hannigan asked, scrunching his shoulders.

“And... I agreed to meet at their place at eight-thirty. So I drove out Escondido way to 1498 Bresa De Loma Drive.”

Hannigan smiled and cocked his toward the agents.

“Now, we’re getting’ somewhere, ain’t we, boys?” He swung his head from one side to the other. “Where’d they go?”

“Over here,” the first agent said, stepping into view.

“Stop doing that. It gives me the creeps.” He turned to Stoner. “What names they use?”

“The guy calls himself Reginal or Reggie Pinehurst, and the dame’s Anne Brewer.”

Hannigan cocked his head toward the agents. “Either of ya heard of them?”

The agents nodded in unison. “They are SS Major Klaus Günsche and Anna Müller, both from Berlin,” the first agent said. “What did they tell you?”

“Anne’s father owned a machine shop or something, and some guy—a William Teller—from their main competitor, Wicker Technologies, stole some top-secret blueprints for a military device her father designed, and... And they needed my help getting them back.”

“It’s partly true,” the second agent said. “Anne Brewer is the daughter of George Brewer, owner of Brewer Industries—east, near El Cajon. She married Frederick Müller about ten years ago, and they moved to Germany four years ago.”

Stoner took a long slug from his glass.

“Wicker Technologies,” the second agent continued, “developed a hush-hush gadget for the military.”

“What was it?” Stoner asked, sliding to the edge of his seat.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Hannigan said, waving his hand and cigar. “All I’ve been told—and the boys know more than they’re lettin’ on—that it’s somethin’ we don’t want Germany ta get their hands on.”

Stoner shook his head and took another slug of Scotch.

“Did they have plans ta recover the stolen blueprints?”

Stoner leaned back on the sofa, still reeling from what the agents said.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling a cold wave of goosebumps crawl up his spine and neck. “They got a plan, all right, and I’m up to my neck in it.”

“We ain’t got time for yer soul-searching, Stoner. Let’s have it.”

“Well...” Stoner slugged down the last of his Scotch and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Reggie said their chief engineer, a guy named Samuel Culver, takes a copy of the latest blueprints from their design office to the plant every Saturday so the shop can work on any changes first thing Monday morning. He leaves the office at nine

sharp, stops for dinner at a greasy spoon at nine-thirty, and arrives at the plant by eleven—like clockwork.”

“We already know that much, Stoner.” Hannigan squirmed to the edge of the easy chair. “Tell us somethin’ we don’t know.”

“You’re as impatient as pigs at a trough, Hannigan. It’s coming. It’s coming.”

“Don’t start up with him, Stoner. Too much’s riding on this.”

“Okay, okay...” Stoner leaned forward and hesitated. “When Culver stops for dinner, Reggie invites him to the back room, he gets some time in the cooler, and I highjack his car. Then, a mile or two down the road, I leave his driver alongside the highway and take the plans to a warehouse at Fifth and L. For my part, I get a cool grand.”

“I’m amazed yer still alive, Stoner,” Hannigan said, shaking his head. “But at this rate, ya’ll be six feet under before week’s end.”

Stoner didn’t say anything; his face said it all. He had “sucker” written across his forehead.

“How they goin’ escape?” Hannigan asked.

The room felt uncomfortably warm. Stoner replayed the events of the phone call, the meeting, and the scheme to retrieve the blueprints. But he blew past every red flag his body and soul raised without giving them a second thought. His brain swirled, going nowhere—a car stuck in neutral—so he stared into empty space.

“Snap out of it, Stoner,” Hannigan said. “We need ta know their escape plan.”

Hannigan’s words threw a wet towel across Stoner’s face, and his thoughts regained focus.

“Uh... I don’t know what it is,” Stoner said. His words tumbled from his lips in slow motion. “Reggie never mentioned it.”

Althwhile, a spiderweb of confusion entangled the cogwheels of Stoner's brain. Some parts of this drama fit, while others didn't, like putting a puzzle together with pieces from two different scenes. For one, he didn't trust Hannigan—FBI Agents or no FBI Agents backing him. For another, a lot remained unsaid; something lurked below the surface that he couldn't put his finger on, but it lingered just the same. He couldn't afford to ignore another red flag; every way he sliced it, Hannigan personified a walking red flag.

Hannigan turned to the agents. "If we nab them at the warehouse, 'twon't matter."

They nodded in unison without comment.

Those two gave Stoner the creeps—they could teach the Corsica Brothers a thing or two.

"Okay, Stoner, here's how it's goin' down," Hannigan said, pointing his stogie in his face. "We'll be waitin' there for ya, Reggie, and the dame. Once ya hand over the plans, we'll burst in and catch 'em with the goods."

"Could you wait until I get my payoff?"

Hannigan turned to the agents. "What part of this don't he get?"

They smiled and shook their heads together as if they rehearsed beforehand.

Hannigan jabbed toward Stoner's nose with his stogie as he spoke. "Listen, good, Stoner. There ain't gonna be no payoff, and if ya don't play along, there might be a slug or two for ya, or maybe Reggie will do us all a favor and put a couple in that wisecrackin' mouth of yers."

A chill flashed from Stoner's toes to the top of his head, but he shrugged it off and lobbed a defensive zinger.

"You ain't no Bob Hope, neither, Hannigan. So don't even try with the jokes; they don't wear well on you."

“No joke, Stoner,” said the first agent. “What we know about Major Günsche puts ya in real danger, so I’d advise ya to play along with us.”

“What’ll it be, Stoner?” Hannigan asked. “Smart guy, or dumbass?”

Stoner glanced at the two agents and back at Hannigan. A tight spot fell short of describing his predicament. The walls kept closing in from all sides.

“All right. Have it your way, Hannigan. I don’t see many options where I’m sitting.”

Hannigan turned to the agents with a wide grin. “Ya, see? I told ya Stoner was a good egg once ya cracked his shell.”

“Like I said, Hannigan, don’t give up your day job for the stage anytime soon.”

“Can’t blame a guy for tryin’, can you? Police work don’t last forever.”

Chapter 7

Thursday, November 7, 1940

The day started out better. A new weather pattern promised a break from this week's high temperatures, and the smog level should be on the low side for a change. When Stoner got out of bed and stretched, he didn't hurt as much. Two fifties stuffed his wallet—the first time since he couldn't remember when—and the prospect of seeing Anne again cheered him up. After breakfast, two eggs over easy on rye toast and three cups of joe, he showered and shaved, wore his best white shirt, his only clean suit, and a snazzy tie.

Stoner glanced again in the mirror to ensure his hair parted straight and grabbed his keys on the way out. He intended to dodge Sid's Collection Thugs, Inc. until he earned a couple more sawbucks, but when he opened his front door, Leo's knuckles hovered mid-air, ready to rap.

“Going somewhere, chump?” Leo asked with a sneer that would scare Atilla the Hun.

“Yeah, bozo,” Stoner said, backing away. “A guy’s gotta earn a living, so stand aside.”

“Don’t even think ‘bout leavin’.” Leo shoved the door open and muscled his way in.

Theo followed right behind. “Ya ain’t goin’ nowhere, Stoner, until ya fork over the dough.”

He didn’t relish the looks of these two apes one bit, so he tried a little bravado. He didn’t expect it to work, but he might just pull it off on these two.

“Theo,” Stoner said, backing into the room. “Stopped by for coffee, did you?”

But as the words spilled from his lips, he knew his lame attempt failed to divert their objective. Their expressions didn’t change, and neither did their focus: him.

“We ain’t got no time for yer wisecrackin’,” Leo said, advancing toward him. “Tell me ya ain’t got the dough.” He pounded his palm with a fist as big as a basketball. “I’ve been savin’ up all night for this, and I got a deposit for ya, Stoner. Two big ones... And ya can bank on that.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Stoner reached for his wallet, pulled out a fifty, and waved it in front of them. He held back the other fifty for spending money.

“Got half of it, and I’ll have the other half by tomorrow.” As soon as he heard the words, he thought holding back the other fifty might be a dumb move.

Theo snatched the bill from his fingers and held it to the light. He flipped it over several times, examining it from all angles.

“What you looking for, Theo?” Stoner asked. “You wouldn’t know a real one from a fake.”

“Says you, wiseass. I seen plenty of ‘em.” Theo folded the fifty and slid it into his coat pocket. “Welchers can’t never be trusted. And you’s worse than all them.”

“Play nice, Theo,” Stoner said, smiling nervously.

“This is my nice side,” Theo said, frowning.

If looks could kill, Theo’s scrunched-up face stood a better-than-even chance of putting you six feet under.

“You got what ya came for, so if you don’t mind, fellas, I got places to go and clients to see... So step aside,” Stoner said confidently, hoping to bluster past them while their sluggish minds struggled to catch up with his words.

But Theo’s mind grasped Stoner’s sleight-of-hand attempt faster than expected, and he backed into the door frame, blocking the door. Leo stomped toward Stoner, closing his right hand into a fist the size of an anvil.

“Wait a minute, bonehead. What if I had the other fifty?”

“Holdin’ out on us, are ya?” Theo said.

“No...” Stoner said. His bravado waned with each passing moment. His lower lip quivered, but he got control of it. “I was just askin’.”

“Don’t matter none to me, chump,” Leo said, waving his fist. “Yer gettin’ a taste of this, one way or the other.

‘Hope blooms eternal,’ as they say, but one look at Leo’s eyes told Stoner he had little hope of getting off easy. He experienced Theo’s punch yesterday and didn’t have to wait long for Leo’s.

Leo wound up and let him have it square in the gut. His punch doubled Stoner over, emptying his breakfast on the floor. He collapsed and

writhed in his puke for a few moments, then Leo grabbed his shoulder in a vise-tight grip and pulled him upright.

Stoner dangled from Leo's hand, his legs straining to hold him upright. His knees wanted to buckle, but he wobbled, waiting for another.

Instead, Theo said, "Wait, Leo. He paid half, so he gets half a break."

"Jeez," Leo said, cocking his head toward his brother. "Yer always stoppin' me just when I'm startin' ta have some fun."

"Sorry, kiddo. Boss' rules, not mine."

Leo let go, and Stoner collapsed. The smell of his vomit almost caused him to retch again, but his gut hurt so bad he gulped some air and swallowed, hoping the urge to puke would pass.

Meanwhile, the wrecking crew yucked it up.

"Cotton-candy gut," Theo said with a chuckle. "All puff, no substance."

"Yeah... All puff and a first-rate wimp," Leo said laughingly.

Theo turned to leave but glanced over his shoulder. "Better clean yerself up, Stoner. Ya look awful, and ya don't smell too good, not too good at all."

"Yeah. Awful, chump." Leo laughed when he walked toward the door. He stopped and glanced at Stoner lying on the floor. "See ya tomorrow, pal. Ya won't know where or when, but we'll see ya—take that to the bank and cash it."

Leo nearly slammed the door off its hinges when he left. A couple minutes later, Theo started the car, gunned the accelerator, and squealed the tires as they drove off.

Even though his vomit smelled terrible, Stoner's pain felt even worse, so he lay quietly for a while. After managing to stagger to the bathroom, he showered and dressed again. Unfortunately, the only other suit he

owned, which he had worn the previous day, didn't smell the best and had some significant wrinkles.

Stoner glanced at his watch. He had enough time to make brunch if he broke a few speed laws. His messy apartment would have to wait for the cleaning lady—if he had one. He couldn't risk being late and jeopardizing the case before it began. He shuffled to the door, closed and locked it behind him, and staggered to his car.

He took a moment to catch his breath. Then, he started the engine and drove slowly down his street. He accelerated once on the main highway, zipping around slower vehicles. Despite hitting some red lights, he could make the fifty-minute trip in forty, barring any stops for speeding.

Stoner weaved through slower traffic on East Harbor Drive without getting a ticket and made good time on North Harbor Drive until he encountered congestion on Pacific Highway. Luckily, he saw his exit just two miles ahead, allowing him to avoid the traffic jam. He then made up for lost time on Mission Bay Drive, Mission Boulevard, and La Jolla Boulevard, eventually reaching Prospect Street and the hotel.

His car screeched to a stop with little time to spare. He valet-parked and hurried into the hotel's main concourse.

Chapter 8

Built overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the Spanish Colonial Revival-style La Valencia Hotel's reddish stucco walls and terracotta-tiled roofs gave the hotel its distinctive appearance and earned its moniker: *Pink Lady*.

After getting directions, Stoner made a beeline to the terrace, where Reggie and Anne sat, drinking coffee. Reggie started to stand to greet him, but he slid into the chair closest to Anne.

"Glad you could make it, Jack," Reggie said, sitting.

Stoner feigned a polite smile. Anne dominated his thoughts and interests.

“Was beginning to wonder,” Reggie continued.

An automatic part of Stoner’s brain engaged, and a wisecrack tumbled off his tongue and landed feet-first on the table. “My garden club scheduled an impromptu meeting this morning, and I was the guest of honor.”

“You’re a real jokester, Jack,” Reggie said with another laugh. “Don’t you think so, Anne?”

Anne rolled her eyes at Reggie and sighed.

“While you two ham it up, I’ll powder my nose.”

When she walked away, Stoner couldn’t help but notice how alluring her navy-blue trousers fit and how she glided along the floor like an angel. Her silk Greta Blouse, bowing and tails at the waist, topped off the whole caboodle. It would have fallen off his shoulders if he cranked his head around further.

“Close your mouth, Jack, and put your eyes back in their sockets.”

Stoner jerked his head around and felt the warmth of blood blushing into his cheeks. “Sorry, but I couldn’t help myself. It’s just that... That she’s all woman.”

“Yes, she is, and don’t even think about it now, Jack. Just concentrate on getting the blueprints back.”

Stoner leaned back against his chair and took a deep breath. The warmth of his cheeks waned, and his insides calmed a bit.

A waiter approached and handed him a menu.

“While you peruse the menu, sir, would you care for a coffee, tea, mimosa, or something else?” the waiter asked.

“What’s mimosa?”

“Champagne and orange juice, similar to a Buck’s Fizz.”

“Oh... I’ll have coffee, black.”

The waiter left and returned with a cravat filled with coffee. He filled Stoner’s cup and gestured toward Reggie. He nodded, and the waiter warmed his.

“Would the gentlemen care to order?”

Reggie waved him off. “Later.”

The waiter scowled and walked away.

“Now, Jack. Let’s get down to business.”

Reggie poured cream into his coffee and stirred it.

“Before we do, Reggie, there’s a delicate topic I want to—”

“Need an advance, Jack?” Reggie smiled and reached for his wallet.

Stoner felt blood rushing to his cheeks again. His nature didn’t usually include begging, but lately, nature looked the other way, and holding out his hand no longer felt as embarrassing as it once did.

“Well, you know how expensive things have gotten these days,” Stoner said nervously.

Reggie fished through the sea of green in his wallet for a couple of sawbucks and snagged them. “Would twenty tide you over?”

“Nicely,” Stoner said, extending his hand for the crisp bills without an ounce of pride left.

“That settled,” Reggie said, putting his wallet away. “I have it on good authority that Culver will arrive at the diner around eight-thirty.”

“What happened to his clockwork routine?” Stoner asked, frowning. “Wasn’t it always nine-thirty sharp?”

Reggie seemed at a loss for words, not the I-got-it-together man Stoner met last evening. “Uh... There must’ve been a change-up in his plans.

Anyway, a car with two bodyguards will follow close behind. His driver will remain in the town car while Culver eats his meal. That'll be our chance to appropriate the prints."

Poker players would recognize what Stoner noticed: a tell, a subconscious reaction such as a twitch, a flick, or some uncontrollable movement. A twitch of his left eyelid telegraphed Reggie's move. But what did it mean? Pulled between Hannigan and Reggie—who lied vs. who told the truth?

Stoner's thoughts bombarded him relentlessly: if Reggie and Anne spied for Germany, just as Hannigan claimed, how could Stoner believe anything Reggie told him? Also, Reggie's story kept changing, with different times and new characters: Culver, his driver, and now his bodyguards. On the other hand, Stoner had known Hannigan for years and had to verify everything he said. Stoner couldn't trust him any farther than he could throw that fat man, and he couldn't pick up that ton of lard without a crane.

"How many invitations did you mail out for this party?" Stoner asked.

"Always with a joke," Reggie said, chuckling.

"There's only the two of us. How we gonna handle them all?"

"Don't forget, Anne."

"Anne?"

"Anne will drive the sedan delivery to the diner. You'll handle Culver and his driver, and I'll eliminate the bodyguards."

"Eliminate?"

"Poor choice of words, Jack. Disable is what I meant to say."

More like a Freudian slip, Stoner thought. He leaned back and sipped coffee.

"So, what day are we going for it?"

“This Saturday,” Reggie said.

“Saturday!” Stoner said, leaning so far over the table that he moved it. “Don’t we need a dry run, more planning, or something?”

“Are you getting cold feet, Jack?”

“No... It’s...” Stoner sat back and relaxed a bit. “I don’t want Anne to get hurt. If it was just you and me, I’d be ready tonight, but I—”

“Don’t let those blonde curls fool you. She’ll hold up her end.”

Anne returned and sat. It must have been the expression on his face—Stoner always wore his emotions on his sleeve—that caused her to ask. “Have I been the topic of discussion?”

“Jack and I have been going over the plans for tomorrow, and he was concerned that it might be too dangerous for you.”

Anne put her hand on Stoner’s and squeezed it. Electricity shot up his arm and exploded in his brain. For a crazy moment, he felt on top of the world—spy or no spy.

“How sweet, Jack, but put your mind at rest,” Anne said with a smile. “You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

She took her hand away, and Stoner understood what a lamp experiences when the power is switched off. He fell to earth with a thud and couldn’t think of one wisecrack.

“Something wrong, Jack?” Anne asked.

“No... No. I was mulling the plan over in his mind once more. Explain how you fit in.”

“Reggie and I will meet you at your office. I’ll be driving a delivery sedan, and we’ll go to the diner. Once Reggie disables the bodyguards, he rides with me to the warehouse. You disable the driver after you switch with Culver and drive to the warehouse with the blueprints.”

“Seems pretty risky to me.”

“Trust me, Jack,” Anne said, touching Stoner’s hand again. “It won’t be.”

“Hey. What about Culver? Who takes care of him?”

“Reggie does. So you see, Jack, all the bases are covered.”

“Why don’t you show Jack their lovely beach, Anne?” Reggie said, waving toward the ocean.

“In these?” Anne said, extending her leg and looking at her shoe.

“There’s a walkway, an overlook,” Stoner said. “No sand, a perfect view of the ocean.”

“Oh... You’ve been here before.”

“No. Saw it on a placard when I walked through the corridor.”

“If you’re game... I am.”

Stoner stood and offered his hand. “Your deal.”

“I’ll play these cards,” Anne said with a chuckle.

“Get out of here, you two, before your metaphor folds.”

“Ha... Ha... Ha,” Anne said sarcastically.

When she took Stoner’s hand and stood, that electric shock exploded in his brain again, and he lit up like a Christmas tree. He led her to the back steps that descended to Coast Boulevard. After the traffic cleared, they crossed and followed the sidewalk to the Shell Beach pathway.

They stopped and leaned on the railing, enjoying the view and cooler breeze of the water.

Stoner turned to face her. “Uh,” he sputtered with a mouth full of cotton and a tongue as dry as the Mojave Desert.

“You say something, Jack,” Anne said, looking at him.

His heart palpitated, and Stoner tried to swallow but couldn't. Instead, he reached into his pocket and retrieved a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "Wanna smoke?" he asked, offering her a cigarette and taking one for myself.

Anne took one from the pack, straightened it, and put it between her lips. "Got a light?" she said in a sultry voice.

"Sure, sure," he said, fumbling and flipping his Zippo lighter open.

Anne leaned in close while Stoner shielded the flame from the off-shore breeze and lit his. They puffed, blew smoke to the wind, and laughed that they did it together as if rehearsed.

Stoner rested on the railing, his back to the ocean, and said, "Anne..."

Anne turned to face him.

"Anne... I..."

"What are you trying to say, Jack?"

"Uh... Nothing... Nothing important," he said, spinning around toward the ocean.

Anne ditched her smoke and put her hand on his shoulder. "You can tell me. What's bothering you?"

Stoner pivoted, pitched his cigarette on the ground, and crushed it with his shoe.

"I don't think I can go through with this... This caper. Job. Oh, whatever it's called."

"Why, Jack?" Anne asked, holding his hands in hers.

He looked into her eyes and paused. "I don't... I couldn't forgive myself if anything happened to you."

"But nothing's gonna happen, Jack. So don't worry."

Stoner slowly shook his head from side to side but speeded up after a few moments. “No. No. You don’t know the half of it, Anne... Not even a quarter of what’s going on.”

“You can be cryptic at times, Jack. Don’t worry, Reggie’s got all angles covered.”

“Then why do I have this funny feeling in my gut?”

“Something you ate, maybe?” Anne said with a chuckle.

“Gracie Allen, you ain’t.”

“Don’t be cruel, Jack... Just tell me what’s bothering you.”

“It’s you, Anne...”

“Me? What you mean, me? What have I done?”

“You haven’t done anything, Anne. It’s me, too. It’s just that... I can’t find the words... Maybe Cole Porter said it best: ‘I’ve got you under my skin.’”

Anne took his hand, pulled him close, and kissed him.

Chapter 9

On the drive home, the sky appeared bluer, and the clouds looked a lot puffier than usual. A breeze blew the scent of wild sage from the canyons. The air smelled much better than he remembered, and it actually smelled good. He parked in his driveway, got out, and sauntered to his front door, floating a few inches above the walkway.

What’s wrong with me? Stoner thought. *Am I falling for that dame? Am I falling for a Nazi?*

Stoner tried to shake the feeling, but it hung on him like an oversized topcoat. Then, he remembered the vomit on the living room floor, and his feet hit solid earth with a jolt. He turned the doorknob, expecting

the worst, but when the unlocked door opened, the smell of Pine-Sol cleaner and cheap cigar smoke surprised him.

Hannigan had found Stoner's undersized easy chair to his liking again, and his walrus frame overflowed and strained it to its breaking point. He puffed on a cigar long enough to cause a logjam on the Mississippi. The two FBI agents did their disappearing act and blended with the floor lamp.

"What's with the Pine-Sol, Hannigan?" Stoner asked, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. "Taking up maid service as a sideline?"

"Yer housekeeping skills ain't nothin' to write home about, Stoner. This place stunk like the drunk tank down at the precinct. The boys pitched in and did ya a favor, seein' we're now all workin' together."

"Since we're speaking of the boys, don't have them stand too close to my floor lamp." Stoner swept his arm toward them. "They blend so well I might think I'm over-decorating."

"Always with the wisecracks," Hannigan said. "How about ya give it to me straight—details of the grab."

Stoner kept one eye on the agents to avoid losing track of them and the other on Hannigan in case he blew a wall of smoke his way. He wanted time to find a window and fresh air.

Hannigan looked around the room like a walrus at feeding time at the zoo.

"Where ya keep the hooch?" he said, licking his lips.

"With or without ice?"

"Don't ruin it."

"Gemme a minute."

Stoner stopped by the liquor cabinet for some Scotch and the kitchen for glasses. He poured a double for himself, put the glasses and bottle

on a tray, brought the whole shebang into the living room, and set the tray on the coffee table.

“Help yourselves,” Stoner said, taking his drink and standing near the sofa.

Hannigan poured a triple and offered the bottle to the agents, but they refused. Stoner took a sip, but Hannigan gulped a mouthful and winced. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Jeez, Stoner. Where’d ya get this paint thinner?”

“Special blend for my friends.”

“What ya serve yer enemies?”

A rhetorical question. Stoner didn’t think Hannigan expected an answer, so he stood looking at him, wishing he would disappear or just go away, but he didn’t.

Hannigan put his glass on the table.

“Okay, Stoner. Now that we’ve dispensed with the niceties, let’s have it. What’s the plan?”

“Saturday evening, we make the snatch.”

Stoner took another sip of the Scotch nonchalantly, but Hannigan didn’t care for his answer and started to squirm in the chair.

“That’s it?” He poked his stogie at him as his voice jumped an octave. “Come on, Stoner. We need more details! I know ya got more! So give!”

For a split second, Stoner didn’t give a damn about national security or torpedo guidance systems. Anne took first place in his thoughts. He took a big slug of his drink and sat on the sofa, facing Hannigan.

Hannigan waited, puffing on his cigar and blowing enough smoke to hide a battleship. He frowned, making the creases in his forehead so deep an infantry platoon could camp in them. When he nearly crushed

the arms of Stoner's easy chair in his clenched hands, Stoner had to say something or buy a new chair.

"All right, Hannigan. There's a change-up in plans. This Culver guy is stopping for dinner at eight."

"Eight?" Hannigan said. "What happened ta nine-thirty sharp?"

"Maybe the guy's got a tapeworm or something; how should I know. It doesn't matter, one way or the other—eight or nine-thirty. The curtain rises on this three-act play as advertised... Same plot but with some character changes."

"Why do ya have to always talk in riddles, Stoner? Just speak plain and give me the highlights."

Stoner filled him in with the revised plans, but Hannigan just grunted and grumbled.

"Why do I get a gut-level feelin' yer holdin' somethin' back, Stoner?"

"Maybe it's feeding time at the zoo," Stoner said, glancing at his watch.

Hannigan took a drag on his stogie and let the smoke trickle out his nose as he eyed Stoner. Then he used it as a pointer toward his face.

"It's the dame, ain't it?" Hannigan cocked his head toward the agents. "Where'd they go?"

"Over there," Stoner said, pointing to the right side of the room. "The lamps without the shades."

"Oh, yeah," Hannigan said, still cocking his head. "Seems Stoner's gone soft on the dame, boys."

In unison, the agents said, "Soft as unrefrigerated butter."

"Don't give up your day jobs just yet," Stoner said sarcastically. "You ain't got the knack for it."

They stepped toward him with clenched fists, but Hannigan stopped them cold with a nod, a yank on their chains.

“We’re all one happy family on this one,” Hannigan said, “so act nice, but when it’s over, he’s all yers.”

With that declaration, they resumed their floor lamp posture.

“What’s the deal with the dame, Stoner?” Hannigan asked with the corners of his mouth curled up in a devilish grin.

“I’ll play along if she goes scot-free; otherwise, find another sucker.”

Hannigan sat motionless, expressionless, smoke rising from the end of his cigar. His piercing eyes met Stoner’s, but Stoner didn’t back down.

“Well, Hannigan? You can nab Reggie, Klaus, or whatever he’s calling himself these days, but let Anne escape—clear out of the country, or I’m cashing in my chips.”

Hannigan yanked the cigar from the corner of his mouth and pointed it at Stoner.

“Listen here, chump. Ya ain’t in no position to make a deal for the dame.”

“Just watch your investigation tank when I spill the beans,” Stoner said, standing and turning for the door.

Hannigan reacted so furiously that he capsized the easy chair, trying to get to his feet. The agents laughed so hard they couldn’t help him. But once the chair hit the floor, it popped him like a champagne cork, and he rolled to his knees, drawing his revolver.

“Hold it right there, Stoner. Ya ain’t goin’ nowhere, and ya ain’t gonna be spillin’ no beans, neither!”

Stoner didn’t know if Hannigan would pull the trigger or not, but he had seen him this angry before, and the suspect landed in the hospital; it wasn’t a pretty sight. So he did a slow turn and put his hands up.

“That’s better, Stoner. I always thought ya had a level head when the chips were down.”

“And when a forty-five stares you in the face,” Stoner said nervously.

“That, too.”

“Put your iron away, Hannigan, and I’ll give my arms a rest. Then, maybe we can come to some kind of agreement, and maybe not.”

“Okay, Stoner. Talk.”

“You want the major; he’s the ringleader. Anne’s just a secondary player and not worth your time. She wouldn’t even be an honorable mention in your commendation. I can see the headlines now. *Detective Hannigan Breaks Nazi Spy Ring*. You fancy the sound of that, don’t you, Hannigan? All you have to do is let the dame go, slip through your fingers as freely as smoke escapes your nose. What do you say, Hannigan? A hero if I ever saw one.”

Stoner had to bite his lip on that last one to keep from laughing, but he needed an extra push over the finish line. He glanced at the agents; they suppressed a snicker in unison. Those guys topped Stoner’s creepiness scale by every measure.

Hannigan holstered his gun and rubbed his chin. Then, a broad smile stretched to the breaking point across his fat lips.

“Okay, Stoner. We don’t want the dame, do we, boys?” Hannigan asked, looking toward the agents.

Stoner became suspicious when Hannigan’s smile morphed into a grin and smirk; he couldn’t be trusted. But Stoner would take any deal, letting Anne off the hook.

Chapter 10

After Hannigan and the FBI Agents left, Stoner felt pretty much on top of the world: Reggie advanced him a couple of days’ pay, he had the dough to cover his debt, and best of all, Anne had a stay-out-of-jail

pass. He could afford a decent dinner for the first time in a blue moon, so he cleaned up and stepped outside.

The sky cleared, and a cooler off-shore breeze chased the high temperatures of the past few days back to the desert where they belonged. It should make for a pleasant meal with drinks overlooking the ocean while watching the sun go down. Stoner locked the door and started down his sidewalk, whistling a jaunty little tune. He typically saved whistling for the occasional pretty dame or to hail a cab, but he made an exception tonight.

Before Stoner got to his car, a sedan roared down his street and screeched to a stop, blocking his driveway. It was a sparkling new Oldsmobile Special Club, streamlined with a two-tone body. Parking next to his long-in-the-tooth jalopy was like comparing top-of-the-line transportation with salvage-yard pickings.

The Special Club advertised having the widest front seat of any car on the market, but shoulder-to-shoulder muscle jampacked it from door to door. Stoner didn't have to strain to recognize its occupants. Theo and Leo crammed the front seat of that big car and made it look small. Any thoughts of a pleasant evening of drinks at some ocean-side dive flew out the window.

What the hell do they want? Stoner thought.

Theo got out of the driver's side, and the car rocked to the right. When Leo got out, the car righted itself. They shuffled up his driveway, partly hunched over, arms dangling. Stoner half expected their knuckles to scrape on the pavement at any moment.

The last two run-ins with these gorillas ended with some serious pain, and Stoner had no reason to believe this would end any differently. But they already paid him a visit earlier this morning, so his thoughts ran all over the place, wondering why they were there.

Stoner did the only thing he could think of on short notice: he grinned from ear to ear, and when they got within talking distance, he said, “I’m fresh out of bananas. What else can I get ya?”

As soon as the words registered in his brain, Stoner regretted saying them. He had chosen a poor time to be wisecracking, and anything that could set them off wouldn’t end in his favor. He waited for the punchline, metaphorically speaking.

Theo stopped a yard or two in front of his car, and Leo lumbered beside him. Theo frowned, his usual grumpy self, perpetual scowl and all—his facial muscles should get tired, but they never look like they did.

“Knock off the funny stuff, Stoner.”

His tone made the hairs on Stoner’s neck stand at attention. Then, as usual, Leo echoed what Theo said.

“Yeah. Knock it off, or I’ll knock you off.”

“Hey. Watch what yer sayin’, kiddo,” Theo said to Leo. “Ya know the boss.”

“What’d I say?” Leo asked, punching Theo’s shoulder. “Huh? What’d I say?”

“We’re legitimate businessmen now, Leo. So we don’t knock off people no more. How many times I gotta tell ya?”

Leo punched Theo’s shoulder again. “Who died and left ya in charge?”

“Don’t start with me, Leo,” Theo said, shoving Leo, “or I’ll wallop and knock ya down a peg or two.”

They faced each other with raised eyebrows and tight jaws.

“Oh, yeah, and who’s helpin’ ya?” Leo tightened his hands into beachball-sized fists.

Theo responded in turn, curling his hands into basketball-sized fists. Stoner expected them to come to blows at any moment. He took this opportunity to duck out and slip away unscathed.

“Pardon him, boys. If you don’t mind, I’ll be on my way since you don’t seem to need me for anything,” he said, opening his car door. “Could you move your car?”

Theo and Leo immediately dropped their tiff and refocused on him.

“Ya ain’t goin’ nowhere, Stoner,” Theo said. “Yer comin’ with us.”

“Yeah,” Leo said with his hideous chuckle. “With us.”

“The way you apes are all decked out, are we double-dating at the zoo?” Stoner asked, closing the car door. “I could slip into something more appropriate—maybe a classy rayon ensemble.”

“If fer one minute ya was serious—” Theo left that thought hanging in mid-air. “Get in the car, chump. Sid wants to see ya.”

“Why? I got his fifty,” Stoner said, waving the Grant he took out of his wallet in their faces.

Leo’s eyes widened, but Theo ignored it. Instead, he fixed his stare on Stoner’s eyes, unflinching.

“When Sid says do, I don’t ask; I just do. So get in the car, and don’t ask me why again.”

“Yeah,” Leo cackled. “Get in.”

Stoner put the fifty back in his wallet and got into the backseat. He ran his hand across the seat’s fabric. It felt better than his sofa and mighty comfortable, too, not lumpy like his. He would wager the plushness extended to the trunk—if he ever needed that mode of transportation.

Theo started the car, put it in drive, and the Hydra-Matic smoothly shifted gears when he gave it the gas. Soon, they zoomed along National Ave, cruising to Harbor Drive, then dog-legging through

Roseville to Ocean Beach. Stoner floated on a cloud compared to the jerky ride of his old rattletrap.

Under normal circumstances, a meeting with Sidney Devar would be an honor—few ever had that honor. However, Stoner placed wagers with Sid for years and never met him in person—even when he fell behind in his payments. He employed an army of goons to handle that end of his business, but now, Sid wanted to see him. ‘*Why?*’ kept bouncing around in his brain, and he couldn’t come up with an answer.

Stoner leaned forward and asked, “Sure, you guys don’t know why Sid wants to see me?”

Theo cocked his head toward him and in a tone that sent a chill to his gut. “Get yer ears checked, Stoner. Ask again, and ya’ll be needin’ a doctor.”

“Yeah,” Leo chuckled. “Real soon.”

Stoner leaned back, shut his mouth, and tried to enjoy the ride. But waves of anxiety swept from his head to his toes and settled in his gut. It didn’t take long before it started rumbling, and he experienced some reeking flatulent releases.

“What’s that I smell?” Leo asked.

“Just the new car smell,” Stoner said, biting his lip to keep from laughing.

Leo fanned his nose with his hand.

“Jeez... I don’t like it one bit.”

Theo glanced at Leo and shook his head. “I don’t smell nuthin’.”

“Ya can’t smell nuthin’ with that nose of yers, but I can almost taste it.”

“Then roll down the window and shut your face,” Theo said.

Leo rolled down his window and leaned out for fresh air. After a couple of breaths, he pounced on Theo.

“Surprised ya can even breathe through it.”

“Don’t start with me, Leo. Or I’ll give ya one, too.”

“And whose army?”

Theo ragged Leo, and Leo returned tit-for-tat. Theo jerked his head from front to Leo and back as he spoke, and every time he did, he turned the steering wheel in the same direction. Soon, they weaved in and out of their lane.

“Guys. Hey, guys... Can you watch the road? Sid doesn’t care for damaged goods. Besides, you don’t want to scratch this brand-new car, do you?”

Theo and Leo snorted at each other like Brahma bulls facing off for a showdown but finally took deep breaths, knocked off their tiff, and the car drifted back into its lane. Stoner figured he could reason with Theo, but someday Leo absolutely would end up in a padded room somewhere in a land far, far away, wrapped snugly in a supersized straight jacket.

Chapter 11

Forty-five minutes later, Theo, Leo, and Stoner stopped at the *Shanghai Palace*, a Chinese restaurant in Ocean Beach, just northeast of San Diego. Leo got out and tipped the passenger seat forward for Stoner. Leo closed the door behind him.

“Wait here, chump,” he said.

Theo joined them on the sidewalk.

“Lead the way, Leo.”

Leo went in, Stoner followed, and Theo trailed them. Once inside, Leo said something to the *maitre d’*. A waiter took them to a private dining room, where Sid sat at a table six feet in diameter, if it was an inch,

covered with more food than one person could eat in a week, and surrounded by three young Asian beauties in traditional dress.

The women bowed when the men entered, and Theo and Leo bowed in return. Stoner gave the bunch a polite nod.

Sid appeared shorter than Stoner expected unless the table stood higher than usual. A booster for his chair would have helped. Sid claimed to be fifty, but age spots large enough to pass for a Caribbean Islands map covered his hands. His high-collared Chinese robe hid most of his neck, yet it didn't cover the loose flap of skin dangling from his chin and connecting to his Adam's apple, enough to make a Tom turkey envious.

Stoner heard stories about Sid's toupees—he had a dozen of them—but today, he proudly displayed his fuzzball from forehead to nape, ear to ear. Sid perfectly exemplified the old saying about Chinese food: eat until you burst and be hungry again in an hour. How else could he eat all this food and still be as skinny as a rail?

While they waited, Sid scarfed down a helping of egg foo young—he must have been afraid someone else might eat it before he did. After Sid had sipped some tea, Theo interrupted his feeding frenzy.

“We brung ‘im like ya said ta, Boss,” Theo said, bowing.

“I ain't blind,” Sid said with a gruff voice that Stoner didn't think possible from a scrawny little man. “Now scram. Me and Stoner got some business to discuss.”

“But, Boss,” Theo said.

“Do it, and take that dimwit with you.”

“But we just brung him,” Leo said, shoving Stoner closer to Sid's table.

“Come on, Leo. He don't mean Stoner.”

Leo looked puzzled, unable to grasp Sid's meaning. Theo understood and dragged Leo toward the exit. He bowed to Sid as he closed the door.

Sid dismissed the women, and Stoner stood facing him alone. He looked mighty big to him at that moment for such a small guy. Stoner shifted his weight from one foot to the other while patiently waiting for him to finish a spring roll—time slowed to a crawl.

Sid took a sip of tea. "You should know I don't see many people these days." He sucked a piece of food from his tooth. "Especially slubs like you, Stoner."

"I can cover the fifty if this is about the wager."

"We'll get around to the principal and interest you owe me in due time, but I want some information you have that's much more valuable."

"Interest?"

"I loaned you money, Stoner, and I expect something for the investment. You know... My risk factor."

"So, how much should I figure your risk's worth?"

"What you owe plus another fifty a day until it's paid off."

"Jeez, Sid," Stoner said, wringing his clenched fists in opposite directions. "Why don't you try squeezing blood from a stone?"

"But..."

"But, what, Sid?" Stoner said, cocking his head and looking quite naively at him.

"But if your information is sound, I'll consider your debt paid in full."

"What information?"

"As much as I like to haggle, Stoner, I'm not in the mood, so listen. The word on the street says you're in a caper involving Nazi spies, top-secret plans, and the FBI."

Stoner's jaw dropped. He was dumbfounded.

"Well, Jack. Is it true or not?"

Stoner's mind raced, searching for answers to questions he hadn't even thought of yet. Sid had him backed into a corner without any means of escape; at least, he couldn't see one.

"May I sit down? My knees are a little weak at the moment."

"Of course, Jack... And have some tea. It'll strengthen your resolve."

Stoner pulled up a chair and sat. Sid poured a cup of tea and handed it to him.

"Something to eat, perhaps?"

"Tea's fine."

Stoner took a slug, and as soon as the liquid touched his tongue and mouth, they burned like a five-alarm fire. He coughed and grabbed a glass of water. Two gulps later, he felt better, but his mouth still tingled.

All the while, Sid convulsed with laughter.

"What the hell was that?"

"Special Chinese herbs and—"

"That'd enliven an Egyptian mummy," Stoner said, still sputtering.

"Enough about the tea, Jack. What's your caper all about? And you'd better tell me straight!"

Stoner looked into Sid's sunken eyes.

They say the eyes are the window to your soul, but Sid's eyes had the curtains drawn, blinds closed—soulless. He never blinked while the seconds passed, waiting for an answer. Instead, he steadily drummed with his right fingers, keeping time with the wall clock.

“All right, Sid. Here’s the scoop.” Stoner took another drink of water. “Nazi spies want my help snatching blueprints for some military thing or another.”

“And the FBI?”

“They want my help nabbing them red-handed.”

“You?” Sid scrunched his face and laughed sarcastically. “You’re a double agent?” He reached for his teacup. “Well, well, Stoner,” he said, smiling. “You’ve come a long way, haven’t you?” He took a sip. “Considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Come, come, Jack. We both know you’re a two-bit gumshoe, barely able to keep your head above water. So why would spies want you... And the FBI... You, of all people?”

“Seems I’m the chief engineer’s doppelganger,” Stoner said confidently with a bit of pride. “And he’s in charge of the blueprints.”

“Such a big word for such an insignificant, little player.”

“No need slinging mud, Sid,” Stoner said, leaning forward. “You ain’t got the equipment to win a beauty contest anytime soon, either.”

“But, Jack, I’m here surrounded with everything I could hope for, and you’re sitting there with nothing—less than nothing actually—willing to do whatever it takes for me to call off Theo and Leo.” Sid tented his fingers and smirked. “Am I right, Jack?”

Stoner’s zinger rolled off Sid like water off a duck’s back, and Sid knew how to stick a dagger between your ribs and give it a painful twist. He stabbed the heart of the issue. So Stoner put his tail between his legs and waited for the next wave of insults. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Here’s how it’s gonna work, little man. Once you lay hold of the blueprints, bring them to me.” Sid’s face tensed up, and he slammed the table with his fist. “Understand, schmo?”

Stoner understood all right, but everyone needed to take a number for a piece of his backside: Reggie, Hannigan, and now Sid. He'd have to rent a banquet hall if this party got any bigger.

He just nodded.

"I knew you were smarter than you look, Jack. So, as soon as you hand over the plans, I'll cancel your debt; meanwhile, the interest keeps accumulating."

"I have a Grant in my wallet."

"Theo handles all my transactions; find him." Sid reached for the teapot, and while he filled his cup, he said, "Nice meeting you in person, Jack, but we're through here." He sipped some tea. "You know the way out."

Sid had declared spades as trump, but Stoner had only clubs in his hand and couldn't fold—not allowed in this game. So he stood and suppressed the urge to bow while leaving.

Chapter 12

Theo and Leo packed the hallway to the main dining room so tightly The Thin Man couldn't have squeezed through. Theo put out his arm and blocked Stoner's way.

"Where ya goin'? Don't ya owe Sid some moola?"

"If you apes'd swing down from your trees, I'll square my debt."

"Hey, wiseass," Theo said, stepping toward Stoner.

"Yeah, wiseass," Leo said, pushing forward. "Lemme at 'im, Theo. One good pop'd shut 'im up."

"Not if he's got the dough," Theo said, holding Leo back. "Boss' orders."

“Tell me ya ain’t got it, Stoner,” Leo said, smacking his palm with his fist.

“I got it, you primates,” Stoner said, waving the fifty in front of them again.

Leo grabbed it and stuffed the bill in his pocket.

“Then, we’re square,” Stoner said with a grin. “Right, Theo?”

Theo’s brow furrowed. The cogwheels in his brain must have been jammed with cobwebs. But then, somewhere in the darkest depths of his mind, a light went on, and he protested.

“Hey. Sumthin’ don’t add up.”

“What you mean?” Stoner said, trying to bluster them. “I owed a hundred and paid you fifty yesterday. Leo took another fifty from me just now, so we’re even-Steven.”

“Today was yer interest payment, Stoner, so we ain’t even. We’ll be payin’ ya a visit tamorra.”

“Yeah. Tomorrow,” Leo clucked.

“All right, have it your way. Meanwhile, how about a ride home?”

“Take a cab,” Theo snarled.

“Yeah. A cab,” Leo cackled.

Theo punched Leo’s arm. “Ya don’t hav’ta repeat everythin’ I say.”

“Hey... Hey, guys. You don’t tell the new employee to take a cab,” Stoner said with bravado. “The boss won’t like it.”

“Working for Sid? You? Ain’t gonna happen in a million years, Stoner,” Theo said, wagging his head. Then he thumbed over his shoulder. “So hit the road, Mack.”

“Yeah. Hit the—” Leo abruptly shut his mouth and rubbed his arm.

“Ask him, yourself.” Stoner stepped aside and pointed the way.

“The boss?”

Theo was stymied—a genuine deer-in-the-headlight reaction. One meeting with Sid was enough for Stoner. So he couldn’t imagine approaching that little man, questioning one of Sid’s decisions, but his evil side delighted in sending Theo into the lion’s den.

“Who else, you ape?”

Theo’s eyes bulged, his jaw clenched, and his fists swelled to the size of spare tires, but he restrained himself and went in to see Sid. Moments later, a crashing thud hit the door, and Theo zipped out, wiping his face.

“Sid didn’t care for the tea?” Stoner asked, grinning from ear to ear.

“Shut it, wiseass,” Theo said through clenched teeth. “Get the car, Leo.”

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The Neanderthal twins bickered all the way home. Stoner wanted to get out and walk more than once, but Theo stopped at his driveway about forty minutes later, and Leo let him out.

“Don’t forget, Stoner,” Theo said, leaning toward him. “Next interest payment’s due tamorra.”

“Yeah. Don’t forget,” Leo echoed.

“Shut up, Leo, and get in,” Theo said.

Leo plopped into the passenger seat, rocking the car, and slammed the door. Theo jammed the peddle, and they zoomed off.

Stoner walked up his driveway, thinking of a stiff drink—a double, maybe a triple. Then he noticed the missing evening edition. The paperboy never missed a delivery. He was dependable as the morning sun, so he cautiously approached his front door and turned the knob. The door was unlocked.

When he stepped in, the familiar stench of a cigar hit him like a bad case of the flu, and he coughed.

“Where ya been, Stoner?” Hannigan asked.

“When’d you start caring about my love life?” Stoner asked, flipping on the lights.

“Cut the crap, Stoner,” Hannigan said from the easy chair. “We know ya went to see Sid Devar. Nobody sees Sid face-to-face unless it’s important, and ya ain’t that kinda important. So what gives?”

Stoner entered the room, leaving the door wide open, hoping for some fresh air. Someone must have tailed or ratted on him, and knowing Hannigan, he probably had both bases covered. So Stoner tried to be cagy.

“I owe him on a nag that died somewhere on the back turn. He wants me to pay up with interest.”

“Come on, Stoner. We both know Sid sends Theo and Leo to collect his debts. He keeps that end of his business at arm’s length, untouchable if it goes south, and he’s got a dozen Theos and Leos lined up to work for him. So I’m not buyin’ yer little tap dance, but ya’ll save us a lot of time and yerself a great deal of aggravation—and pain—if ya spill it.”

Stoner laughed.

“You can’t even get out of my easy chair before I close the door on your ugly face.”

“Okay, Stoner. Ya got me on that one, but I never told ya about the boys’ special skillsets, did I?”

Before Stoner realized what had happened, each agent had grabbed his wrists, flipped him like a ragdoll, and landed him flat on his back. Then they bent his fingers backward, toward his forearm. Pain shot up his arm and exploded in his brain.

“How many do ya want dislocated? One? Two?”

Stoner whimpered. “Okay, Hannigan, you win.”

“Speak up, Stoner. Cat got yer tongue?”

“Call off your hounds.”

“Not so fast, Stoner. Tell me what I want, and the boys will ease off, but until then, they’ll keep the pressure on as a friendly reminder.”

“Okay. Okay, flatfoot,” Stoner said, nodding as fast as a Jackhammer. “Sid wants in on the action.”

“Action?” Hannigan scratched the stubble on his chin. “Sid don’t do nothin’ unless there’s a nickel in it, and ya ain’t robbin’ a bank.”

“Hannigan... You couldn’t win in a shootout with a little old grandma. You’re too slow on the draw.”

“Hey,” Hannigan said, stomping toward him.

Stoner closed his eyes and braced for the impact of his size-eleven shoe, but Hannigan stopped short and looked squarely at him.

“Yer in no position ta be wisecrackin’, Stoner.”

Stoner opened one eye and squinted with the other.

“Don’t you get it, Hannigan?”

Hannigan looked puzzled, unable to understand Stoner’s drift. Stoner opened his other eye and smiled.

“Consider this scenario, Hannigan: Sid gets hold of the blueprints. He offers them for sale to the highest bidder. He sells them for heaven knows what price. Then, he’ll be counting nickels from now to eternity.”

Hannigan stepped backward.

“Didn’t think of that angle.”

Stoner glanced at the two agents to gauge their reactions—both could be models for Michelangelo: statuesque and stone-faced. So, he appealed to Hannigan.

“I might wanna hold a Scotch in what’s left of my hands.”

Hannigan nodded and gestured with a wave of his hand.

“Okay, boys. Let ‘im up.”

Stoner got to his knees and pushed himself to his feet. The boys didn’t offer assistance; instead, they stood statue—as if he was some cheap entertainment.

Then Hannigan turned, headed for the easy chair, and plopped in it.

“I got some thinkin’ to do.”

“Don’t strain yourself, Hannigan. You might get a hernia.”

Hannigan squirmed in the chair, visibly irritated. He yanked his cigar out of his mouth and used it as a pointer, jabbing it at Stoner.

“Shut it, Stoner. This new angle complicates things a bit.” He glanced toward the kitchen. “Gemme some of that paint thinner ya call Scotch. I need somethin’ to clear my thoughts. And be generous,” he growled.

Stoner shuffled to the kitchen and reached for a glass; it slipped from his grip and bounced on the floor. On the next attempt, he used two hands and managed one for Hannigan and another for himself. The feeling returned to his fingers, so he juggled both and set them on the table by Hannigan.

He used both hands to pour a double Scotch for himself and a triple for Hannigan, then put the bottle next to the glasses and sat on the sofa opposite Hannigan.

Hannigan had already guzzled half of his before Stoner took his first sip. Hannigan picked up the cigar that had rolled off the ashtray and charred the tabletop. He stuffed it in his mouth. While Hannigan puffed away, Stoner slid to the edge of his seat.

“How we deal with another player at the table, Hannigan?”

“Depends,” Hannigan said with a shrug. He took another slug of Scotch. “What’s Sid want ya ta do?”

“Once I get the blueprints, I’m supposed to take them directly to him.”

“And what ya getting’ for yer part?”

Stoner watched Hannigan without answering. Then Hannigan’s eyes gave away his thoughts—they suddenly popped wide as if an idea had wandered into his mind.

“Didn’t that Reggie character promise ya a grand?”

“Yeah... So what?” Stoner said cautiously.

Hannigan was animated: squiggling in the chair, rocking back and forth, and jabbing his stogie at Stoner.

“Then Sid must’ve offered ya more than that. Two thousand? More? So how much was it?”

“Nothing...”

His brow jumped two inches, and his jaw dropped three.

“What ya mean, nuthin’?”

“No money... Just my canceled debt and a longer lifespan.”

“I get it. Yer inta Sid for a tidy sum, and Theo and Leo paid ya a visit or two. That right, Stoner?”

“Yeah. That’s about the size of it.”

“Then try this one on for size: the boys are gonna follow ya from the diner to the warehouse in case ya get lost along the way.”

The winepress was squeezing Stoner’s grapes from all sides. He didn’t care much for the original plan, and he didn’t care for this one any better. Reggie, Hannigan, and now Sid—how much bigger could this get?

“But, Hannigan...”

“No buts about it, Stoner. Yer on a short leash; get used to it.”

Chapter 13

Friday, November 8, 1940

Stoner had hoped for a better start today, but he had barely finished his second smoke and poured his morning coffee when the phone rang. Nobody called him at home; he had an unlisted number and never gave it out.

He picked up the receiver and blandly said, “He moved out last week.”

Before he could hang up, a familiar voice said, “Jack. Reggie here.”

“Reggie? How’d you get my number?”

“No time for that now. A slight change in plans for tomorrow night.”

“Oh?” Stoner said nonchalantly. “I’m listening.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

He glanced at his wristwatch.

“I don’t get surprised before nine in the morning and only after I’ve had a smoke and a cup of joe.”

“Always the kidder. That’s what I admire about you, Jack. No matter what, you always come across with a joke.”

“All right, Reggie. That’s enough butter for three slices of toast, so what’s the change?”

“Word is that your bookie has you over a barrel and is trying to muscle in.”

“How’d you know that?”

“What’s he wanting you to do, Jack?”

Stoner hesitated. He didn't know how much Reggie knew or suspected, but if he found out about Sid and got this unlisted number, Stoner could only guess how far Reggie's connections went.

"There's too much at stake, Jack. I must know what he's up to."

"Okay..." Stoner said, opting to give Reggie the bare minimum info. "He wants me to boost the documents and deliver them to him personally."

"How come that doesn't surprise me?" The pause seemed interminable. "I can't let him muck this up, so here's the change, Jack: you'll be followed to the warehouse."

"What? No trust?"

"Not a matter of trust, Jack, simply divided loyalties. Don't forget Anne'll be waiting there with me, so don't disappoint her."

Stoner hung up, returned to the kitchen, and sat at the table, staring at his smoldering cigarette and lukewarm coffee. He wondered what Reggie meant by 'Don't disappoint her?'

Stoner didn't have long to mull it over. His front door shook in its frame—only a gorilla's knuckles made that much noise knocking. He hurried to open it before the peephole became a fist-sized hole.

"Theo. Leo. What a surprise. Out for your daily jog?"

Theo nearly pushed the door off its hinges and marched inside, followed by Leo.

"I ain't got the payment yet, but I will." Stoner backed into the living room.

"We ain't here about the dough, Stoner," Theo said, wagging his head. "Message for ya from the boss."

"Yeah. A message," Leo echoed.

"I can't read your pea-sized minds, so give."

“He says we’re gonna follow ya from the diner ta the Chinese joint,” Theo said. “But where’s this here diner he’s talking ‘bout, and when ya gonna be there?”

Thoughts raced through Stoner’s mind. He had Hannigan and the Bobbsey Twins, Sid, Theo, and Leo, and Reggie and Anne trying to pull him in three different directions simultaneously, and he didn’t have enough arms.

“Uh... Lemme talk to Sid.”

“What about?”

“Business, bonehead,” Stoner said, picking up the receiver, “just between me and Sid.”

“I dunno,” Theo said, frowning.

“You gonna interfere with Sid’s business? It’d be a brave but stupid move, Theo.”

Theo wagged his head from side to side. “Give ‘im the phone number, Leo.”

Leo handed Stoner a dog-eared business card with Sid’s private number, and he dialed it and waited. It rang and rang.

“You sure he’s there?” Stoner asked.

“Give it time, chump,” Leo said, nodding. “Sid takes his sweet time answerin’ sometimes.”

“This better be important, whoever you are,” Sid said in a tone that would startle Genghis Khan.

“Jack Stoner, here, Sid. Theo just told me about your two aces in the hole. Well, it won’t win the hand.”

“What you mean?”

“I’ll grab the blueprints Saturday and—”

“This Saturday?” Sid said.

“Yeah. After the grab, the Nazis will escort me to the warehouse. Theo and Leo are welcome to tag along, but they can’t stop us—too many of them, not enough of you.”

“My boys can take them, so stick to the plan, Jack.”

“Not so fast, Sid,” Stoner said, thinking quickly.

He didn’t want Anne endangered by Sid’s thugs, so he lied through his teeth.

“Listen up, I heard they’ll have a squad of goons armed to the hilt, and I don’t think Roosevelt wants you to declare war on Germany single-handedly.”

He only heard the sixty-cycle hum. Then came a hacking sound on the extension, like a cat coughing up a hairball. Sid spat and cleared his throat.

“No... Uh... Not what I had in mind either, but here’s what we’ll do instead. Me and my boys will take care of them at the warehouse. Once I have the goods, I’ll make them an offer they can’t refuse. Fast money. Easy, peasy.”

“They won’t give up that easily.”

“That’s my worry, little man. You just worry about getting me the blueprints... And you’ll be off the hook, Stoner... If you deliver.”

“Sid...”

“What you want now?” Sid asked with a tone that dripped with impatience.

“Call off Theo and Leo... I don’t have your dough yet.”

The line had the sixty-cycle hum and a few crackles of static.

“Sid?” Stoner said. “You still there?”

“All right, Stoner. But if this deal falls through, you’ll owe me double. Got that, chump?”

“Sure, Sid. Sure, I’ll—”

Before Stoner could finish, the line clicked, and a dial tone buzzed in his handset. His mind went every which way at once. Reggie, Anne, Hannigan, the FBI Agents, and now Theo, Leo, Sid, and the gang planned to converge on the warehouse, and Stoner stood at ground zero.

A pretty kettle of fish I’ve gotten myself into, Stoner thought as he cradled the handset on the phone’s base.

“What gives, Stoner?” Theo asked.

“Write this down, Leo: Café La Mesa, La Mesa Boulevard, Saturday, eight-thirty sharp. Got that?”

“Ya got a pencil and paper, Theo?”

The two started arguing about whose turn it was to bring something. Stoner didn’t want their argument to escalate, so he found them a pencil and paper and repeated the instructions.

“And Sid said to lay off the rough stuff since I’m an employee.”

“What’s that mean?” Leo asked.

“Do I have’ta explain everything to ya?” Theo asked. “We can’t touch Stoner, that’s what.”

“Just when I was gittin’ ta enjoy thumpin’ ‘im.”

“Shut up, kiddo. Let’s blow,” Theo said, shuffling toward the door with Leo—knuckles dragging on the carpet—following close behind.

Stoner shut what survived Theo’s assault on his front door and returned to the kitchen for another smoke, coffee, and maybe a real warmer-upper. Not a drop of Irish blood flowed in his veins, but he

liked their namesake coffee so much that perhaps he would seek dual citizenship.

He barely had time to settle back and enjoy his breakfast's first course when the phone rang again.

Someone must've scratched my number on the bathroom stall at the bus station, Stoner thought. If this keeps up, I'll need an answering service.

He considered letting it ring, but his curiosity got the better of him, so he picked up the receiver.

"Won Hung Lao Chinese Laundry," Stoner said with the worst imitation Chinese accent he had ever heard.

He heard the sweetest voice on the other end of the line.

"No time to be funny, Jack," Anne said.

"Anne... Where'd you get my number?"

"Later, Jack. I called because... Because I'm worried about tomorrow tonight."

"Don't be. We've got all the bases covered."

"No, you don't. I shouldn't be telling you this, but—"

Before Anne could finish, Reggie's muffled voice sounded in the background. She made a flimsy excuse about checking on her laundry and hung up.

Stoner couldn't imagine what Anne tried to tell him, but after their walk near the beach, he hoped she had fallen for him as badly as he had fallen for her.

Chapter 14

Saturday, November 9, 1940

Before the sun peeked over the mountain, Stoner was awake and perched on the bathroom throne with the most irritated bowl he had experienced in years. He made pilgrimages to the porcelain shrine between cups of coffee and smokes, and by the time he emptied the coffee pot, his bowels should have been empty as well.

Stoner wobbled back to bed, his legs barely able to support him. He fell sound asleep, but an hour later, the phone's ringing awakened him.

"Who the hell...?"

He stumbled out of bed, went to the living room, and grabbed the receiver before the caller gave up.

"John Doe, speaking," Stoner said, half awake and thoroughly irritated. "You've reached the City Morgue, and you're too late. My body's already been identified."

Booming laughter kept him from hanging up.

"Reggie? Is that you?" Stoner said.

"Always the card," Reggie said, still laughing. "Did I wake you?"

"No. Just finished up my five-mile jog before breakfast," Stoner said, suppressing a yawn. "You should try it sometime; gets the blood flowing."

"In your dreams, maybe," Reggie said, still chuckling. "Seriously, Jack, I wanted to review the plans for this evening one more time so everyone understands their roles."

"Are we doing a three-act play or a heist?"

"Can't you be serious for once?"

Stoner glanced at the clock. "I'm never serious before nine in the morning, some coffee, and a smoke."

Reggie didn't laugh, not even a chuckle.

"Don't make me regret—"

Reggie didn't finish; he didn't have to. Stoner got the message all the same. So he reached for a cigarette and lit it.

"I'm having a smoke, Reggie, and I've put on my serious hat. Coffee later."

"That's better, Jack. There's more at stake than you realize, so we can't have any slip-ups."

"I'm listening."

And for once, Stoner's ears tuned to Reggie's every word.

"Anne and I will pick you up at eight in front of your office. She'll be driving a black, unmarked delivery sedan. You'll get in the front with Anne and me. She'll drive us to the diner, and we should arrive by eight-twenty."

"Isn't that cutting it kinda close? What if Culver's early?"

"He won't be," Reggie said confidently. "Then you'll take his car—"

"Why you so sure?"

"Sure of what, Jack?"

"The timing... I don't shave that close."

"All right, Jack. We'll pick you up at seven forty-five. Satisfied?"

"Then I'll take Culver's place, hijack his car, ditch his driver, and drive to the warehouse with the blueprints," Stoner said. "That about right?"

"I'm not sure your heart is in this a hundred percent, Jack. What's eating you?"

"Just have my bonus ready—in leafy-green bills—when I deliver the plans."

After a long while, Reggie said, “In small, unmarked bills as they say, eh, Jack.”

“As long as it spends.”

“Until then...”

Reggie hung up, and the dial tone came on the line.

Stoner put the receiver back in its cradle and took a long draw on his cigarette, which had already burned halfway. He blew a cloud of grayish smoke toward the ceiling while he pondered this whole case.

Something's wrong, Stoner thought.

So far, he merely had a gut-level feeling, and he couldn't put his finger on what troubled him. But these feelings always came to light if he kept mulling them over in his mind. He needed some coffee—mixed with something more potent than cream—so he put on another pot.

The coffee percolated halfway through its cycle when someone knocked. Stoner put on his robe, went to the door, and opened it.

Theo stood there, smiling. “Good morning, Stoner,” he said in a regular and somewhat pleasant voice.

“Been sniffing the catnip?” Stoner asked, not quite grasping the change in Theo's demeanor.

“That's funny, Stoner.” Theo cocked his head toward Leo, standing behind him. “Ain't that funny, Leo?”

“Yeah. Funny,” Leo said cynically, and his twisted lips and rolled eyes showed he didn't think much of the zinger.

“Stop by for coffee on your morning jog from the zoo? Fresh pot's brewing.”

“I take mine black,” Theo said.

“And you, Leo?”

“Got any honey?”

“I’ll shake the hive and see what’s buzzing.”

Leo smiled at that one as the two shuffled into his living room.

“Have a seat while I get it.”

They spied the sofa and plopped on it, nearly causing it to collapse.

When the coffee finished percolating, Stoner filled three mugs to the brim. He found some old crystalized honey, scraped a couple of spoonfuls for Leo, and then served the boys in style with the mugs, milk, and honey on a cookie tray.

His sofa creaked and moaned when they shifted their weight, reaching for a mug.

“To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?” Stoner asked, sipping his coffee. “An early morning coffee clutch, perhaps?”

Theo acted like he didn’t understand half of Stoner’s words, so he ignored him and tasted his coffee. “Good brew, Stoner.”

“Yeah. Good,” Leo said. He added the honey and stirred. “And just sweet enough.”

“Your friendly demeanor is unnerving me. It ain’t natural.”

“What’s this duh-me-near?”

“Shut up, Leo,” Theo said, “and listen.”

“Then give it to me straight, Theo,” Stoner said. “You didn’t just append to be in my neighborhood and stop by for coffee and chitchat, so what gives?”

“Sid sent me and Leo, so’s there ain’t gonna be no screw-ups tonight, see?”

“And...?” Stoner looked at one and then at the other, but they just sat there like bullfrogs on a pond log. “We just gonna sit here sipping joe till this evening or what?”

“Uh... Sid says to tell ya we’re gonna be waitin’ at the diner and tail ya from there.”

“Yeah. Waitin’,” Leo echoed.

“I already knew that.”

“But me and Leo,” Theo said sheepishly. “Uh... We don’t know what car ya’ll be driving, Stoner, so how we gonna follow ya? Sid’s gonna be real mad if we screw this up.”

Stoner never thought he would ever see the day when anyone or anything genuinely frightened Theo and Leo, but Sid had put the fear in them and turned them to mush. So, he plopped into his easy chair—careful not to spill his coffee—and savored this moment. They looked at him, patiently waiting for an answer, but he had all the time in the world to enjoy this.

He drank the last of his joe and set the mug aside. While he spoke, Stoner wrung his hands.

“The problem is, my friends, I don’t know.”

Theo pushed against Leo, getting to his feet.

“Ya holdin’ out on us, Stoner?” he asked, tightening his brow, lips, and fists.

His friendly demeanor vanished, and Theo’s true nature burst through.

Stoner swallowed hard.

“Wait a minute, lughead. I wasn’t told anything about the car, so calm yourself.”

“How we gonna know?”

“Yeah. Know,” Leo echoed.

“I’ll wear a suit and my fedora when I leave the diner. When I stop, light a smoke, take a drag, and pitch it, that’ll be my signal, then watch which car I get into. Can you do that?”

“Come on, Leo. We got this.”

“We do?” Leo asked, getting to his feet.

Theo led Leo to the door and shoved him outside. Before closing the door, he turned to Stoner.

“Don’t be late, Stoner. I don’t wait too good.”

Theo’s grammar might be off, but Stoner understood every word of his not-so-subtle warning. His gut rumbled again, and he headed to the bathroom.

Chapter 15

After a light lunch of processed ham, Swiss cheese on rye, and a bottle of beer, Stoner planned to spend the afternoon resting up for tonight’s adventure—no telling when he would get home. But he barely had time to swallow the last of his brew when the doorbell rang.

If this keeps up, I’ll have to replace the door with a turnstile, he thought.

Stoner stashed the plate and glass in the sink and the empty bottle in the trashcan.

“Hold your horses,” he yelled.

He didn’t have to open the door to know Hannigan waited on the other side: the stench of his cigar already seeped through the cracks. When Stoner yanked it open, the trio waltzed in as if they lived there.

Hannigan headed straight for the easy chair and plopped his walrus-sized backside with a grunt and a groan. The two agents drifted to the kitchen area and blended with the wallpaper.

The thought jumped into Stoner's mind: *I didn't know chameleons were people, too.*

"What you want, Hannigan?"

"What's with ya, Stoner? Just when I was gettin' used ta the idea of workin' together like pals, ya have ta go and soil it. Maybe ya should get larger-sized underwear."

"Funny, you ain't, Hannigan. I'm hounded from all sides, and I don't have enough meat on these bones for everyone to take a bite, so get to the point. I need my afternoon beauty nap."

"All right, Stoner. Have it the hard way."

Hannigan shifted his weight in the chair, trying to get comfortable and stuff his five pounds, of you know what, into the chair's four-pound bucket.

"So that we're all on the same page, this is how it's gonna play: the boys are gonna follow ya ta the warehouse, and I'll be there, waiting. Then we'll crash the party while yer handing them Nazis the blueprints."

"Why'd you bust in here to tell me something I already knew, Hannigan. There's more to it, so give."

Hannigan looked at the floor and slowly raised his head until their eyes met.

"Hate ta break it ta ya, pal, but the dame ain't getting' off scot-free."

"But you said," Stoner shouted, moving toward him.

The agents came at Stoner, but Hannigan waved them off, and they blended with the wallpaper again.

"That's how the cookie crumbles, Stoner," Hannigan said, slowly shaking his head. "Sorry, pal, but I made a promise I can't keep."

"I'm no pal of yours, you bastard!"

“Name callin’ don’t do nuthin’, Stoner. She goes down with the rest of ‘em,” he said with a cold, steely look in his eyes.

“Them? Who’s them?” Stoner waved his arms about and looked one way and then the other frantically.

“Sometimes, I wonder about ya, Stoner,” Hannigan said with a puzzled look. “Didn’t ya ever question whose mansion that was? Who were the butler and house staff? Nobody can escape the country without help. So, who’s helping them? It’s like a spider’s web of Nazis, or at the least, Nazi sympathizers involved from end to end, and we want to catch them all. So the dame’s gotta go down with the whole bunch.”

“Then I won’t have any part of it,” Stoner said, holding his hands up defiantly.

Hannigan cocked his head. “Trouble is, Stoner, yer on that short list of Nazi conspirators, too. And the question is, will ya be a hero or a goat? Every way ya cut it, pal, yer up to yer neck in this...” Hannigan pointed his cigar at him. “So yer gonna havta choose: work with us or against us. Go free or go to jail, and we ain’t playin’ Monopoly here.”

Stoner had always used the phrase, between a rock and a hard place, without giving it much thought. For the first time, he understood what it meant. Hannigan hit the nail on the head: he had no choice. He had to go along, yet maybe he could still help Anne in the inevitable chaos. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

“All right, Hannigan. You got me where it hurts; just don’t squeeze.”

“See, boys...” Hannigan said, cocking his head toward the kitchen and looking puzzled. “Where’d they go?”

“Over here,” the first agent said, stepping from the shadow—except in this lighting, the room had no shadows Stoner could see.

“See, boys, like I said, Stoner would come around once he knew the score.”

“Don’t rub it in, Hannigan. You got me by a thread but only by a thin thread.”

“Okay, Stoner, here’s the deal: when the blueprints are in that bastard Nazi’s hands, me and the boys will rush in and nab ‘em with the goods—case closed!”

“What’s your backup?”

Hannigan raised his eyebrows and glanced toward the agents.

“Don’t need no backup. We got this one, flat.”

“And Sid?”

Hannigan gestured with the nonchalant wave of his hand. “Sid don’t figure in. He’s a non-player, a non-entity.”

“Then you don’t know Sid.”

“Well, enough to know that Sid ain’t gonna give us no trouble,” Hannigan said confidently.

Stoner couldn’t imagine Hannigan brushing off Sid like he didn’t exist. Nobody he knew, other than Sid, could cause so much fear that Theo and Leo turned to mush. A big boy with years of experience, Hannigan should have known the players and considered Sid a serious threat. Regardless, he would have to play this deal alone. Stoner had plenty of his own problems.

“And how you gonna do that?” Stoner asked.

Hannigan chomped on his stogie then huffed and puffed—Little Red Riding Hood would have trembled in her shoes.

“Ya see about the blueprints,” he growled, pointing his cigar at Stoner’s face, “and we’ll see about Sid.”

Stoner shrugged. “Arrogance can spell disaster.”

“Since when ya become Sigmund Freud?”

“Ever read Proverbs? They’d do you some good, Hannigan.”

Hannigan’s overconfidence unnerved Stoner. He always believed in the old saying: once pride got hold of you, your downfall lurked just around the corner.

Hannigan waged his head and snorted. “Got a beer?”

“Sure... Got a buck?”

“That’s highway robbery!” Hannigan said, sliding to the edge of the easy chair.

“Gotta pay the rent somehow. Take it or leave it.”

“Come on, boys. Stoner’s beer’s probably the cheap stuff, anyway.”

Hannigan wiggled loose and grunted, getting to his feet.

“Be nice, Hannigan,” Stoner said. “It’s imported...”

“Imported?” he said; his face lit up like a Christmas tree. “From where?”

“Milwaukee.”

“Stoner, yer hopeless,” Hannigan said, frowning. He started toward the door and stopped. “Tonight, and don’t be late.”

Stoner closed the door, hoping the last of his afternoon interruptions had ended. The room needed airing out, so he opened the windows to catch a crosswind. The breeze felt so good that he lay on the sofa for a few minutes. Before he realized it, he dozed off, fast asleep.

Someone knocking on his door awakened Stoner from a good snooze. He glanced at his watch: quarter past three. He sat on the sofa's edge and shook the cobwebs from his brain.

“Don’t break the door down,” Stoner yelled. “Give me a minute.”

The knocking stopped.

Stoner opened the door and found a small man, not more than four feet ten, skinny with thin, slicked-down, jet-black hair. He had an Asiatic look to him. His eyes were slits, and he smiled a row of teeth too big for his mouth.

The man bowed and said with better diction than Stoner, “So sorry to bother you, Mr. Stoner, but I saw someone trying to break into your car.”

Stoner looked past him at his car in the driveway. It appeared untouched, so he turned his attention to his Good Samaritan.

“What did you see, exactly?”

“A man checking each door—one after the other.”

“And you happened to be passing by, Mr... Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Toshio... Toshio Okada, Mr. Stoner,” the man said, grinning from ear to ear and bowing.”

A couple thousand Japanese lived in San Diego County, but none in Stoner’s or the surrounding neighborhoods, so he immediately became suspicious of Mr. Okada—if he could be trusted to use his real name, and he *just* happened to come by *just* at the right moment? With all the turmoil going on, Stoner had reached the point of trusting no one.

“Thank you, Mr. Okada, but I’ll check my car later.”

“I wouldn’t want any tragedy to befall you, Mr. Stoner,” Okada said, grinning.

“What the hell you mean by that?”

“We’ll be watching to keep you safe.”

Stoner leaned over him and looked both ways but saw no one.

“Who’s we?” he asked.

Okada smiled, bowed, and zipped around the corner, leaving Stoner totally dumbfounded. The rumbling feeling in his gut returned, and he headed for the bathroom and the porcelain throne.

Chapter 16

Stoner arrived at his office early and plopped in his chair. When he opened the bottom desk drawer and reached for the whiskey bottle, he remembered he had drained it the day before yesterday. Just as well. He needed a level, unclouded head on his shoulders for tonight. So he leaned back, put his feet on the desk, and stared at the ceiling.

His mind raced, straining to piece together the complex puzzle: Hannigan, the FBI, Sid, Theo, Leo, Reggie, Anne, and now the mysterious Okada. At a mental impasse, Stoner needed a screenplay to keep the actors straight.

Stoner didn't usually carry a gun, but the reassurance of the .38 Colt Banker's Special he kept in the office safe would help alleviate any remaining unease about the heist and the odd cast of characters involved. He spun the tumblers and put the iron in his coat pocket.

He glanced at his wristwatch: the hands ticked in slow motion. His eye twitched, and his foot tapped to a musical beat of its own. He couldn't stand the suspense any longer, so he got to his feet and paced until seven, then he closed up shop and went down to the sidewalk for a smoke or two.

Anne and Reggie arrived in a black 1940 Ford Sedan Delivery at seven-forty-five on the button and pulled to a stop alongside the curb. They both wore snug-fitting all-black outfits with matching watch caps.

Reggie slid to the middle, next to Anne, and Stoner opened the door. Even without makeup and hair stuffed in her cap, Anne looked as beautiful as ever when the dome light came on.

"Close your mouth, Jack, and hop in," Reggie said with a smile.

Anne kept her eyes looking forward. Stoner joined them and closed the door. Its latch had barely engaged before Anne floored the gas pedal, and they peeled down the street and zipped around the corner at Twenty-Eighth and again onto Main. Reggie slammed against Stoner at each turn, and he against the door.

“Little heavy with the foot, aren’t we, Anne?” Reggie asked.

Anne ignored him and burned rubber, taking off from the Twenty-Ninth Street stop light. Thirty minutes later, they drove into the lot of Café La Mesa and parked in the shadows.

“Another change up, Jack,” Reggie said.

“What now?”

“Culver will be staying for dinner.”

“Not the usual carry-out, then.”

“No, but you’ll order pie and coffee to go and leave as soon as your order is ready.”

“What about Culver?” Stoner asked. “And his driver?”

“I’ll handle Culver as planned, and his driver won’t think anything’s unusual.”

“I dunno,” Stoner said, shaking his head.

“You’ll be fine, Jack, just fine.”

Stoner’s confidence fell short of Reggie’s, and his anxieties caused his gut to rumble again.

“Bring a gun?” Reggie asked.

“Uh... Sure, I got one,” Stoner said nervously. “Shouldn’t need it, though.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Anne said. “Just be careful, Jack, and don’t use it unless you have to.”

“Finally, Anne,” Reggie said. “Thought you might go the whole evening without so much as one word.”

“Don’t rag on me, Reggie. I’m not in the mood. Let’s get this job done and move on.”

“Job? Move on?” Stoner asked. “What’s she talking about, Reggie?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all, Jack,” Reggie said to him, then he turned to Anne. “Isn’t that right? Well... Isn’t it, Anne?”

Anne leaned her head on the top of the steering wheel and gripped its sides with both hands. After a few tense moments, she said, “Yes... But...”

She slowly lifted her head and looked at Stoner, and when their eyes met, he knew much had been left unsaid that needed to be said. Reggie glanced at her and then at him.

“I’m getting into position, and while I’m gone, would you two settle whatever’s going on between you? There’s too much at stake tonight for you not to have your heads in the game.”

Stoner opened the door and got out so Reggie could leave. He started to walk away but stopped and looked back.

“Don’t mess this up,” Reggie said, fading into the darkness.

Before Stoner responded, Anne said, “Get in, Jack. We have to talk.”

It was a familiar phrase he’d heard often from his ex, which usually led to a battle of words, so Stoner reluctantly got back in the sedan and closed the door.

“Don’t sugarcoat it, Anne. Just give it to me straight.”

“I haven’t the foggiest what you’re talking about. All I wanted to do was explain what I said about this being a job and about me moving on.”

Stoner sat there, looking at her sheepishly and without uttering a word. Similar to his experience with his ex, this posture had proved to be the best.

“I have responsibilities: my father’s business and national security. And when this job is done, I’ll move on and return to keeping his dreams alive. So whatever transpired between us, whatever spark was there, must be viewed through a lens of the reality that I’m an heiress, you’re just a private eye, and never the twain shall meet.”

Her words stabbed him right where it hurt the worst, but Stoner had to agree. He bordered on delusional if he thought they could cross the gulf between their two worlds.

“How will I know when Culver arrives?” Stoner asked as nonchalantly as he could fake.

“Uh... Oh... His car will have Wicker Technologies pained on the doors.”

Stoner got a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and leaned back against the door, her words still stinging as much as ever.

“Wanna smoke?”

She held her two fingers in a V-shape, so he lit her one, pressed it to her lips, and then lit one for himself. They rolled down the windows and smoked in silence.

Stoner checked his wristwatch: eight-thirty-five.

“He’s late,” he said.

“Worrywart.”

“What if he doesn’t show?”

“He will, Jack. Trust me, he will.”

“How can you so all fire sure?”

Before she answered, a late-model, four-door sedan with a Wicker Technologies emblem printed on the front doors parked in a secluded spot opposite them. Another late-model, unmarked sedan pulled in behind it and stopped. A few moments later, a man got out of the back of the first sedan, said something to the driver, and closed the door. He walked over to the second sedan, spoke to its driver, and headed to the diner's entrance.

"What'd I tell ya?" Anne said, smiling.

"He's wearing a short-sleeved shirt, no coat, and no hat," Stoner said anxiously.

"And?"

"Mine's long-sleeved."

"If his driver's a typical man," Anne said, chuckling, "he won't have the foggiest idea what Culver's wearing, so roll yours up."

Stoner slipped off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and put his coat back on. Then, got out of the vehicle, closed the door, and stopped by Anne's open window.

"Anne, I—"

"Your hat."

"Oh... Right." Stoner handed her his fedora. "Treat it gently; it's the only one I've got."

Anne took it and put it on the seat beside her. Then she grabbed Stoner's necktie, pulled him close, and kissed him on his lips before he could react.

"Ditch the tie and be careful, Jack."

Anne's kiss surprised him, and Stoner stumbled backward. He hesitated for a few moments, handed her his tie, and started for the diner, coat slung over his arm.

“Wear the coat,” Anne said, “and leave it in the diner.”

Stoner stopped and looked back, still surprised by her kiss. Anne smiled. A warm feeling and a sense of calmness came over him when he saw her. Once he put his coat on, he walked to the diner, floating a few inches above the ground, and went inside.

Chapter 17

The diner was busier than Stoner anticipated. All but two booths were occupied, and the counter had only three vacant stools. Waitresses scurried between customers and the kitchen window, taking orders and delivering food. A surly-looking, gray-haired woman worked the register.

“What’ll it be, mister?” the cashier asked with a gravelly voice that would startle Bela Lugosi.

“Uh... Piece of pie and a cup of joe to go.”

“What kind? We got apple, peach, pumpkin, custard, and—”

“Apple. Small coffee, black.”

“Fifteen cents.”

Stoner fished through his pockets and found two dimes.

“Keep the change,” he said nervously.

“Diamond Jim Brady in the flesh,” the cashier said, taking the dimes and dropping them in the till. “Give us ten or fifteen minutes.”

Stoner nodded, stepped out of the way, and stood near the entrance. He glanced to see if anyone looked his way and casually hung his coat on the rack. His gun clunked against the rack’s metal frame.

He froze.

“Damn,” Stoner said under his breath. “How could I forget about my gun?”

He was in a real pickle. A blast of adrenaline shot through his bloodstream, and his heart pounded like a jackhammer as sweat trickled down his temples. He licked his dry lips with a tongue as coarse as sandpaper. After several deep breaths, his heart rate eased a bit, and he casually transferred the gun to his pants pocket, keeping his movements hidden under his coat.

Once Stoner felt the gun’s weight in his pocket, he glanced around the diner again and spied a man who fit Culver’s description, wearing a short-sleeve shirt, sitting in the last booth. A waitress took the man’s order and walked toward the kitchen. Someone with his back to Stoner sat opposite the man, wearing a black shirt and a watch cap.

That couldn’t be Reggie, could it? Stoner thought. *Why would they be sitting—*

“Your takeout’s ready, Diamond Jim,” the cashier said, interrupting his thought.

Stoner nodded and approached the cashier, but a customer stepped between them to pay his bill. Stoner’s right leg started quivering, and a wave of goosebumps shot up his back and shoulders. He shifted his weight, hoping his leg would settle, but the longer it took for the customer to pay his bill, the more it quivered.

They finally finished their transaction, and Stoner’s goosebumps dwindled. The cashier grabbed a paper sack off the counter and handed it to him.

“Apple. Coffee. Black,” she growled.

“Right... Uh... Thanks.”

Stoner took the sack and glanced in the last booth’s direction in time to see the two men leaving by the backdoor exit. Anne entered the diner when Stoner turned to exit, and they approached without

showing any signs of recognition. He stopped by his coat and discreetly thumbed toward it. She blinked, and Stoner left. Moments later, she followed with his coat draped over her arm.

He stopped a few feet from the entrance, lit a smoke, took a puff, and gave it a pitch. Then Stoner trudged toward Culver's sedan, hoping Theo and Leo recognized him without his coat and fedora. With each step, his feet grew heavier and heavier, like he wore lead-lined shoes.

When Stoner reached the car, the driver hopped out and opened the door for him.

"Ready to go, Dr. Culver?"

His heart skipped a beat, and Stoner hesitated.

The driver whispered, "For heaven's sake, Stoner, get in the car!"

Astonished that the driver had called him by name, Stoner hesitated.

"What's going on?" he asked. "How'd you know my name?"

"Later," the driver said. "Get in. We gotta move."

Stoner slid into the back seat. The driver closed the door, got behind the steering wheel, and closed his door. The driver started the engine, drove onto La Mesa Boulevard, and turned south on Palm.

"Tell me quick," Stoner said. "I'm packing a gun."

"You won't need that."

While they rode along, the driver introduced himself as FBI Field Agent Tom Walker from the LA Office.

"I'm to ensure you arrive safely at the warehouse."

"Won't work," Stoner said, shaking his head. "Too many eyes on us."

"Who?"

“For one, a local, small-time crook has two of his musclemen tailing me, a Nazi or two following them, and then you guys right behind them—a regular caravan.”

“Wasn’t told about the muscle. Any ideas how to handle them?”

“Yeah. Up ahead on Riviera Drive is a secluded stretch of road. Pull over, get out, and we’ll playact for our audience.”

“I can’t let you out of my sight. You know... Orders.”

“Right... I’ll escort you to the passenger side and fake conking you. You’ll drop to the ground and crawl into the back seat when I transfer the blueprints to the front. Then I’ll drive to the warehouse.”

“Just make sure you fake it,” Walker said with a chuckle.

A few minutes later, they neared the spot.

“It’s just around the next curve,” Stoner said.

They glided to a stop alongside the road and got out. Once on the passenger side, they faked the mugging for their audience. As planned, Walker crawled into the backseat when Stoner transferred the blueprints. He got behind the wheel, eased onto the highway, and glanced in the rearview mirror. Headlights at the curve kept pace with them.

“We got company,” Stoner said.

“Who?” asked Walker.

“Dunno. Probably Theo and Leo, the Goliath Twins, shoulder to shoulder muscle, but hollow between the ears.”

Walker chuckled. “You keep strange company.”

“If you only knew... What you know about this caper?”

“Only that I’m to watch your six.”

“Good ole Hannigan.”

“Who’s Hannigan?” Walker asked.

“You never heard of him?”

“No, but not unusual. Field agents are sometimes no better informed than frontline doughboys.”

“Who’s your general?”

“Special Agent Reginald Houser of the LA Office.”

“Reginald?”

“Yeah, but he hates it,” Walker said. “Goes by Reg or Reggie. Don’t make the mistake of calling him Reginald.”

“I know a Reginald Pinehurst,” Stoner said. “Ever heard of him?”

“No, but two Reginalds... What are the odds?”

Stoner drove onto Lemen Grove Avenue and continued south and westward to Imperial Avenue. He turned due west onto Logan Avenue and dog-legged onto National Avenue. At Beardsley Street, he turned southwest, traveled three blocks, and turned northwest onto Harbor Drive.

“We’re almost there,” Stoner said. “What’s the plan?”

“Park in the shadows, and I’ll slip out while you get the blueprints.”

“And then?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be watching your every move.”

When Stoner glanced in the rearview mirror, he noticed two sets of headlights following them, with a third set flashing into view occasionally. True to his word, Sid had Theo and Leo in one, Anne must be in another, and the agents in the third. Stoner could clearly spot his tails, and it amazed him that the others didn’t spot their tails as well and did nothing about it—a four-year-old would. But Theo and Leo never scored very high in the sharpest-tack-on-the-bulletin-board

contest, and who knew about the sharpness of the Bobbsey Twins' tacks.

They turned north onto Fifth Avenue a few minutes later and traveled one block to L Street. Stoner found a parking place in a secluded spot away from the streetlamp so Walker could exit unnoticed. Stoner got out, went to the passenger side, and gathered the blueprints. Walker carefully opened his door, crawled out, and they closed their doors together. Then, the FBI Field Agent quietly disappeared into the shadows.

Chapter 18

Stoner tucked the blueprints under his arm and headed for the side door. In the distance, he heard the unmistakable sound of a car door closing. He listened for a few moments more and stepped inside.

The wide-open building was two stories high, gloomily lit, and smelled musty. Boxes and crates were stacked in rows on the cement floor, with aisles wide enough for a front lift to maneuver. The high-hanging night lights cast shadows dark enough to hide an army between the rows.

Stoner's shoes clicking and scuffing on the cement was the only sound.

Fifteen yards into the warehouse, the rows took a sharp turn right and opened into a staging area in front of story-and-a-half-high roll-up doors. A single overhead light fixture barely lit the space. In the middle, a man sat quietly at a table, with Reggie and Anne standing on either side.

"I knew you could pull this off, Jack," Reggie said, nodding. "Well done."

"Is that Culver?" Stoner asked.

"Uh... Yes, it is, as a matter of fact."

“So we’re into kidnapping, too?”

Stoner was deeper into this quagmire than he had agreed. Reggie upped the ante with kidnapping, and if Hannigan didn’t square his part in this melodrama, he could spend his remaining days making little rocks out of big ones.

“The blueprints have to be authenticated,” Anne said. “Only Culver can do it.”

“Put them here,” Reggie said, pointing to the table. “We don’t have much time to spare.”

“Where you going in such an all-fired hurry?” Stoner asked, backing toward the shadows.

The hatred of helping the Nazis welled up inside him with each step.

To hell with the money! Stoner thought. *There ain’t gonna be no payoff anyway.*

Stoner turned to leave.

“I wouldn’t do that, Jack,” Reggie said.

Stoner kept walking with his jaw clenched. He expected to feel the pain of a bullet in his back at any moment, but at least he would die with some self-respect. Heaven knew he had precious little left.

“If you value Anne’s life,” Reggie added.

Stoner stopped and spun around to see Reggie pointing a gun at Anne. Reggie had him by the cullions, and he knew it.

“Easy with that, Reggie,” Stoner said, shuffling toward him. “You can have these; just let her go.” He plopped the blueprints on the table. “And good riddance.”

“He wasn’t going to hurt me,” Anne said with a chuckle, “and you fell for it.”

His gut rumbled. Stoner imagined 'SUCKER' in big block letters stamped on his forehead. But he would have the last laugh when Hannigan and the FBI showed up.

Where's that fat man, anyway? Stoner wondered. *Said he'd be waiting.*

"Sensible thing to do, Jack," Reggie said, smirking. "No need for any unnecessary violence."

Hannigan stepped from the shadows, chewing on a stogie and waving his gun.

"Couldn't've said it any better, myself... So, drop your gun, Reggie, or whatever your real name is."

Reggie lowered his gun and laid it on the table.

"Now back away," Hannigan said, lumbering closer. "You, too, Culver."

Culver got up and stood beside Reggie and Anne.

"'Bout time you got here, Hannigan," Stoner said excitedly. "I'd almost given up hope you'd find the place."

"Me and the boys knew about this place all along."

"Where are they anyway?" Stoner asked, looking around. "Don't we need more help?"

"Don't worry, Stoner. They're here." Hannigan cocked his head and yelled, "Hans. Fritz. Come out where we can see ya."

"Hans? Fritz?" Stoner asked, stepping forward Hannigan. "Who's Hans and Fritz?"

"The Weber brothers," Hannigan growled. "And ya stay put right there, Stoner."

They appeared out of nowhere. The Invisible Man could take lessons from them.

“Oh... Wasn’t the plan to—”

“Plans have changed, Stoner.” Hannigan waved his gun toward Anne. “Bring them plans ta me, little lady.”

“Trader,” Anne yelled while gathering up the blueprints.

“I love dirty-talking women,” Hannigan said.

“What gives, Hannigan?” Stoner asked. “Aren’t Reggie and Anne the Nazi spies?”

“Never ya mind, Stoner,” Hannigan said, chomping on his stogie. “I said ta bring ‘em here, girly, and be quick about it.”

Anne handed the blueprints to Hannigan.

“What the hell’s going on?” Stoner shouted. “Aren’t Hans and Fritz FBI Agents?”

“Tell him, Hannigan,” Reggie said, “or I will.”

“Okay, wiseguy,” Hannigan said. “Ya seemed ta have all the answers, so why don’t ya go ahead and tell him.”

“They’re the von Weber brothers, SS officers in Germany’s Schutzstaffel,” Reggie said, pointing at Hans and Fritz. Then he waved his hand toward Hannigan. “And your friend is a modern-day Benedict Arnold and quite willing to stab his country in the back. And for what? For ideology—hell, no... He couldn’t care less about that—am I right, Hannigan?”

Hannigan snorted.

“For thirty pieces of silver,” Reggie continued. “For cold cash... That’s why he’s doing it.”

“That was Judas,” Hannigan said, chewing his cigar, “And there’s more than thirty pieces in my share—a lot more.”

Hannigan pointed his gun at Stoner. “And ya can join ‘em, sucker.”

“Point that at me, and I’ll—”

“Saw that movie, too, Stoner, and yer no Humphrey Bogart. Now, get over there and make it quick. My trigger finger’s gettin’ twitchy.”

“You’re a son of a bitch, Hannigan,” Stoner said, stepping backward, “and a two-bit bastard for playing me.”

“That’s all ya got, Stoner? Just name-callin’? Where’s the wisecrackin’, the comebackin’ yer so good at?” Hannigan asked with a chuckle. “Maybe the cat’s got yer tongue, eh Stoner? Maybe yer brain’s stuck in reverse?” His laughter echoed in the canyons of boxes and crates. “Never thought I’d see the day yer mouth had nuthin’ to say.”

Hannigan turned to Hans and Fritz. “Take these... And the girly for insurance. Now move it!” he barked. “We got a date with a plane.”

Hans took the blueprints from Hannigan, rolled them up, and headed for the nearest shadow. Fritz grabbed Anne’s arm, following on Hans’ heels.

“Anne,” Stoner yelled.

Stoner started after them, but he passed too closely to Hannigan, and Hannigan clipped him alongside the head with his gun barrel. Stoner saw stars when the floor jumped up and slammed his chin.

But before anyone had gotten far, Theo and Leo joined in, weapons at the ready, with Sid standing between them.

“Not so fast,” Theo growled. “Hold it right there, busters!”

Hans and Fritz simultaneously stopped and turned toward Theo’s voice.

“Get back over here,” Theo said, motioning with the wave of his gun.

“Yeah. Over here,” Leo echoed, his gun pointed at Hannigan.

“Bring them papers to me,” Sid said, extending his hand.

Before anyone moved, Field Agent Walker yelled from atop a row of boxes.

“FBI. Drop your weapons. We got you covered.”

For a fat man, Hannigan reacted with remarkable speed. He spun around and fired toward Walker’s voice. Hans crouched, drew his weapon, and shot out the overhead light, plunging the area into semi-darkness. Fritz backed Anne against a row of crates and held his gun on her.

Reggie grabbed his gun off the table, firing once at Hannigan’s silhouette and then at Theo’s, but missed them both. Theo and Leo stood back-to-back, randomly shooting while Sid crouched near a row of boxes. Stoner dove for cover and pulled his gun.

“Theo. Leo,” Sid yelled. “Get me them papers!”

Hannigan aimed in Reggie’s direction and sent a round whizzing toward him. It hit Culver in the shoulder instead, and he went down. Stoner shot at Hans’ contour, missing but splintering the crate above his head. Hans shot back. His aim was no better than Stoner’s.

Walker fired at Hannigan, clipping his wrist, and his gun flew across the floor, skidding to a stop in front of Stoner. He grabbed and pocketed it. In the dimness, countless gunshots rang out. Whizzing bullets flew above Stoner’s head and struck the wooden crates behind him.

Then, the shooting ended as quickly as the fireworks erupted.

Hannigan, Hans, Fritz, and Anne disappeared into the shadows. Hans and Fritz had elevated the art of blending with the background to a new level, but how that fat man managed to do it escaped Stoner.

When the gunsmoke cleared, Theo and Leo knelt beside Sid’s body, sobbing like babies. Sid caught one square in the chest, and he lay dead on the cold cement floor.

Stoner stared at them momentarily. He didn't understand how those two apes showed anything resembling genuine human emotions, especially toward Sid, considering how horribly he'd treated them.

While Reggie reloaded, Walker and four other agents emerged from the shadows.

"How'd they escape!" Reggie said. "We had them surrounded."

"Didn't figure on these bozos, Chief," Walker said, pointing to Theo, Leo, and Sid.

"I screwed the pooch on this one, Tom," Reggie said, "but it'll be all our heads if they get away."

"And they took Anne," Stoner said.

"Don't remind me, Jack," Reggie said. "Difficult enough keeping a clear head without constantly thinking about Anne."

"Airport," Walker said. "They're catching a plane, but which airport?"

"Gotta be a small, out-of-the-way airport," Reggie said. "Get a map!"

"No need to. It's gotta be Nichol's Field," Stoner said without hesitation. "It's a heck of a place for an airport, damn smack between two mountains, but very secluded, ten minutes from the nearest settlement, and that's only a four-way-stop burg with just a mom-and-pop fillin' station. Maybe thirty minutes from here, but I could make it less."

"Then it's our best bet," Reggie said.

"What if he's wrong, Chief?" Walker asked.

"No time to think about that."

Reggie pointed at two agents. "Clean up this mess. The rest of us, let's move it, or they'll be airborne before we leave the city limits."

They piled into two sedans: Walker and two agents in one and Reggie and Stoner in the other, leading the way to Otay Lake Road south of

Jamul. Stoner stomped the accelerator to the floorboard and kept it there whenever possible to make up for lost time.

“So, you’re Special FBI Agent Reginald Houser. That about right?” Stoner said, careening along the twisty lakeside road. “Glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise,” Reggie said.

“Who is Anne?”

“She’s Anne Müller, a private investigator like yourself from the LA area.”

“Not an FBI Agent, then?”

“No... Our director doesn’t trust them enough for fieldwork... A real shame. We mightn’t have pulled this one off without her.”

Ten minutes later, the brightly moonlit airfield lay ahead.

Chapter 19

The moon was past its full phase but still reflected enough sunlight to read a newspaper. When the two vehicles approached the last bend in the road, the airport complex was clearly visible on their right: a one-story building, a few sundry shed-like structures, two hangars, a tower, and a single-engine, high-winged monoplane parked on the tarmac near the first hangar.

Stoner killed the headlights and slowed the vehicle to a crawl. Walker followed close behind.

“Pull over there,” Reggie said, pointing to a brush-covered mound between the airport and them.

Stoner eased the car to a stop, and Walker parked behind. Everyone got out and crawled through the underbrush until they had an unobstructed view. The tarmac and the plane were clearly visible

straight ahead. The hangars lined the tarmac on their left, while the other buildings and the tower aligned on the right.

Crewmen topped off the fuel tanks while Hannigan's unmistakable silhouette paced nearby, wildly waving his arms and spewing a litany of vintage Hannigan cusswords, which occasionally drifted Stoner's way. One Nazi, probably Hans, stashed the blueprints behind the pilot's seat, and the other guarded Anne near the tower's base.

The direct approach had no significant vegetation for concealment. Low-growing bushes dotted the otherwise open ground to the left, and on the right, a few small trees, scattered haphazardly, lined the driveway. Beyond that, an empty parking lot to the buildings had to be crossed without cover.

"What's the plan, Chief?" Walker asked.

"As much as I want those SOBs, Anne's safety comes first. What firepower we got?"

"Handguns and scatterguns," Walker said.

"Rifles?"

"Sorry, Chief."

"Damn," Reggie said. Then he pointed. "Take your men, Tom, work your way to the hangars, come up behind the plane, and take those men. Stoner and I will go in from the tower side and get the other one."

"But what about Anne?" Stoner asked, grabbing Reggie's arm.

"Once the shooting starts, she'll know what to do."

"Want a scattergun, Chief?"

"Can't risk hitting Anne. Use them on that plane, and do whatever you must, but keep it on the ground!"

"Right, Chief."

Walker motioned to his men, and they circled left, crawling from bush to bush, closing in on the hangars. Meanwhile, Reggie and Stoner scurried from tree to tree, advancing toward the driveway.

They reached the last growth of trees before the open parking lot when someone atop the tower yelled, “Hans! Wir haben Gesellschaft!”

An automatic rifle’s distinctive rat-ta-ta rained bullets on Waker and his men, pinning them down. The gunman hadn’t seen them, so Reggie and Stoner dashed across the parking lot to the main building. They quickly approached the tower where Fritz and Anne hid.

Once in range, Reggie aimed at the shooter and fired two quick rounds. The man slumped on the railing. His rifle slipped from his grip, tumbled to the ground, and smashed on the tarmac’s hard surface.

“Damn,” Reggie said. “Could’ve used that!”

Fritz turned toward the sound of gunshots and saw Reggie and Stoner. He fired but missed wide. Hans shouted to him and slid into the pilot’s seat. Fritz grabbed Anne’s arm and dragged her toward the plane. Reggie tried training his weapon on Fritz, but Anne blocked a clear shot. After a few strides, she dropped to the tarmac.

Fritz stopped and tried to pull Anne to her feet. She refused to budge. He pointed his gun at her, threatening to shoot, but Reggie’s next round hit Fritz in the shoulder. The impact knocked Fritz off his feet. In the confusion, Anne ran to the tower and hunkered down.

Reggie fired until he emptied his gun but failed to hit anything. Fritz scrambled to his feet and scurried to the plane. Stoner fired a few shots, hoping he’d get lucky, but luck was looking the other way again.

Hans revved the plane’s engine, getting ready to taxi. Hannigan grabbed the ladder, struggled, but failed to climb aboard: the first step was too high, and he was too obese to pull himself up. Fritz reached the plane, pushed Hannigan aside, quickly scampered up, and plopped in the passenger seat.

The plane's engine roared, and the craft slowly taxied down the tarmac toward the runway. Hannigan waddled alongside, banging on the fuselage. He held onto the ladder and kept pace for a while, but he tripped, and the plane dragged him along.

Fritz opened the door and yelled, "Let go, you stupid man! You'll wreck us all."

But Hannigan refused to let go. He held on for dear life.

Fritz yelled again, "Let go, fat man!"

When Hannigan shook his head, rejecting the command, Fritz took his weapon and pumped three quick rounds into Hannigan's rotund frame. His head slumped, and his fingers slowly let go of the ladder as the plane pulled away. His body fell, skidded, and rolled, landing face-down on the tarmac.

The plane moved on, unimpeded, gaining speed.

Although the plane was out of range, Reggie emptied his reloaded weapon without any apparent effect. Walker and his men arrived and fired their scatterguns at the craft, which had also moved out of their range.

Then Stoner remembered Hannigan's .45, which he had stuffed in his pocket, and ran flat-out toward the runway. The plane taxied to the runway's end, turned, and started coming toward him. His heart felt like exploding, but he kept running.

The craft gained speed, rolling down the runway. The tail lifted off as it got closer to Stoner. The wheels left the ground. Soon, it was airborne, flying toward him one foot above the runway, then two, three. He knelt to steady his arm and took aim. When the plane was in range and soaring toward him, he fired at its engine and kept firing as it flew over until he emptied his weapon. But the plane roared overhead and steadily climbed into the moonlit sky.

Stoner failed to stop them.

Dejected, he hiked back to the hangar, the plane's roar fading. When he reached the hangar, he couldn't hear it anymore above the ringing in his ears. When Anne saw him, she hurried to his side.

"You okay, Jack?"

"Much better if I'd stopped them."

"At least you're safe."

"When Fritz took you, I—"

"Really?"

"Really... And—"

Before Stoner could say anything more, Anne put her arms around his neck and kissed him. He hugged and kissed her back.

"What about all you said in the delivery sedan?"

"I was lying... I'm not the heiress I claimed to be. I'm a—"

"Yeah, I know, so shut up and kiss me again."

###

They strolled, arm-in-arm, to join the others.

Two agents had the crewmen in custody nearby. Hannigan lay on the tarmac. Reggie knelt beside him while Walker looked on.

"Is he?" Stoner asked, already knowing the answer.

"Gasping for air now and then," Reggie said. "A matter of time."

"Always hassled me, but I hate to see him end this way."

"He sold his country out, Stoner," Reggie said, "so don't shed any tears over him."

"Still..."

"Isn't that a plane?" one of the agents yelled.

“Where?” Walker asked.

“Toward the ocean.”

Reggie stood, and they all looked westward.

“I don’t hear anything,” Stoner said, cupping his hand on his best ear—still ringing.

“Its engine is sputtering,” Walker said.

“And it has a yellowish glow,” Anne said, pointing.

The plane was in serious trouble: its engine was engulfed in flames and was rapidly losing altitude. It descended sharply, trying to land, but before reaching the runway, it plowed into the ground and exploded in a horrendous fireball.

Everyone stood watching the horrifying calamity, mouths gaping, not moving a muscle.

Then, Reggie slapped Stoner on his back. “Ole Jack must’ve hit their engine on the fly by. Way to go, Jack.”

“Escort them to the car and radio for backup,” Reggie said, turning to the agents holding the crewmen. “We’ll need help cleaning up this mess.”

Before the agents reached the cars, the wail of sirens could be heard coming toward the airport. The Johnny-on-the-spot local firefighters saw the explosion, and newspaper reporters smelled a story before the first whiff of burning aviation fuel made it out of the valley.

“You need us, Reggie?” Stoner asked, not wanting any part of the circus about to descend upon the site.

Reggie glanced at them, holding hands, and smiled.

“No... I guess not. We’ll take her home as soon as backup arrives.”

Partway to the vehicles, Stoner stopped.

“What’s wrong, Jack?”

“Why didn’t you trust me enough to fill me in on the details of whatever you call this three-act play?”

“I started to, but Reggie interrupted me.”

“Oh... Your cryptic phone call.”

“Yeah. I wanted to walk away, Jack, but Reggie convinced me to stay.”

“Walk away?”

“He wasn’t giving you enough protection... And—”

“And what, Anne?”

“I don’t have to spell it out for you, do I?”

“Never learned my ABCs.”

“Always with the wisecracks... We’ll have to work on that.”

“Wait just one damn minute... What you trying to say?”

“You can’t spell, so maybe this’ll work,” Anne said, leaning close and kissing him.

Chapter 20 – Epilogue

December 7, 1941, 6:45 am

Honolulu, Hawaii

The sunrise from the honeymoon suite’s patio overlooking Māmala Bay couldn’t compete with last night’s sunset, but Stoner enjoyed it all the same. While Anne slumbered, he wanted a smoke and a cup of joe. So he pulled up a deckchair and plopped in it to appreciate the tranquility of the calm waters, the wakes of seabound fishing boats lapping on the shore, the seagulls’ squawking—even the seagulls—and the patter of the occasional jogger on the beach.

This past year had been a whirlwind, and he changed a lot. He tried toning down his wisecracking because Anne disapproved, keeping them more humorous than cynical. He made some progress thanks to her, but it had been a struggle.

Last year's events and players intertwined so much Stoner needed a scorecard to keep them straight.

Sid Devar and his two apes, Theo and Leo: Sid... Well, you could have held his funeral in a phone booth for the paltry number of mourners that attended and still had room for his casket. His operation fell apart when he died. He kept the details of all his business dealings in that scrawny, little head of his, and when the gunfight at the warehouse wiped him out, records of everyone's debts died with him, including Stoner's. Theo was a resident in a federal pen somewhere, crushing big rocks into fine-grained sand with his bare hands. Five minutes after the prison docs interviewed Leo, he got a nice padded cell in a land far, far away.

Special FBI Agent Reginald Houser: Reggie received a promotion to heaven knows what the last Stoner heard, mainly for eliminating the nest of Nazi spies, and he deserved it. He apologized for keeping Stoner in the dark throughout the operation. Reggie thought he carried too much "baggage" with the likes of Sid and Hannigan to tell him much. Stoner's still waiting for Reggie's promised thousand-dollar bonus, but you know how government red tape works. If his grandkids are lucky, maybe they'll see it.

Speaking of Detective Wallace Hannigan and the Weber Brothers: At times, Stoner hated his guts for the way he pleased in tormenting him, but you can get used to anything, and Stoner would've chosen prison over his cold-blooded killing. Once the word got out that he betrayed his country, you could have fired a cannon at his funeral and not hit anyone. The remains of Hans and Fritz Weber, or what could be scraped from the wreckage, made their way back to Germany in a shoebox marked "Return to Sender."

Anne Müller: Anne had a fledgling detective agency in LA when she agreed to join the operation because J. Edger had systematically eliminated females from the FBI. They needed a young, beautiful woman to pose as the heiress of the Brewer fortune, and, brother, did she fit the bill!

Anne and Stoner's phones rang off the hook once the news story broke and mentioned their names and agencies. They hired extra staff to handle the incoming casework. Stoner paid all his outstanding bills in short order and regained the good graces of his favorite watering hole.

Stoner kept seeing Anne as often as he could, and after a few months, he popped the question, and she said, "Why not?" Some suggested theirs was a May-December matchup. He pointed out it was closer to June-September, and they could lump it if they didn't like it.

They figured Roosevelt would ask Congress to declare war on Germany any day, and time was slipping through their fingers more quickly than ever, so they tied the second knot for each of them two days ago and hopped a flight to Hawaii for some much-needed rest... And a honeymoon.

Toshio Okada: the strange little visitor who warned Stoner of an attempted car burglary, turned out to be a mystery man. Reggie never heard of him, and neither did Anne. Stoner didn't know if he was part of Sid's organization, but he doubted it. Sid loved Chinese food, but he had no love for the Chinese people and wouldn't hire one. Okada looked Japanese, and as far as Sid cared, they all looked the same. Stoner considered paying Theo or Leo a visit to ask them but quickly put that to rest. That was another dead end. Maybe Hannigan knew him... But the dead can't talk. Bottom line: Toshio Okada remained the mystery man of the hour.

Stoner finished his trip down memory lane when Anne opened the patio door. She wore her bathing suit and had a towel draped over her arm.

“Wanna quick swim before breakfast?”

He glanced at the temperature gauge on the side of their unit. It read seventy.

“What time’s breakfast?” Stoner asked.

“We can swim till seven-thirty and catch a bite by eight.”

Stoner glanced at his wristwatch: seven-ten.

“I’ll catch up,” he said, heading to the door. When they met mid-patio, they stopped and kissed.

“Uh... Do you really want that swim?” he asked, holding her tight.

“Not anymore.”

Stoner took Anne’s hand, and they returned to the privacy of their suite.

###

Afterward, they lay in bed, staring at the ceiling fan’s rotating blades.

“You’re too good to me,” Stoner said.

Anne turned and propped her head with her hand.

“What you mean, Jack?”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Jack...”

“One look at us, side by side in the mirror, and... Well... I’m trying to say that I’m the luckiest guy in the world.”

“You’re too sweet.”

“No... I mean it, Anne. What guy pushing fifty could ever hope for—”

“Shut up, Jack, and kiss me.”

He shut his mouth and puckered his lips. Then, one thing led to another, and they were on the verge of missing breakfast when a

distant buzzing sound, like a cloud of angry wasps, disrupted their interlude. It came closer with each passing moment.

Stoner and Anne hopped out of bed, threw on their robes, and ran outside as several low-flying aircraft shrieked by. The planes then climbed over the Pearl Harbor area. They stood and watched in horror when the flashes from bombs lit up the morning sky, and the ground shook under them. Seconds later, the sickening sound of exploding ships and detonating munitions reached them.

From their vantage point, they witnessed wave after wave of planes descending on the harbor and airfield, attacking anything afloat or with wings. The ships fired back, trying to knock the attackers from the sky, but it was a losing battle, like trying to swat a hornet swarm with a stick. Shells from the Navy ships exploded overhead. They damaged an aircraft here and there, but the vast majority escaped unscathed.

Without warning, the high-pitch whistling sound Stoner remembered from WWI signaled an incoming round heading right for them. He grabbed Anne's hand, and they dove for cover as the shell exploded nearby.

"Who are they?" Anne screamed.

"Japs!"

"What we ever do to them?"

"Breathe the same air."

Shells exploded, and planes zoomed above them. As horrifying as that felt, nothing compared to the terror of anti-aircraft rounds falling from the sky and detonating at ground level. The devastation was all around them: fires, debris, and collapsed buildings, probably injuries and deaths, too.

A Jap submarine surfaced in the bay, but a Naval vessel fired and promptly sunk it. Then, the planes left as quickly as they arrived, and the sky above them returned to their tranquility. Yet, plumbs of ugly,

black smoke billowed from the carnage and secondary explosions in the harbor.

Jack and Anne sighed, thinking the worst had passed.

“What can we do to help, Jack?”

Stoner didn’t know, but he knew they couldn’t help anyone wearing nothing but robes.

“Get dressed, then we’ll figure something out.”

While they were changing, another wave of planes approached, just like the last bunch. They dashed outside to seek better shelter. They found a dug-out area large enough for them to hunker down and not a minute too soon. A shell exploded near their patio and, in all likelihood, would have killed them both.

Zooming planes, exploding shells—in the air and on the ground—and shaking earth continued for what seemed an eternity, but by ten o’clock, the Japs left again.

Stoner and Anne slowly got to their feet.

“Is it over, Jack?”

“Dunno. They might come again, or they’ve done what they came to do. Either way, we’re in deep sh*t.”

“Why’s that?”

“Our whole Pacific fleet was anchored here and ripe for the picking. And from the amount of smoke over the harbor, I imagine the Japs just harvested us, but good.”

“What’s that mean for us, Jack?”

“For one thing, we were caught with our pants down, and for another, we’ll be fighting the Jap’s big guns with pea-shooters.”

“They had help, didn’t they, Jack?”

“Who?”

“The Japs. Think about it, Jack. An operation this big doesn’t happen because one day, you wake up and decide to attack a major naval base like Pearl Harbor. It takes information and planning, lots of information. Somebody had to collect it and pass it on.”

“Sure, but—”

“But what do we do best, Jack?”

Before Stoner could answer, a nearby unexploded naval shell detonated, sending shrapnel zinging in all directions. He instinctively crouched when he heard the explosion, but Anne didn’t.

Anne had a surprised look: eyes wide, mouth agape. Then her eyes closed, and she crumpled to the ground. Stoner had seen that look before, in the trenches of WWI, and knew without checking that a piece of shrapnel had hit her.

Stoner held Anne until help arrived, but it came too late to save her. His anger swelled within him. He vowed to find every bastard responsible for feeding information to the Japs.

###

A month after he buried Anne, Stoner wallowed in self-pity and finished his third round of drinks at a local dive, hoping to drown his grief, but the alcohol never took away the pain. The horrible images of that day kept resurfacing, no matter how much or what he drank. His world ended when Anne died. His heart had been ripped from his chest, and he cared little for anyone or anything but the booze.

Stoner nodded to the bartender for another round.

“Look, Mack,” the bartender said, “find another place to drown your sorrows. You’re chasing off the customers.”

“My money’s good, ain’t it?”

“This is your last one, Buster... Then leave, or I’ll call the—”

“All right. All right. Hurry up with that beer, will ya.”

While the bartender drew another cool one, a small man, not quite five feet tall, slid onto the stool next to Stoner. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the skinny man had thinning, slicked-down, jet-black hair and slitted eyes.

It struck Stoner odd that Asians walked around free, considering the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. But this one wore a military uniform with creases pressed sharp enough to slice bread. The well-groomed little man reminded Stoner that he hadn't shaved, changed clothes, or even bathed in quite a while.

The bartender plopped the mug of beer in front of him. Stoner paid and took a sip.

“That won't bring her back, Mr. Stoner,” the little man said.

Stoner slowly put the mug on the bar and slid around to face him. Little man or not, Stoner curled his hand into a knuckle sandwich for that remark. He cocked his arm, but the little man sat calmly, smiling from ear to ear, bearing a row of teeth too big for his mouth.

Then, Stoner recognized that smile. “Mr. Okada,” he said, flabbergasted.

“Major Toshio Okada, at your service, Mr. Stoner,” he said, nodding. “So sorry for your loss.”

“What the hell...?”

“We're tracking down everyone who helped the Japanese with their attack, and we could use your help. Interested in a case, Jack? Maybe two or three?”

“They ain't divorce cases, are they? Too messy.”

As soon as the words tumbled off his tongue, he realized he'd broken his promise to Anne about wisecracking.

“Sorry, Mr. Okada. I don’t know what came over me. Besides, Anne wouldn’t’ve approved of my wisecracks.”

“I think she would have, Mr. Stoner,” Okada said, smiling. “Yes, I think she would’ve.”

Stoner smiled. He finally had something worth smiling about for the first time in a month.

The End