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# The Japanese Client: A Novel

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The Japanese Client

A Thesis

Presented to the

Writer's Workshop

and the

Faculty of the College of Communication, Fine Arts, and Media

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Bachelor of Fine Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By Andrew J. Aulner

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## Chapter 1

The ringing telephone cut through my sleep. I was slouched across my desk, my face resting on the desktop so that the vibrations from the ringing rattled my teeth. I stretched out my right hand toward the receiver, pushing aside an empty whiskey bottle as I did so.

I held the cold metal receiver up to my face and wiped sleep out of my eyes with my free hand. “Rick Dale.”

“It’s Mr. Como.” The voice was high and piping enough to make even a neutral introduction petulant. “I’m calling to ensure that you make your next rent payment for this upcoming week.”

I rubbed my temple. “Yes, Mr. Como, I’ll be sure to make out the check next—”

“I am not finished. I do not want a check that bounces like last month. I wish to make it clear that payment must be received in order to continue using my services. Real, actual payment. No money, no apartment. No apartment, you find a nice breadline, yes?”

“Yes, that would be a logical progression,” I muttered. “Though with the post-war boom, breadlines aren’t exactly commonplace right now.” A glance at my watch. “Look, Mr. Como, why are you calling me at eight in the evening?”

“I know your type, Mr. Rick Dale who bounces checks.” Impossibly, the voice had become even more high-pitched and whining. “You sleep in the mornings and work late into the nights, only with no money to pay the landlord with when it is all said and done.”

“As a matter of fact,” I grunted, tapping a notepad and a pair of photographs that were sitting on the left hand side of my desk, “I sleep when the work dries up and work when the sleep dries up.”

“A check next week, Mr. Rick Dale,” Como repeated. *Click.*

I set the receiver back down, ran my hand over my face, and gave a weary look at my office. It was perhaps ten by twelve feet. The door was directly across the room from my desk. It had a frosted glass window with “Richard Dale, Private Investigator,” stenciled across the top in thick black letters. A bookshelf filled with tomes on Nebraska statutes, Omaha city ordinances, and ancient Greco-Roman philosophy sat to my right, propped up beside the window that overlooked the humble Omaha skyline. To my left was a wall full of newspaper clippings, the certificate of my licensing as a private dick, and a black, wooden shadow box with a few tokens from my time fighting in the Big One.

I walked around my desk and turned the knob on my radio. A rich male voice backed by a gentle chorus began singing something halfway between a lullaby and a love song. I sang along as the song came to an end. “While you’re away, oh, then remember me. When you return, you’ll find me waiting here...”

The song faded away and a smooth-voiced announcer rushed in to fill the gap. “That was Bing Crosby’s hit number, ‘Now Is the Hour,’ one of the top singles of 1948 thus far. What a marvelous voice that man has!”

I flicked the radio back off. *Quite a marvelous voice for the work that he does*, I thought, shuffling back over to my desk. Sitting on the edge, I pulled a business card out of my pocket, picked up my telephone receiver, and began spinning the dial. *I wonder if ol’ Bing would have much of a voice for the sort of work I do.*

The line clicked open. “Redford residence,” a husky female voice said.

“Yes, could I speak to Mr. Redford, please?” I asked.

“May I ask who’s calling at this late hour?”

I rubbed the back of my neck impatiently. "I'm a business contact helping with an upcoming divorce case. Mr. Redford wanted to give him a call as soon as I finished my work for him, even if it was after the workday had ended."

There was a brief pause, and then the voice said brusquely, "I'll just go get him, then."

After a bit of rustling on the other end, I heard a deep male voice that I was being paid to recognize. "This is Joe Redford."

"Hey Joe, it's your pal from the office, Rick Dale. It's about the memo you sent me earlier this week," I said.

The man sighed. "Yes, Mr. Dale, I understand your meaning. Thank you for responding so quickly. What have you managed to find out?"

I grimaced before answering. "Your wife couldn't be listening in on a different telephone, could she?"

"She's in the parlor right now, Mr. Dale," Redford said. "Is it bad?"

"I was able to charm my way into perusing the notes of a pretty secretary at the Jefferies and Thompson Law Firm the Thursday after you hired me."

"I don't care much how you found these things out, Mr. Dale," Redford said, a hint of annoyance creeping into his voice. "I just care to know what you did find out."

"This particular secretary happens to work directly for Mr. Edward Thompson, newly minted partner of the firm."

"Well?"

"Mr. Thompson's secretary noted her employer leaving the firm for lunch at exactly 12:15, every Wednesday and Friday of every week, for the past three months. The girl told me

that his lunch plans were flexible every other day of the week, but those dates and times never changed.”

“And?”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “The secretary also noted that Mr. Thompson always went to the same restaurant on those days: the Montpelier. Naturally, I staked the café out the following day—this was Thursday.” I picked up a notepad from my desktop and squinted to read my own scribbled marks. “A man with slicked-back, black hair and a dapper, three-piece suit sat with his back to me. He met with a blonde woman who wore a red, double-breasted coat and a black beret, the kind that Lauren Bacall wears in the movies.”

The voice on the other end of the telephone moaned.

“They had coffee and shared a plate of fish. It only took them about half an hour to work their way through it. After they were finished, she left with him in his red sports car. I recognized it from an automobile magazine. Some fancy English outfit called ‘Jaguar.’”

“Where did the car take them, Mr. Dale?” I could imagine Redford biting on his nails.

“They, uh, they went to a hotel.” Despite nearly three years in the business, I still hadn’t found a gentler way of putting it. “I was waiting in the lobby the entire time. They went up to a hotel room, and they stayed up there for just over an hour.”

“And I suppose that when they were finished, they left like. . . like nothing had happened?” Redford’s voice was shaking.

“They weren’t exactly cursing each other, if that’s what you mean.”

Redford drew in a deep breath. “What happened next, Mr. Dale?”

“He took her back to the restaurant. She drove off in her car, and he drove off in his. I managed to snap a picture of the two of them at lunch, as well as one of them together in the hotel lobby.”

“Do you have those photographs, Mr. Dale?” I imagined Redford crushing the receiver in his grip.

“That’s what I’ve been working on this evening, Mr. Redford.” I had actually fallen asleep at my desk after I pulled them from the darkroom adjacent to my office, but Redford hardly needed to know that.

“That will do, I think,” he said. “You just hang on to those photographs, Mr. Dale. I will collect them when I drop off my check for you next week.”

“Monday at the latest,” I cut in, thinking about my rent. “I got the work done fast, and I’d like to get paid fast.”

“No matter,” he said. “I can drive it over on Monday. And as for my wife...”

“Mr. Redford,” I said with more urgency than I’d intended. “I’ve worked a lot of infidelity cases. Advice isn’t my business, but I’ll be damned if I don’t tell you not to do anything you might regret.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dale, that will be all,” Redford said abruptly. Suddenly, the phone slammed, and the line went dead.

I picked up the two developed photographs and put them inside one of my desk drawers. I grabbed my fedora from my coat rack, set the hat upon my head, and slipped on my coat. I tapped the spine of one of my Plato volumes as I made my way out. If only the search for truth looked as neat as a cloth-bound book.

I hummed as much Crosby as I could bring to mind as I left the building, drove my gray Plymouth coupe down to my apartment, and took the elevator up. As I let myself into my home, I found a reply to my own past self, speaking out loud this time. "I spend all day digging up truth, and I feel as stuck as a rabbit in a spring trap. What a gag." I loosened my tie, flopped onto my bed, and let myself forget how to stay awake.

## Chapter 2

“You’re looking for a funny one, aren’t you?” the girl at the desk asked me.

“Beg pardon?” When I was at the police station with my ear to the ground, I tended to be the one asking the questions.

“A funny case. The sort that Sherlock Holmes would go for.” She looked away from me, then starting dancing the end of her pencil across the papers scattered on her desk. “Something exciting, bizarre. That’s what I’ve heard the sergeants say about you, after you’ve come and gone out of here before.”

“Believe me when I say that I am nothing like Sherlock Holmes,” I said. The secretary stopped playing with her pencil and looked up at me. “Unlike Holmes, I’m an American. Unlike our friend on Baker Street, I don’t bother telling someone their life story after I’ve taken one look at them and figured what kind of mud they’ve got on their shoes. And most importantly—”

“And most importantly, you don’t have Holmes’ style,” a gravelly voice from across the room rumbled. I looked up to see a man that I both respected and viewed warily, like an uncle with both a treasure trove of tales and a drinking problem: Omaha Police Detective Martin McMahon. He was a short, stocky man with a drab gray business suit and a clean-shaven face, the sort that would blend into a crowd like a compulsive gambler blends into a stack of slot machines.

He was leaning against the doorway of his office, his hands in his pockets. “You and Holmes are more alike than you think. Fellas like you always want an oddball case so that you can show off your brilliance and wow us plain and simple police folk.”

“I’m nothing like Sherlock Holmes,” I repeated. “I wear a fedora.”

“A hat is a hat, Rick,” McMahon said.

“You only think that because you wear an ugly old derby. No, Marty, a hat may be a hat, but *this*,” I said as I held up my own hat for dramatic effect, “is a fedora. This is the hat for a man’s man. Holmes wore a deerstalker when he was skulking around in the forests. I wear this because it’s practical, comfortable, and makes me look sharper than a butcher’s cleaver amongst the teeming masses of our fair city.”

“If you insist, Rick,” McMahon said, nodding his head to the side to indicate his office.

“Thanks a bunch,” I said to the secretary, rapping my knuckles on her desk. She gave me an ironic tilt of her head and wagged her fingers as I turned to follow McMahon.

His office was as drab as his appearance. Its distinguishing features included a gray filing cabinet, a neat row of identically sharpened pencils, and a stack of papers without a single edge or corner out of alignment. The only splash of life in the place was the framed family picture. The photographed McMahon, his wife, and their three daughters smiled at me while the real McMahon began looking through the filing cabinet.

After a minute of rustling around, McMahon pulled out a case report. “As much as you deny it, you and Holmes have at least one thing in common: an attraction to the odd. Here’s a case you would’ve heard about sooner or later, in the funny papers or out on the street. Have a look.”

I glanced at the file’s first few lines. “It’s a report on a breaking and entering at the Joslyn Art Museum. So what?”

“That happened two nights ago,” McMahon said, pointing at the paper in my hands. “I haven’t had much time to run down the leads on it.”

“What kind of a detective doesn’t care about preserving the city’s most cherished art?” I asked in mock surprise.

“That’s just the thing. If you took the time to read it all, you’d see that nothing was taken,” McMahon said. “Obviously, a crime was still committed, but because nothing was reported stolen, I haven’t placed it very high on my list of priorities.”

“Shoved to the backburner, essentially,” I said.

McMahon shrugged. “More or less. The thing is, I was in the neighborhood and poked my nose into your office a couple nights ago, Rick.”

“I was out,” I said.

“I know. That’s what your secretary would have told me, if you could afford to have one. Everything was neat, tidy, damn near pristine. It never gets to be that way unless you’re eager for some fresh work. I hope you can look into this for me.”

“Maybe that bit about my office is right, and maybe you’re off the mark,” I said coolly. “I just wanted to drop by and have a quick cup of coffee with my best friend on the force, but I can always take an extra case if you insist.”

McMahon gave me a long look. “You come crawling in here like a hungry dog and start matching wits with my secretary, and then you expect me to believe that you’re trying to pick up cases out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Fine. You got me,” I said, holding my hands up in surrender. “Business has slowed down by an unacceptable margin. I just finished up a routine infidelity case, and after I’ve cashed the check on that mess, the well runs dry.”

“You can have this one,” McMahon said, gesturing at the report. “Just be sure to leave the official file with me.”

“Thanks, Marty,” I said, pulling out a notepad and pencil to start copying down the details from the report.

“And Rick?”

I glanced up at McMahon.

“It wouldn’t kill you to make an honest-to-goodness social call every once in a while, instead of just sniffing around for extra work when money gets tight. Being friends is supposed to mean something.”

“Coffee it is,” I said, finishing up my notes. “Maybe next Friday. You know where to find me when you hear a cup of joe calling your name, Marty.”

### Chapter 3

The Joslyn Art Museum was an anomaly. Stone steps leading up to a series of Roman columns gave it a classical appearance that softly screamed in defiance of the urban decay—the cracked pavement, chipped paint, and overgrown tufts of grass—of the buildings that surrounded it.

I went straight to the front desk, my feet rapping against the tile at a moderate tempo as if to signal my restrained urgency. “Pardon me,” I said to the boy at the counter. “You seem sharp, kid. Where can I find someone who knows about the break-in earlier this week?”

“We had a break-in last week?” The boy’s eyes grew almost as wide as his square poindexter glasses.

“I wouldn’t be asking if you hadn’t. Now, who can I speak with about it?”

The kid started looking around. “Uh, I think, uh...” He pointed toward a short, rotund man in a brown tweed suit across the lobby. The man, whose hands rested on top of his mountainous belly, was twiddling his thumbs and whistling to himself.

“Thanks. With a gift for rhetoric like that, you ought to run for Congress.” I walked over to the suited man, who noticed me just as I was about to speak.

“And who might you be, young man?” he asked, holding out a flabby hand.

“Dale, Richard Dale.” I gave his hand a gingerly shake. “Your big-league hitter over at the desk suggested that you might be able to help me with some questions I’d like answered.”

“Indeed I can,” the older gentleman said. “In point of fact, I am Geoffrey Smith, purveyor of fine arts and humble servant of all others who feel likewise. Phrased in a different fashion, I am one of the assistant curators of this museum. What aid may I render today?”

I wondered if he had eaten a thesaurus for breakfast. “I’m working with the police on the investigation of the break-in that happened two nights ago.”

The curator’s face took on a hint of sadness. “Terrible thing, that burglary,” he said, walking away from the lobby.

“Burglary? I thought nothing had been stolen?”

Geoffrey Smith started, as if I had just jumped onto the tracks of his train of thought. He blinked several times, smiled, and said, “Yes, of course. Attempted burglary is what I intended to convey, naturally.”

“Naturally.”

“My cogitation is, perhaps, impaired by such a grievous assault on the artistic delights that I revel in. Follow me.” I kept on his tail as he strode out of the lobby with urgent steps that made his fat body rock back and forth as he moved. “So many people, crass in nature, have such a minute respect for the wonders of the fine arts. Lord only knows what foul thoughts were traversing the shallow minds of those ruffians.”

As we walked, I looked back over my notes from the report. One of the side doors had been picked open, as evidenced by the scratches around the lock. No fingerprints had been found on or in the doorway, which told me the perpetrators had at least half a working brain each.

Geoffrey Smith continued waxing poetic. “I am not cognizant of the full extent of your knowledge regarding this misdemeanor, Mr. Dale, so I shall elaborate as time permits. Our paid constabulary, Emilio—”

“The night guard.”

“Yes, indeed, most accurate. Emilio, such a delightful young man, had been perambulating when he heard a veritable din coming from our display of classical paintings. Over here,” he said.

We had reached a large gallery with wall-to-wall paintings, most of them oil on canvas, with a few watercolors, all painted by men from France and the Netherlands whose names I couldn't pronounce. Well-dressed men and women from hundreds of years ago stared out at me from some of them, while others depicted rolling hills of the sort that I hadn't seen since I was a boy.

Pacing around, I stopped at a bearded man in a gray monk's habit. His cheeks were as deep and sunken as valleys. The sky above the holy man seemed to shift and roll in on itself. The monk was gesturing toward a skull, above which floated a crucifix.

“*Saint Francis in Prayer*, El Greco,” Geoffrey Smith said at my elbow. “A reasonably recent acquisition.”

“Yeah,” I said, wanting to tear my eyes away even as I stared deeper into the image.

“Quite a remarkable depiction of a man of the religious persuasion, wouldn't you say?”

I finally turned away from Francis and his crucifix. “I'm a detective, not an art critic, and definitely not a saint. That's not my area of expertise, and it's not why I came here today.”

Geoffrey Smith took a step backward, hemming and hawing. “Indubitably, sir, quite right. And furthermore—”

“Can it. What happened next on the night of the break-in?”

The curator straightened his necktie. “You understand that I myself heard not a thing?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Would I have expected that you did?”

“I was residing in my office at the time of the incident, you see. I found myself deep in concentration and heard not a thing.”

“You were there but you heard not a thing,” I said.

“Quite right, sir, quite right. Not a thing.” Once again, Geoffrey Smith blinked repeatedly, as if substituting the flicks of his eyelids for actual words.

“Go on,” I said, folding my arms.

“When Emilio arrived to investigate, he saw two men accoutered in black garments. Unsavory characters, I dare say.” He dabbed at his face with his pocket kerchief. “My, it is nerve-wracking to discuss such an unfortunate encounter.”

I stared at the paintings again. “Is there any particular painting you think these bunglers would have gone after? Do any of them have a special value that would make an art thief go ga-ga?”

Geoffrey Smith shook his head. “Any one of these paintings would serve an art thief well either culturally or financially. Our collection is peerless throughout the state, and I venture, throughout the entire region.”

“I don’t care if you venture it or not,” I muttered. “How much are we talking?”

He gestured at the entire wall. “A successful thief might find himself fortunate enough to garner hundreds of thousands of dollars for any one of these works, each of which is peerless regarding age, quality, and scarcity.”

I whistled. “Mr. Smith, I don’t keep up on art, so I wonder if you could tell me if any of this stuff has been in the newspapers recently. Something that could tip the thieves off to a piece’s value.”

He tapped his finger to his chin, as if to give the impression of deep thought, but he looked more like a schoolboy trying to fool the teacher into thinking he was chewing on his arithmetic lesson instead of daydreaming.

While he stood there putting on his act, I looked over his shoulder and saw a chest-high pillar in the middle of the adjacent room. The top was flat, as if something should have been resting on the pillar. “Wait a minute. Was there something on display there?”

Geoffrey Smith turned around quickly before chuckling. “Ah, yes, the former resting place of a Grecian urn. For a moment, I became quite perturbed, Mr. Dale. I sincerely believed that, in our frenzy to secure our paintings, we had overlooked the necessity of safeguarding our sculptured goods.”

“And why are you no longer perturbed?”

He tapped his stomach with delight. “That particular fellow currently resides in the competent hands of our restoration employees extraordinaire!”

I folded my arms. “And you’re sure it’s still there?”

“I ensured the veracity of that fact myself, immediately after Emilio had informed me of the malfeasance which occurred in our museum.”

“Right.” I looked around. None of these painted scraps or trinkets caught my attention anymore. “If there’s nothing else you can tell me about it all...”

“I am afraid that your capacity for asking questions is superior to mine for answering them, Mr. Dale,” Geoffrey Smith said with a twinkle in his eye.

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” I said. “Good day.” With that, I turned and left the Joslyn. My client was the police, my case was a meaningless farce, and my checkbook was an empty hole. That was the business I signed up for.

## Chapter 4

A quarter of an hour later, I was back at my office desk, my feet propped up, a Dostoyevsky hardback in my hands, and a glass of whiskey sitting next to my ink blotter. I'd always been a tenderfoot about alcohol, but I found that if I sipped some of the stronger stuff every so often, it helped keep my hands from shaking when I was waiting for something to happen.

Because I couldn't afford to hire a secretary, I had to spend most of my office hours waiting by the phone in case someone called in or stopped by. The crossword in the *World-Herald* barely kept me occupied for an hour most morning, so I inevitably turned to the books that made my head spin and my guts burn. Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Virgil—anything that pierced the soul like a needle in a blister.

I read the Russian's words aloud, because something in me never did want to shut up. "He's an intelligent man, but it takes something more than intelligence to act intelligently." I looked up from the book, then at my notepad with the details about the art museum break-in. *That's probably why I'm wasting time with someone else's leftovers.*

Setting the book down on the desk, I got to my feet and walked over to my shadow box. Inside were three hunks of medal. They weren't beautiful, but then again, a lot of things that mean something aren't. There were two round, gold-colored medals—one for service in the Pacific, and one for being a cog in the machine that won the war—as well as a star made of glorious bronze. I didn't have money and I barely had a case, but at least I had a little dignity left.

I brushed some imaginary dust off the shoulder of my rumpled gray suit and took a sip of my Jim Beam, hunched over like a hungry vulture. The bourbon burned, but it didn't make me feel like throwing up the way the instant coffee in my general-issue rations had done back in '45.

Before I could get too wrapped in my contemplations about which drink was killing me faster, I heard footsteps immediately outside in the hallway. There was a gentle knocking on my door. I could tell a bit about someone from the way they knocked. Jittery and rapid-fire tapping like a Browning automatic usually meant a jilted woman, whereas a slow, heavy thump on the wood of the door meant a weary man like Mr. Redford.

This knock, quiet without being timid, told me that my caller was confident, but not so easygoing that I could open the door with my whiskey in hand and my suit all undone. I slid my glass off to the side, stood up straight, and fixed my tie. "Come in," I called.

The door opened slowly. It was a woman, a gal with a figure sharp enough to cut through steel. Her head was turned down so that I couldn't see her face, so I looked at the rest of her instead. She wore a mustard yellow pea coat and a black homburg with a bow around the band. I resisted the urge to whistle at the sight of her shapely calves and tanned skin.

I took a step forward. "Feel free to take off your coat, Miss—"

She looked up.

My mother wouldn't have liked it, but the first word that came into my mind when I saw the shape of the woman's face was "Nip." The second was "Jap." Her brown eyes weren't as sharply angled, and her face wasn't as long, but she had the same blood as the Japs I'd spent three years trying to kill.

I must have started glaring in the middle of my sentence, because the woman leaned back with furrowed eyebrows. “Are you going to invite me in, or would you like to stare a little while longer?”

She spoke perfect English, as pristinely as a proper schoolgirl.

“Yes, uh, I was...” I hurriedly helped her take her coat off, gingerly hung it on the rack, and jerked my thumb toward the chair in front of my desk.

She slowly walked over and sat down with fluid grace. I didn’t look at her as I made my way back to my side of the desk. As I sat down, she said, “You are a detective named Richard Dale.”

I nodded. “It says something like that on the door.”

She gave me a thin smile. “Can you guess where I am from, Mr. Dale the Detective?”

I leaned back and rested my chin on my hand. “Not New Jersey. I know that, otherwise my cheek would be stinging from you slapping me. That’s the custom up there when they catch you staring.”

“My mother did always say it was rude to stare.”

“It sounds like she knew a thing or two.”

“She still does.”

I wasn’t exactly avoiding her eyes, but I wasn’t looking at her directly, either. There was a burning under my collar like a wasp sting.

She stretched out her right hand. “My name is Mariko Meyer.”

I reached out and shook her hand with as much delicacy as I could muster. “Richard Dale. Formally, this time.”

Mariko Meyer rested her hands in her lap. She tilted her head slightly. “You have never had a Japanese woman in your office before, have you, Mr. Dale?”

I cleared my throat. “As a matter of fact, I can’t say I’ve ever met a Japanese woman before.”

“But you know what a Jap looks like.” Her voice was neither angry nor resentful. It was a clinical statement of fact, like a veterinarian announcing a neutering.

“I’ve seen about as many Japs as you’d expect,” I said, gesturing toward my shadow box.

Mariko looked over her shoulder at the medals and then turned back to me. “Were you a sailor, Mr. Dale?”

“Marine Corps, actually. I wasn’t pretty enough to wear a sailor cap.”

“I’m sure no one was worried about your looks, even if you do care about how other people look.”

I fidgeted in my seat. “Miss Meyer, if I’ve offended you in some way—”

She held up a well-manicured hand. “Mr. Dale, I spent three years in an internment camp in Manzanar during the war. I watched while I and my fellow Americans were confined to camps because we looked like the men who bombed Pearl Harbor. At this point, it will take more than a private detective squirming in his chair to offend me.”

“I wouldn’t be against working for you, even if you weren’t American,” I said without much conviction.

“Born and bred,” Mariko said. “My father’s name is Eugene Meyer. He was a Los Angeles mechanic who was stupid enough to fall in love with a little Japanese immigrant girl.”

“I’m not sure I need your entire life story, miss. I may have been wondering about a polite way to ask your last name, but—”

“I’m telling you about my father because he is the reason I’ve come here,” she said.

“Alright, I’m listening.”

“You must understand how deeply my father loves my mother and me, Mr. Dale.”

“I’ll just use my imagination.”

“He was heartbroken when we were taken away to the camp. He argued with the internment officials that we were both loyal to America, and that I was a natural-born citizen, but they didn’t care. A Jap was a Jap. My father appealed to everyone he could think of, but nobody listened.”

I gave her a sympathetic smile, trying not to think of any of my friends who didn’t make it back home.

“It gets worse,” Mariko continued. “During the hysteria, when everyone from Reno to Sacramento thought anybody with slanted eyes was a spy, my father was fired because he had married a Japanese woman.”

I nodded sincerely. “That *is* a bad break.”

“My father left the state. He visited us one night at the camp.” She looked away from me for the first time since I’d seen her eye-to-eye. A storm cloud passed over her face. “It was the worst of nights. Not just for him leaving. Not just for that.”

“I don’t mean to sound rude, but how much of this bears down on whatever problem you’re bringing to me?”

“Yes, of course,” Mariko said, meeting eyes with me again. “He came to the camp and told us that he’d received word of work out east. Not far east, like New York or Georgia or . . . I suppose you get the idea.”

“I think I do. East is really the only place to go from California.”

“Yes. He said he’d found work out east and needed to leave immediately. He promised to write every other week, but he said he could only tell us so much for fear of the guards screening our mail. Mother asked him what kind of work he was doing. He just smiled and said he had a chance to fulfill his lifelong passion.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

She sighed. “My father has always enjoyed the finer things in life. These usually consisted of things we couldn’t afford on his pay—elegant wines, art, and the like—but no matter. After he left on an eastbound train, my mother and I grew concerned that my father meant to take up a life of crime.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Quite a conclusion to reach. Matter of fact, it sounds like a longer stretch than the English Channel.”

Mariko shook her head firmly. “Hardly. In his younger days, before he met my mother, my father was something of a rogue. He preferred petty misdeeds like swiping my grandfather’s cigars without permission and stealing tools from whichever garage he happened to be working at. He once received a ticket for driving his car backward to work.”

“A regular Capone from the sound of him.”

“A regular Artful Dodger, and a fairly harmless one at that.”

I folded my hands together. “So you and your mother figured that, when pressured by the circumstances, your father decided to combine his love of life’s hoity-toity knick-knacks with his rascalion tendencies.”

“You sometimes have a funny way of putting things, Mr. Dale.”

“It’s a gift that I tend to get socked in the mouth for.” I gestured for her to continue.

“Unfortunately, our suspicions were confirmed when our father missed a week in his letter. The next time, we received this.” She reached into her handbag and slid a slightly yellowed leaf of paper across my desk.

I picked it up with a surgeon’s touch and gave it a once over. “It says he was nabbed for driving the getaway car in a haberdashery heist. How cute.”

“I do not celebrate what my father did, even if he meant it for my family’s sake,” Mariko said. “Nevertheless, I care about him, which is why I want your help to find him.”

“Find him?” I looked back at the letter. “You’re no dummy, which means he must not still be in this lock-up, huh?”

“For once, my father received a lucky break. Lucky for him, at least,” Mariko said. “His later letters informed us that he was released on bail.”

“Let me guess: he skipped town.”

Mariko nodded. “The letters stopped coming after that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“When my mother and I were finally released from Manzanar, we found a cheap apartment and began to worry. My mother has been working in a restaurant café, but her pay is miserable.”

I thought about how discontented I had been earlier to be stuck waiting at my office all day, and I felt my face turn a bit red.

Mariko didn’t seem to notice. “She still works there, but she urged me to find my father. I wouldn’t have known where to start if we hadn’t received one more letter.”

“Did your father feel it was safe to send a letter once the papers announced the end of the camps?”

“Yes. He waited far too long. Two years ago, we received a letter saying he was in Kansas City but still had some obligations that he needed to fulfill. As vague as he was, I still wanted to go after him, so I took enough travel money from what was left in our bank savings and headed east. I looked up and down the city for him, working as a waitress while I consulted the phone book, talked to the police, and asked anyone I could think of. Never a sight of him.”

“Sounds like you could use a bounty hunter instead of a private dick,” I said.

“I couldn’t afford to hire anyone at that time. But I saved up, and after two years, I received another letter. This time, my father promised that he had one last assignment, and then he would have enough to come back for Mother and me. But he still wouldn’t tell me where he was exactly. Here, have a look.” She handed me another letter from her handbag. This one was still in its envelope and was postmarked from Omaha.

I pulled the letter out and read it. “It’s not just an assignment he’s talking about. It says here that he’s made a deal that’ll leave you all sitting pretty. ‘A deal with a respected businessman who’s as American as Betsy Ross.’”

“I know what my father has done in the past, Mr. Dale. I am sure that this businessman is somehow involved with organized crime. This city is not what one would call ‘clean’ as far as that is concerned.”

“No, it surely isn’t,” I said before stuffing the letter back into the envelope. “So you came here to find a man who’s been on the run for five years.”

Mariko reached into her handbag yet again and produced three one-hundred-dollar bills.

I whistled.

“I want to find my father, and I want to keep him safe,” Mariko said, laying the money out on the table. “If he has become allied with criminals, his life and his freedom are in danger.”

I plucked up one of the bills, holding it up to the light to make sure it was the real McCoy. "One of these will suffice. I charge fifty a day, plus expenses. Those bills will come in handy if it takes too long." I stood up, and Mariko did likewise. "I can think of a couple people who might know about your father. Do you have a photograph, Ms. Meyer?"

Reaching into her handbag, Mariko gave me a picture of a lanky middle-aged man with receding hair, a square jaw, and a scar just above his right eyebrow. "This was taken a year before the internment separated us."

"So I'll expect a couple new wrinkles and less hair," I said, setting the picture down. "Well, Ms. Meyer, I won't promise the world, but I will promise my best."

Mariko gave me another thin smile. "Thank you, Mr. Dale. My gratitude and that of my mother's is yours." She pulled a business card out of her handbag, reached up, and tucked it into my outer breast pocket. "That's the number of the hotel I'm staying at, for when you've dug something up. I only just got into town, and that's the only lodging I expect I'll need here. You can find me in Room 203."

"Marvelous." I helped her slip her coat back on and showed her out the door. "Good morning," I said to her as she turned and left. Her legs swished invitingly from beneath her knee-length skirt as she walked out. I closed the office door behind me and slumped against it.

I'd seen eyes like hers plenty of times, squinting at me with hatred or widening in fear. She *was* different from that; I had no reason to think she was anything but a loyal American. But just as soon as my rational mind told me the obvious, my guts twisted up again.

Taking measured steps back to my desk, I picked up my whiskey and gulped the rest. It burned all the way down, but it distracted me from thinking. I picked up the hundred-dollar bill and gave it another close look. Benjamin Franklin gave me a waspish smile, as if he was

laughing at my inner struggle. “The trouble, dear friend,” I said to the portrait, “is that a gumshoe is expected to be a gumshoe to anyone who pays.” I looked back up at my shadow box. “To anyone.”

## Chapter 5

I left my office shortly after five in the afternoon and drove west, out of the downtown area. I pulled my Plymouth over onto the curb in front of a brick church with ten-foot-tall wooden doors and stained glass on the side.

The building was deathly quiet when I walked in. My footsteps reverberated throughout the high-ceilinged sanctuary as I made my way toward the offices. I knocked on the side of the office door and then took a step inside. A Negro man in a black clerical shirt and a white tab collar stood up at my approach.

“Dylan Carver,” I said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Rick!” he answered, his eyes twinkling as his hand shot forward. “What brings you to my humble pasture?”

I gave his hand a firm shake. “I need some advice, and I figured that the man who has the Bible printed on his eyelids would be my best bet.”

“I never know whether you’re complimenting or insulting a man,” Dylan said. “Sit down.”

We both sat.

“It’s been a long time, Rick,” Dylan said, his fingers folded together in a steeple. “I think I haven’t seen you since Christmas.”

“I make it down here when I can,” I said. “I know I ought to treat an old friend better than that, but—”

“I don’t hold it against you,” Dylan said. “I imagine that your business keeps you on your feet as much as mine does.”

“Sometimes, Reverend,” I said. “Listen, I just took a case from a client. But it’s different from what I’m used to.”

Dylan raised his eyebrows. “Nothing illegal, I pray?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m afraid I’ve shot myself in the foot about it, though.”

“How do you mean?”

I hesitated before answering. “She’s a Nip.”

Dylan nodded slowly. “I see. And you’re concerned because of what you saw happen to Casey and Mike and the rest of them. Over there.”

“You remember my letters,” I said with something like admiration.

“I remembered, and I grieved, and I prayed,” Dylan said solemnly. “My childhood friend goes overseas to fight, you better believe I’m doing all I can to intercede.”

I said shrugged. “I don’t have any bullet holes in me yet.”

“Look, Rick. I know what it’s like on both sides of the fence. I know what it’s like to walk down the street and see a Japanese fella, and wonder what he gets up to when nobody’s watching. And I know what it’s like to walk down the street and to be the one that nobody respects. Even when I wear the clothes of a man of God, I’m just ‘boy’ or ‘uncle’ to them.”

“I know all that, Dylan. I know it’s not fair or right. But it’s one thing to say it’s not fair, and it’s another to feel the anger when you look into eyes that could have belonged to the guy that tortured and starved your friends.”

“We all lost friends, Rick.”

“But you didn’t see it,” I said coldly. “You didn’t have to see it again and again in your nightmares. You don’t have to see the hatred and the fear whenever you see those eyes.”

“I got the hate in me too, Rick. We all do. But it doesn’t stop us from doing our job, does it? We grit our teeth and wait for the day when all this will just be a memory.”

“So that’s your advice? Live with it? Act like it isn’t there?”

“I’m not a miracle worker, Rick. I can’t change human nature. I can counsel, and I can pray. But the rest is up to God.”

I glanced at the crucifix on the office wall. “Well, if God doesn’t give me the strength, maybe the three C-notes she paid me will. A man can endure a lot for that kind of money.”

“If that’s what does it, I guess that’s what does it.” Dylan thought for a moment. “Rick, I don’t know what to tell you, except for what I know is the truth. And to say that maybe you should stop by more than twice a year.”

“More than twice a year,” I repeated. “I suppose I’m not *that* overwhelmed with my snooping.”

Dylan chuckled. “There’s the boy’s armor. Things get tough, and the jokes come out.”

I raised my hands palms-up. “What are you gonna do. I’m a one-trick pony who can’t ever shut his mouth hard enough to bite the bit.”

“Come over for dinner sometime, Rick.” Dylan rose, and I did likewise. “Janine will whip us up something nice, and we can play cards and shoot the bull like when Hoover was still hanging on.”

“My promises tend to be as slippery as my cases, but I’ll shake on it anyway,” I said.

We did.

I smiled at Dylan. “Thanks, pal. I’ll just keep my nose to the pavement and march to the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’ until I can find something better to do.”

## Chapter 6

The next morning was Sunday; the nearly elemental clanging of the church bells in the early hours left no doubt of that. They drew me in like a magnet. I was driving to church, but it wasn't to appease Dylan. I had to find someone, a man I hadn't expected to see again quite so soon.

I drove east down Cuming Street, my fingers tapping impatiently on my steering wheel. I turned north onto Eighteenth. This piece of the road was run-down, with cars parked bumper to bumper on either side. To my right was the Holy Family Church, a white-painted brick building with a round glass window like a jewel in the wall that faced out toward street. Red trim ran along the edges where the wall met the roof. I kept driving, sneaking my car along a free stretch of curb.

Men and women, young and old were filing into the church, all gussied up in suits and dresses fit for a wedding. I glanced down at my own gray suit, still a bit ruffled from my having worn it yesterday, and shrugged. I made my way inside the church and took a seat near the back.

The man I wanted to see was sitting with a retinue in the front pew, his family members and closest associates stretching out to fill the entire row on both sides of the aisle. I could only see him from behind, and he was all the way across the sanctuary, but I'd come across him on a job the year before, so I knew what he looked like from the front. He was short and thickly built, but not rotund, with glossy silver hair and a meticulously trimmed pencil mustache. I remembered how perfect the cut of his dark gray business suit had been; I had no doubt that he had his own personal tailor on retainer.

His name was Buddy Brannigan. He was, according to the *World-Herald* and its ilk, a respectable meatpacking businessman who gave away truckloads of money and goods to local

parishes and the Boys Town home for children. According to the stray rumblings of beat cops and police detectives, he was a principal leader of organized crime in Omaha. The most I'd read in the papers was that, admittedly, some of Brannigan's employees had occasionally had the misfortune to find themselves on the wrong side of a jail cell. Nevertheless, the reporters opined in their hemming and hawing fashion, this suggested nothing about Brannigan's ethics; it merely called into question his judgment of character.

How closely Brannigan danced the line between legal and illegal business wasn't my concern. But it was well-known that Brannigan was partial to fine art, and that's what I cared about on this Sunday morning. I watched him and his brood kneel, stand, and sit all throughout the worship service. All but the youngest participants went up for the Eucharist. I sat in my pew with my arms folded the entire time.

When the congregation had been dismissed, the Brannigan party began filing out, a squadron of brown- and red-headed men and women plodding down the aisle toward the doors. As Brannigan, who was leading the group with his wife on his arm, got closer, I slowly rose to my feet and raised a hand, waving it slightly side to side.

Two men were standing immediately behind Brannigan. The one to his left had the same prominent nose and glossy hair, though his hair was dark brown rather than silver. The man to Brannigan's right had the build of a professional football player, the jet-black hair of a movie star, and the face of a Rottweiler. Both men narrowed their eyes at me, and the ugly one reached a meaty hand into his jacket with an easy tenseness.

"Buddy Brannigan," I said. "It's been a long time."

"Good morning!" Brannigan's face instantly warped into a smile as he held out a hand. "If it isn't ol' Richie Dale, the boy wonder."

“Glad you remember me, Buddy,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Are you sure, Richie?” As Brannigan smiled, the man behind him dropped his hand from his jacket. “Last time I saw you, you were fast-talking your way out of a hiding from a couple of my boys for snooping around.”

“Buddy, do we have to talk about this in church?” the woman beside Brannigan asked with a harried look.

“It won’t be but a minute, darling, I’m sure of it.” Brannigan tapped her hand plaintively and turned back to me. “Let’s talk outside. And we’ll have to make it quick, Dale.”

There was a stretch of grass to the right of the church entrance. As the rest of his family mingled on the concrete steps in front of the building, Brannigan and I talked beside a spruce tree while his two companions stood about two yards away, near the well-kept shrubs and flowers nestled beside the church.

“Buddy, you know I was only snooping because I’d been hired by Stanley Gerhardt,” I said after we’d been situated. “The meatpacker who’d wanted to know if there was any collusion between his men and yours, remember?”

“And in the process, you rid me of some troublesome employees that I would otherwise have been forced to handle myself.” A twinkle came into Brannigan’s eye. “I ought to thank you for the free service you provided me.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I said. “But that won’t stop me from taking advantage of you thinking I’m owed a favor.”

“You’re a man of business, just like me. I respect that.” His eyes were glittering now. “Perhaps I could even hire you one of these days.”

“As long as it’s nothing I couldn’t write to my mother about. She’s got a bad ticker, you know.”

Brannigan stroked his mustache. “I’m confident that the right price would be enough to get you to sympathize with my way of doing business.”

“Right now, I can afford to be an idealist.” I glanced at Brannigan’s men, then looked back at him. “If you’re ever willing to make a substantial donation to the Richard Dale Retirement Fund, that might change.”

Brannigan smiled at me. “I like you, Richie. You’re honest about the kind of man you are. Now, what is it that you need to ask me about?”

“I’m looking for a client’s father. She knows he’s in town, and that he’s made a deal with a local art collector. It sounded like he nearly lost his head in his excitement about whatever it was he was fixing to sell, or maybe what he was trying to buy.”

The eyes of the youthful man behind Brannigan darted nervously to the side.

I pressed on. “I know people say you’re classy as far as art goes. I figured either you know the man, or else you know who I could talk with to find him.”

“I do make deals with quite a lot of people,” Brannigan said lazily. “What’s your man’s name?”

“Meyer,” I said, pulling out the photograph that Mariko had given me. “Eugene Meyer.”

Brannigan furrowed his brow. It might have been my imagination, but I thought his eyes widened ever so slightly. In any case, he did a real nice job screwing up his eyes as if he needed time to recognize the face. He looked away from the photo and back to me. “You’re a lucky man, Richie. I made a deal with this guy a while back.” He paused, then looked over at the hulking, dog-faced man behind him. “How far back was it, Donnie?”

The man shrugged. "Couple weeks, maybe."

"There you are," Brannigan said. "He contacted my office and asked to speak with me personally. It seemed to be a sensitive matter, so I arranged the meeting. He wanted to sell a remarkably rare piece, though he hadn't yet got his hands on it."

"What happened?" I asked.

Brannigan shook his head. "The deal fell through. He asked for a delay, claiming that the merchandise hadn't materialized. Then we stopped hearing from him."

"Strange," I said, scratching the back of my neck. "What else can you tell me?"

"He was going by the name 'Ed Gunderson,'" Brannigan said. "Is he in some kind of trouble to be using a fake name?"

"That's not really my business to share," I said. "Surely he told you where he was staying, in case you wanted to contact him?"

"He would've skipped town by now," the man called Donnie said before Brannigan could reply. "He just wanted to sell a piece. No piece to sell, no reason to stay."

A trace of annoyance pulsed through Brannigan's eyes. "I don't need my number-two man speaking for me, Donnie. If Richie asks me a question, I'll answer it, thank you very much."

"Yeah, boss," the big man said, cowed.

"And that's all you can tell me?" I asked Brannigan, pretending the interruption hadn't happened.

He smiled. "Nothin' doin'."

"Swell." I stuck out my hand for Brannigan to shake. "Thanks a lot, fellas. I'll see you in the funny papers."

“Don’t pound the pavement too hard on a Sunday like today,” Brannigan said, giving me what he must have thought was a whimsical smile as he shook my hand. “Come on, Declan, my boy,” he nearly trilled, gesturing to the young man as he walked back toward the main group.

I met eyes with this Declan, who I knew from the papers was Brannigan’s son. His eyes were cold and gray, like the side of a skyscraper slicked over with freezing rain. I didn’t want to see whatever those eyes had seen.

As Declan moved on, the dog-faced man stayed behind. When Brannigan and his son were near the steps and out of earshot, the big man stood directly in front of me, blocking my way.

“I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced,” I said, trying to skirt around him.

He held up a meaty hand. “I’m Donnie Sullivan. I keep a close watch on all of Mr. Brannigan’s business affairs. The boss meant that he doesn’t want you poking around too close to his business life. He’s got a right to his privacy, dick.”

“Simmer down, Goliath,” I said as I tried to slide past again.

“Don’t push me, Dale,” Sullivan said. “I don’t play with kid gloves.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve been to Sunday school, Donnie, but I seem to recall Goliath losing that fight,” I put a contemplative finger to my lips. “Ah, well, I’m sure history wouldn’t dare to repeat itself, would it?”

The muscles in Sullivan’s face tightened and he twitched his nose, which had been broken in two different places, as he turned away to rejoin his boss’s group.

As the Brannigan party went down the sidewalk toward their gleaming cars, a hunch dropped into my head like a coin into a fountain, light and probably meaningless yet tinged with

hope. I ran a few steps closer to the entourage. “Hey Buddy,” I yelled to the boss, “what did ‘Gunderson’ want to sell you?”

Brannigan looked back at me. “Beg pardon?”

“What was it? A painting, a sculpture? Some kind of urn, maybe?”

Dog-faced Donnie Sullivan folded his arms across his barrel chest a bit too quickly.

Brannigan chuckled. “I believe the words, ‘That’s not really my business to share’ would suffice. Don’t you, Mr. Dale?”

Apparently, we had retreated to a last-name basis.

Brannigan left the vicinity of the church with his retinue, leaving me to stand there looking like a jackass.

## Chapter 7

I sat in my Plymouth for at least ten minutes, turning over the past hour in my head. I still didn't know anything. Assuming Brannigan had told me the truth, Mariko Meyer's father had dropped in, tried to sell something to the magnate, and then went on his merry way, none the richer and none the poorer. Maybe he had something to do with that museum heist, which would explain why the deal fell through. Except that had happened half a week ago, and Donnie Sullivan said the deal was from a few weeks back. Unless Sullivan was lying...

I shook my head. If I started thinking about when I might have the truth and when I might have lies, I'd end up with a dozen divergent paths that all led nowhere. The only thing I could think to do was to start canvassing all the hotels in town on the off chance that "Ed Gunderson" was still in town. I started my engine and pulled my car away from the curb. One K-turn later, and I was heading south.

I turned right onto Cuming Street. As I headed west, I noticed a black coupe driving about thirty yards behind me. After five blocks, I turned left onto Twenty-fourth and headed south. After close to thirty seconds, the black car entered the road behind me. I couldn't tell who was in the driver's seat.

"Son of a gun," I muttered. I had only ever been tailed once that I knew of, and it took me nearly half an hour to shake him. My high school track experience made sure I was an ace at outrunning someone on foot, but I'd never been as slick when driving a car. Still, I'd done it before, and that was enough.

I turned east on Cass Street and gunned my engine once the tree line obscured my car from the tail's eyesight. I swung onto the southbound side of Twentieth and eased off the gas just enough to avoid drawing anybody's attention.

Once I hit Douglas Street, the westbound side of Highway Six, I thought I was sitting pretty. The speed limit was high enough and the cars were bountiful enough that no one could tail me in that mess. Glancing in my rearview mirror and seeing no ominous black coupe, I chuckled to myself. *Afraid of nothing, you goat.*

After driving half a mile, I exited onto Fourteenth Street and looped around to reach the Hotel Deco. Like the name suggested, it was done in the art deco style, like a shorter version of the Chrysler Building, only it didn't curve and come to a point at the top. It was more luxurious than a man on the run could likely afford, but it was also one of the closest hotels, so I thought I'd give it a go.

After parking my car in a curbside slot and filling up the meter, I made my way into the lobby. The clerk at the front desk gave me a polite smile. "How may I help you today, sir?"

"I'm looking for an old friend. He sent me a letter saying that he was staying at this hotel. The only problem is that the letter was delayed, so I actually got it two weeks after he sent it."

The clerk raised his eyebrows. "Two weeks after?"

I held out my hands in a placating fashion. "You know how the post office is."

The clerk cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. What was your friend's name?"

"Gunderson. Ed Gunderson. May I assume you know how to spell it?"

He gave me no answer, only pulled out the guest registry and thumbed through it. I looked around the hotel as he did so. The whole place gleamed like it had been burnished by a horde of invisible concierge fairies. The couch cushions were shiny black hills, and the grand piano looked like it had just been assembled right there in the main lobby. I whistled appreciatively.

“Sir?” The clerk was looking back up from his book. “We have no record of an ‘Ed Gunderson’ checking in here.”

“Not at all in the last two weeks?”

“Not at all in the last month,” the clerk said, looking at me suspiciously. “Are you certain this was the hotel he mentioned in his letter?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m not,” I said, putting my hands in my pockets in a display of dejection. “My friend Gunderson is a practical joker of the worst kind. He never stops kidding. Would you believe that he fooled me into thinking the Japs had invaded Alaska during Christmas in ’41?”

“That does seem rather remarkable,” the clerk said in an unimpressed voice.

I laughed with a far-off look in my eyes and a chuckle bubbling from the lips, like I was remembering an old school chum. “I’m starting to think good old Eddy led me on this wild goose chase as another one of his gags.”

The clerk frowned. No doubt he’d heard more than his fair share of crummy stories. He plastered a thin smile on his long face and asked, “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“You’ve done as much as anyone could. Thanks.” I slapped two quarters on his desk and left.

I approached my car, which I had parked on the side of the street opposite from the hotel. Even from across the street, I could see that something was wrong with my Plymouth. Drawing closer, I realized what it was: my car was tilted toward its right-hand side. I ran around the front end and crouched down beside the car.

Both of my right-hand tires had been slashed.

“Pity, that,” a voice rumbled from behind me.

I bolted up and spun around. Donnie Sullivan was standing in front of a nearby store window. Tipping his squat porkpie hat, he walked toward me as his cragged face twisted into a wicked grin.

“What the devil’s the matter with you?” I said with clenched fists.

“You must have thought you were pretty clever, shaking me off back there on the road,” Sullivan said, his wide grin exposing discolored gums. “Only problem is, I had an idea what you’d be looking for, and where.” He nodded his block-like head toward the Hotel Deco. “You were in there near ten minutes. Plenty of time for me to find your old heap and apply my special remedy.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding angrily because I didn’t know what else to do with my head.

“Okay. What do you want, wise guy?”

“Stay out of my boss’s business,” Sullivan said, taking a few measured steps toward me. “I told you that back at the church, and the first thing you do is to start looking for your mystery man again.” He was no more than a yard away from me now.

I strode toward him, halving the distance between us. “I don’t care about your boss’s business. I care about my clients. And this client is looking for her father. And her father might have checked in at this hotel. So back off.”

Sullivan shook his head slowly, like an ox trying to wriggle free of its yoke. “We survived everything the old country could throw at us, Dale, and everything America threw at us, too. We’re not scared of a private dick running around in a dopey fedora.”

“At least *you* know what it’s called,” I muttered. “What happens if I don’t like dropping a case when it’s still unfinished?”

“That’s your problem, not mine.”

“My problem,” I said, taking another step forward, “is an ugly Irish hoodlum who thinks he can give me orders. My problem is—”

I’d never seen a mountain move so fast. I tried to put my hands up, but his right hook crashed into the side of my face with a *smack!* The force of the blow spun me around back into the side of my car. I blindly kicked backward, my foot made contact with something, and I heard a huff of air.

I turned myself back around, fists raised. Sullivan charged forward, his forehead colliding with my face. Everything spun around me, and my feet forgot how to hold me up. I slumped down and landed on the concrete, my eyes half-shut.

There was the sound of feet racing across pavement, the slam of a car door, and the rumble of an engine. Then I heard more racing footsteps as half a dozen passersby rushed to my side.

“Are you alright?” a woman asked, holding a white-gloved hand up to her mouth.

I tried to say, “Peachy,” but it hurt too much to say anything just then.

“We need to call the police,” a suited man said. He walked away from my little crowd and started yelling, “Officer! Help, Officer! Somebody!”

Two men helped me to my feet. A third picked my hat up off of the ground and handed it to me. I nodded in thanks, pulled out a handkerchief, and started dabbing at my bloody lip.

By then, a uniformed policeman had hurried onto the scene. “Who saw what happened?” He dutifully took notes from a few of the assembled people before facing me.

“I got half-whacked by an Irish mutt named Donnie Sullivan,” I said, wincing as I spoke. “I guess he wanted to tenderize me.” I gave him a brief physical description but mentioned nothing about my previous meeting with the Brannigan clan.

“We’ll run it down in no time, sir,” the policeman said.

I rubbed the side of my face. “He’s the type that knows how to pull strings and stay out of trouble. If you manage to snag him in your little dragnet, I’ll bet he gets back on the streets in an hour. But you can try, Officer.”

He nodded at me glumly and walked away.

When everyone had gone their separate ways, I trudged down to the nearest bar. I told the bartender that I needed to use his telephone to call a towing service for my heap. And I needed a little medicine on the rocks.

## Chapter 8

An hour later, I was knocking on the door to Room 203 at the Hotel Fontenelle. Mariko Meyer's room. I had taken a cab over while my car was getting itself some new rubber legs at the auto shop. The cabbie, the desk clerk, and the elevator man all looked shocked at the sight of my face but were professional enough to muzzle their questions.

The hotel room door opened an inch or two; a bronze-colored chain held it back. An eye framed by a thin black eyebrow blinked out at me. "Mr. Dale," Mariko breathed.

I shrugged but didn't say anything.

"Just a moment." The door shut, the chain rattled, and the door swung wide open. I pushed myself past her into the room before she had a chance to move out of the way.

The room was typical hotel fare: a full-sized bed with white sheets, a smooth brown nightstand with a lonely lamp and a purse sitting atop it, an unadorned wooden desk opposite the bed, and garishly green carpet. A light brown suitcase rested at the foot of the bed, perhaps no larger than two briefcases glued together. There was a straight-backed chair pushed in at the desk; I pulled it out, turned it around, and sat down without waiting for an invitation.

Mariko hurried across the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. She immediately crossed her legs and began wringing her hands with such nervous energy that I almost wondered if she would give herself a rash.

"Your father has some dangerous playmates," I said without any ado. "They know how to ruin a guy's Sunday afternoon, at least."

"Oh, Rick, I'm so sorry. I should have told you—" She broke off and stared toward the window, her eyes glistening.

"Should have told me what?"

She looked back at me. “I didn’t tell you everything about how my father got in touch with me. It wasn’t just the letter I showed you. He sent me another one right after, one I haven’t shown anyone else.”

“What did it say?”

“It had a telephone number. I called it just before I left Kansas City. My father was on the other end.”

I stared down at the carpet. “And?”

Mariko wiped away a tear. “He said—he said that he made a mistake. He said that he needed help, but he couldn’t go to the police. The law wouldn’t have been on his side, is what he said.”

“Why not? What did he do?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t tell me. He said he was too ashamed of what he had done. Ashamed for our sake.” Mariko paused. “I don’t know how he could be ashamed, when he’s been as good as dead to us for near two years.”

“The phone number’s what’s important here. What difference would it have made to me knowing your father felt bad for himself?”

“He told me where he was, you brute!” Mariko’s eyes were burning holes. “He told me where he was but asked me not to come to him. He asked me if I could test the waters, find out who knew where he was. He wanted to know if he had safely hidden himself. So I hired a private investigator to see how easily my father could be found. To see if he was really safe, or if he was just fooling himself.”

I stood up, towering over her. “Your father is either safe as Fort Knox or as imperiled as Pauline. I got my face jackhammered by an Irish mule from the Brannigan crime gang just an

hour ago for asking too many questions about him. And you didn't bother telling me what I might be diving into."

"You have a right to be upset, Rick. I know you do, believe me!"

"Believe you," I sneered. "Nice trick to pull. Real nice. I should've expected this from a Nip, even a pretty one like you." I started for the door.

"And I thought you weren't a coward," she said. "You pass yourself off as an intelligent man, and then you hide behind disgusting words like that. Words only a child would say! You speak without thinking and then run away at the first sign of trouble."

I wheeled around. "Call me ugly or call me stupid, but never, and I mean never, call me a coward. I've done too damned much shooting and getting shot at to be called a coward."

Mariko made a noise halfway between a deep laugh and wrenching sob. "And yet you run away the moment that things don't go your way."

"Risk assessment. I can't risk having a client who withholds enough information to get me bushwhacked by one of the town's biggest crime bosses."

"I've already paid you for two days," she said pointedly.

I put my hands in my pockets and sighed. "I can find a way to make change."

Mariko gave me a wan smile. "Or you can accept my apology and keep moving forward."

"What do you still need me for, anyway? I learned that Buddy Brannigan isn't keen on the idea of people knowing where your daddy is, and you already know where to find him."

"I've respected his wishes not to go to him personally. Both because of what my father insisted upon, and for own safety's sake. But I also want to be reunited with the man who walked out of our lives."

“So now you want me to play secretary and set up a meeting?” I looked around the room, but there still wasn’t anything of interest to look at except her, so that’s where my eyes returned. “I’m sorry. For that and everything else I said. I’m a bit of an ass to most people I talk to for more than five minutes.”

“But you have even more trouble when it’s someone who looks like me.”

“I got conditioned to feel a certain way about Ja—” I bit my lip. “About people of your persuasion.”

Mariko leaned over to the nightstand and pulled a card and a pen out of her bag. “We all think things we ought not to, no matter how much we might try to appear otherwise.” After a moment of writing, she handed the card to me.

I plucked it out of her hand. It was an apartment address. “This wouldn’t happen to be where a fella could find your father, is it?”

“You’re the detective. I’m sure you can find the right answer after a bit of footwork.”

I whistled. “You *are* a confident one. Have you been downing some liquid courage when I wasn’t looking?”

“I have little choice but to trust you, Rick. I’ve told you too much about my father to discard you now. In any case, you don’t seem like the man who does things by half measures, at least once he has set his mind to it.”

“My skull’s a mite thicker than the Hoover Dam, so you’re right in that I’m stubborn.” I tapped the card against my thigh, nodded to myself, and slipped it into my breast pocket. “I’ll pay him a visit tomorrow morning. A discreet visit, so that he doesn’t get spooked.”

“Thank you, Rick.”

“Unless there’s anything else you haven’t told me...”

She stood up and put a hand on my arm. “Tell my father that I love him and want to see him again, whatever it is that he’s done.”

Hardly thinking about what I was doing, I reached out, gave her hand a gentle pat, and left her room. The same elevator boy took me downstairs, and this time his reaction to my face was one of practiced disinterest. I tipped him, mumbled, “Courtesy of Eugene Meyer,” and trudged out of the hotel.

## Chapter 9

Mariko's old man was housed at an apartment complex off of Leavenworth Street. I drove past it twice in my repaired car before parking across the street. It was nine on a Monday morning. If Eugene Meyer had found himself a day job, I might have a chance to look around before waiting the rest of the day. If he was in his apartment twiddling his thumbs, I could talk to him straightaway.

I waited for traffic to die down and crossed the street, my hat tilted forward just enough to guard my face from any prying eyes in the apartment windows above me. The door into the complex was locked. Someone would have to be inside to open it for the mailman or a prospective tenant, so I knocked. After a minute's wait, I knocked again, waited, and repeated the process until some five minutes had passed. Just when my knuckles started contemplating mutiny, I heard footsteps.

The door opened to a crack as thin as a zipper, and a mousy male voice asked, "What do you want?"

I affected a nasally voice. "Is Mr. Gunderson available? I need to speak with him rather urgently."

"No one here by that name." The door started to drift close. I jammed my fingertips into the gap, wincing at the pressure and pulling the door open enough to see inside. The person on the other side was a squat, middle-aged man with slicked-back, thinning black hair.

"You the landlord?" I asked.

He nodded almost reluctantly.

I glanced over his head and caught sight of the row of apartment numbers. “Are you sure there’s no one named Gunderson here, or are you saying there’s no one named Gunderson here because someone named Gunderson paid you to say no one named Gunderson is here?”

“No Gunderson here,” the man said. He gave an apologetic smile that was no more convincing than a grade school kid who said he had not, in fact, pinched the little girl sitting in the desk across from his.

“Why don’t you let me—”

The door slammed in my face. *Funny guy*, I thought, strolling around the side of the building. The card that Mariko gave me was for Apartment One-Oh-Four. I had seen Meyer’s apartment number stenciled onto one of the doors at the end of the hallway. I counted the windows as I walked past, coming to the right one in no time at all. *Here’s my lucky number.*

I looked around. There were no people visible from this side of the building, and no one from the upper floors would be able to see me unless they were sticking their heads far out of the windows, like hens gawking at the rooster during his morning strut.

I tried to look inside, but the blinds were drawn. I slipped on a pair of leather gloves from my pocket, pressed on the window, and pushed up to test how sturdy the lock was. To my surprise, it slid open with only a slight amount of force. I reached my hand beneath the window and pushed it up all the way, then brushed the blinds aside. A glance inside told me it was empty.

I slipped a leg over the windowsill and let the rest of my body gradually follow, taking all care not to make any excess sound. When I was finally inside the apartment, I pushed the blinds all the way to the side and then examined the top of the window pane. The lock that should have fastened the window shut was broken.

The rest of the apartment was no better. The carpet was curling up at the edges, the beige couch was as lumpy as curdled milk, and the walls were unevenly painted, like a color-blind man had done them.

*Broken lock and a cheap place to sleep*, I thought. Either Meyer was a miser, or his big score had fallen through worse than Hoover's presidency.

I searched the desk, the dresser, the suit coat hanging on the coat rack near the door. I found nothing earthshattering; only a few scattered single dollar bills, a fresh notepad and pen, and a few packets of cigarettes.

There was still the closet, though. I turned to it and reached for the door handle, keeping my ears open for the sound of footsteps and a key turning in a lock. I opened the closet door and pulled the chain hanging a few inches inside the space. A single light bulb, naked and weak, shone down on a brown paper parcel about the size of a man's head.

I reached toward it, or at least, I started to. I was interrupted by the sound of a gun being cocked.

"Back away slowly. Keep your hands up, mister." The voice was trying too hard to sound tough, but if the gun was loaded, it didn't matter if he sounded like Andy Devine.

I backed out of the closet, keeping my hands in plain sight. A man with unruly hair that didn't quite reach his forehead was pointing a pistol at me through the outside window. I recognized him from the scar above his eyebrow. I had finally met Mr. Eugene Meyer.

## Chapter 10

Meyer's thin lips curled into a sneer. "Moe just told me somebody was asking around. Somebody with a nice suit and a fast mouth. Somebody he thought could've been hired to do a job on me."

"Glad landlords are paying such good attention to their tenants' needs."

"Stuff it," Meyer said. "Now, I'm going to climb in the window, but the gun will still be aimed right at your chest, so don't move a muscle."

"It would probably be more prudent to tell me to sit on my hands," I said, trying not to roll my eyes.

"I'm the one with the gun, wise guy. I do the talking." Keeping the pistol fairly level, Meyer slowly raised one gangly leg over the windowsill, placing his left hand onto the sill for balance. He was inside in just a moment, without a single pratfall.

The man in front of me looked perhaps twenty years older than the one in the photograph, and I could tell it was more than years that had done it to him. Life had been dragging on him like chains, and I felt a little bad for him, gun notwithstanding.

"You one of Buddy's men?" Meyer asked.

I shook my head. "Nobody's man but my own."

Meyer chuckled. "Somebody's always pullin' somebody's string."

I tilted my head to the side like a curious dog. "Who's pulling yours, chum?"

The sneer came back. "My gun, my questions. Don't make me repeat myself again. Who are you working for?"

"A crazy gal named Mariko Meyer."

The tough guy edge dropped from his face. "M-Mariko sent you?"

“As surely as that gun sets me a-quivering.”

The pistol drooped, then snapped back up to the level of my chest. “How do I know? If you were really on the level, why would you be snooping around my room?”

“Private dicks have a nasty habit of rifling through other people’s business. It gets us in trouble every once in a while.”

Meyer looked away from me for a moment, and the pistol also wobbled away. Then master and weapon were both trained on me again. “What color are Mariko’s eyes?”

“Brown,” I said immediately. I had dwelt on her eyes long enough when meeting her.

He looked around the room, the pistol drifting as well. It seemed that wherever his gaze went, the barrel of the gun inevitably followed. Meyer didn’t know how to handle the gun, not really. Either I’d have to take it away from him, or else convince him to put it away before I became another accident statistic.

“What else can I say to make you believe me?” I asked. “I’m here to set up a family reunion, plain and simple.”

With the quietly pained look of a man trapped at a crossroads, Meyer took the hammer off the gun and slipped it into his pocket. “Where is my daughter?”

“Ah-ah.” I raised an index finger in a schoolteacher manner. “First, let’s get some things straightened out. What trouble are you in that she felt the need to send a gumshoe poking around to see if you were under the radar?”

“I let that one slip already. I’m tied up with Buddy Brannigan and his crew. Or at least, that’s how they see it. I just want to do what I came here to do and go back home.”

“What exactly did you come here to do?”

“That’s something for my daughter to hear from me, not from her hired man.”

I pointed to the window. “If you’re so concerned about Brannigan, why don’t you even have a working lock on your window?”

“They haven’t found me yet. I didn’t think I’d need to get it fixed.”

“Mariko gave me the impression you’d have that attitude.” I nodded toward the closet.

“Why the elaborate wrapping on the parcel? You don’t have a heart in a jar, I hope?”

Meyer smiled, maybe the first genuine smile I’d seen him make. “Macabre, yes, but not in that way. Take it out and have a look for yourself.”

I walked over to the closet and picked up the parcel. Whatever it was felt solid, and as heavy as it needed to be for feeling so solid. I undid the twine and tore open the brown paper. It was a brown and black urn with twin handles on the sides and a painting that wrapped around the belly. A young man wearing a thin crown was being pulled apart by a horde of women. As flat as the image was, I could hear his scream like I was halfway across the ocean again.

“Pentheus and the Bacchae,” Meyer said. “A young king gets in over his head and is destroyed by forces he can neither understand nor control. I’m afraid it speaks to me more than I would have admitted before all of this began.”

“Where did it come from?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“That urn was meant to be put on display at the Joslyn Art Museum,” Meyer said. “But it’s a bit more complicated than that, sir. It certainly must be, given that forgeries are at play.”

“Forgeries?” Before I could say any more, we heard scuffling feet out in the hallway.

Moe the landlord shrieked, “No, you can’t, you cant!”

There was a smack like a bat cracking against a fastball down the middle, then the tumbling of legs and feet end-over-end. The footsteps were approaching the door. I moved to the opposite wall. Meyer started fumbling in his pocket.

“Open up, Meyer!”

For some crazy reason, Meyer flapped his mouth while he was still pulling his gun out. “Leave before I have to get rough!” He pulled at the pistol, but it snagged on the end of his trouser pocket.

My Marine instincts made me dive to the floor in the split second that a trio of gunshots blasted through the door. Meyer staggered backward like a man dead on his feet. His hand went loose as he fell down. As his body crashed, I army-crawled forward with savage energy and snatched up the pistol.

I held my breath and gripped the gun with both hands. The doorknob slowly turned. I cocked the hammer and fired blindly from a prone position through the splintered door. I heard wheezing, and then a thump.

I listened for any more attackers. There were footsteps further out from the immediate hallway. I crawled closer to the window and heard footsteps on pavement, the slam of a car door, and the revving of an engine.

Everything was still for a minute after that. When I was sure no more gunmen were within killing range, I set the gun down and crawled over to Meyer. He was staring up at the ceiling. His face did me no good, so I looked at the rest of him. One bullet had got him in the left shoulder, one had nailed him in the chest, and the last had burrowed into his abdomen. Blood dripped from his mouth; he had already drowned in his own blood.

I started to get up and felt a sharp pain in the side of my hand. I snatched my hand up and glared down at the floor. A jagged piece of pottery had gouged me. In the chaos, the sculpture had been shattered. Urn and thief both lay broken on the ground.

## Chapter 11

Somebody was screaming in the hallway. I glanced at the splintered door, then at the apartment window. I might have been able to slip out the window and get across the street to my car before somebody saw me, but then again, I might not. If I was still in that apartment when the police arrived, I'd be in trouble, but it'd be nothing next to someone spotting me fleeing the scene of a gunfight.

Swearing under my breath, I pulled out my handkerchief and tied it around my bleeding hand. The blood soaked the light blue fabric, making it look like an angry sun bursting through an innocent sky.

There were footsteps outside in the hallway, as tentative as a newborn deer taking its first steps. I swore under my breath.

“Do we go in?” a man’s voice asked from the other side of the apartment door.

“There’s a dead body right in front of us!” shrieked a voice I recognized as belonging to Moe the landlord. “We gotta call the police!”

“Mr. Carter, my wife has already done that,” the other voice said calmly. “But you said there was another man who wanted to talk to Meyer, right? A man in a suit?”

“So?”

“So what if he’s still in there?”

“He is,” I called out. “I’ve been trying to resuscitate Mr. Meyer in here, but I’m afraid it’s too late.”

“How do we know you ain’t part of it?” Moe was sounding more hysterical by the minute. “How do we know you’re not just stalling ‘cause your partner here bought the farm?”

“I was talking to Mr. Meyer about some business. The corpse out there used to be a man. He shot at us and nailed Meyer. I grabbed his gun and returned the favor, and now here we are.”

After a moment, the door opened. A tall, thin man stood in the doorway; behind him was Moe the landlord, trembling. I looked past them into the hallway. There was a man sprawled out on the floor, an automatic pistol lying a few inches away from his limp hand. His gray dress shirt was drenched in blood, and that same blood had splattered on the walls and floor.

“Who the hell are you, M-Mister?” Moe squeaked out.

I looked down at Meyer’s crumpled form and then back up at the two men. “I’m a private detective who needed to get in touch with Eugene Meyer. Believe you me, I wish he was still breathing. The only problem is, somebody else decided they didn’t want him breathing anymore. I was just in the wrong place. I’ll save the rest for the police.”

The tall man looked back over his shoulder at the landlord. “Go wait by the door for the coppers, Moe. They should be here any minute.” As if in response, we heard the approaching shriek of a police siren. The man looked back at me. “I’ll watch this guy.”

Moe nodded and trotted off down the hallway, being very careful not to make contact with the corpse beside his feet as he went. For a man as short and round as he was, the landlord navigated the gory terrain with finesse enough to keep his pant legs clean.

The tall man folded his arms. “I’m one of the tenants here. I made sergeant back in France, so don’t think about trying anything.”

I stood up slowly. “I followed MacArthur to the Pacific. Saw enough Japs to keep me from fearing much of anything stateside.”

The man’s lip curled up in a half-smile. “Marines, huh?”

I nodded. "It's funny. We all went to the same places and took the same roads, but none of us came back the same route we left. You know what I mean?"

The siren was getting louder, getting closer. "Some of us didn't make a return trip."

"You're right at that, soldier." I gestured to the gold wedding band on his finger. "Here you are, married, living in a decent place, and you wake up to the sound of gunshots. Whereas I'm a free bird stuck in an empty space, sniffing after just the sort of thing we thought we'd left on those other continents three years ago."

"What did we leave behind?"

"The truth, mangled and bloody." I looked down at my bandaged hand. "Maybe I'm just talking funny 'cause I lost some blood."

Before my new friend could answer, we heard rushing feet outside.

"In there, in there!" Moe said. He must have been standing outside the front door and pointing a chubby finger where no indication was needed.

A group of uniformed coppers came into view. Three of them knelt down by the body in the hallway while the others advanced into the room. Moe pointed at the tall man and mumbled, "He's one of mine." The officers disregarded him and walked past him into the room, glaring at me with the concerted disapproval of a half dozen irate mothers.

I held out my hands, my fingers splayed out like Al Jolson belting a show tune. "My name's Rick Dale, private detective. If you search me, you'll find my license. If you listen to me, you'll get as many answers as you have questions. If you call Detective Martin McMahon down here, he'll say 'Tsk, tsk' at me and then smooth things over. Got it?"

One of the officers pulled out a pair of handcuffs. "Shut it, mister."

Another said, "Yeah, you talk too much."

“Maybe I do, at that.” I winced as the first officer bent my injured hand so he could slip the cuffs on. “But calling McMahan would be an awful nice thing of you fellas to do.”

“Don’t tell us how to do our job,” the second officer said. After a pause, he looked at the third man, a senior trooper with a walrus mustache whose nameplate read “Eccleston,” and asked, “What do you think? It’s a real bad one we got here. McMahan might have to take it anyway.”

The senior trooper chewed on his lower lip, glanced down at the body, glared up at me, and said, “I’ll go find a phone.”

## Chapter 12

McMahon made them take the cuffs off me as soon as he arrived, of course, though he didn't seem too broke up about me getting a little roughed up.

I told him what had happened as the other officers and detectives did their work. I left out the bit about my breaking and entering, choosing to give the impression that Meyer had met me outside the building and invited me into his apartment to talk. McMahon nodded, frowned, and glowered at all the right parts.

"It sounds like you're giving it to me straight, Rick, or at least as straight as I can expect from a private eye. I don't have any reason to charge you, even if I wanted to. The physical evidence rules out Meyer getting shot at point-blank range, and the fact that you didn't high-tail it out of the place after all those shots were fired makes it hard to believe you could be the killer. And anyway, we found the other guy's wallet, and one of our boys recognized the name. The guy's a career criminal, an armed robber with known ties to Buddy Brannigan."

I clenched my fists. "How did he find Meyer? I *know* I wasn't tailed this morning."

McMahon shrugged. "Maybe they found this place all on their own. Brannigan has people everywhere, at least in this part of town."

"But if they wanted to kill Meyer and they knew where he was, why would they wait to grease him? Unless there was something about the fact that they saw me nosing around this morning. If they saw me and thought Meyer was trying to pull something..."

"Why were you looking for Meyer, anyway?"

"That's for my client to say, not me."

"I'm just trying to help you puzzle this out, Rick."

“I know, Marty. I just don’t want to say too much, especially since I still have to break things to my client.”

“He’s gonna be in bad shape hearing the man he’s looking for is gone, isn’t he?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Ah.” McMahon jerked his thumb at an officer who was clearing up the broken remains of the Grecian urn. “What happened with that thing?”

“Meyer was saying something about a forgery just before the shooting started.”

“And I take it that this urn didn’t belong to him.”

“No more than the Taj Mahal belongs to the Pope. He said it was from the Joslyn.”

McMahon scratched his head. “So Meyer must have stolen this urn and replaced it with a forgery, huh?”

“Looks that way, though I think he had help.”

“Why?”

“Simple. I talked to the assistant curator on Saturday, and he told me that the night guard spotted two men running out of the museum, not just one. Maybe the other one was a Brannigan man—”

McMahon suddenly looked off to the side. “Can I help you, Officer Eccleston?”

I turned and saw the mustached man standing off to the side, doing nothing in particular but certainly falling within earshot of us. He cleared his throat. “No sir, I was just waiting for further orders.”

“Uh-huh. Go see if they need any help with the bodies out front.”

Eccleston nodded and left the room.

“I’ll see if I can’t tie things up at the museum tomorrow,” I told McMahon. “For now, I need to consult with my client and see what else she wants from me.”

I was about to take a step out the door when McMahon put a firm hand on my shoulder. “Rick, if you’re getting mixed up with Buddy Brannigan, be careful. You act like you’re a hotshot who can handle anything, but you look like the last couple of days put you through a meat grinder.”

“Glad to see you still care, Marty.” I shook his hand and left what had, until just a few hours ago, been the apartment of Eugene Meyer. Now, it was just another living space devoid of life. I didn’t look at the body as I walked past the police wagon and across the street to my own car. I started the engine and pulled away like I hadn’t just seen another man die right in front of me. I didn’t think about him or any of the other bullet-ridden bodies I’d seen in my life. I didn’t think at all; I just drove.

### Chapter 13

I went straight up to Mariko's room as soon as I reached her hotel. I knocked on the door three times, as slowly and deliberately as the tones of a funeral dirge. She almost greeted me, until she saw the look on my face and clammed up. After she let me in, I took off my hat, sat down on the edge of her bed, and stared at the floor.

"Well, what's the matter, Mr. Dale? I wasn't expecting you so soon, unless . . . unless you've already met with my father."

"Oh, I met with him," I said in an even voice.

"And? What did he say? Was he safe? Did he want to see me?" Mariko bent down until we were at the same level. "Tell me what happened!"

"He's dead." I said it with the same empty voice I'd used when I had to tell Casey Stewart's mom about her son's death on a craggy hill in the Philippines. I hadn't known how to sound reassuring or somber or warm back then, and I still didn't know. I just said it and let it hang in the air between us.

"What?" She wanted to believe she'd misheard me. I knew she hadn't.

"They found him, and they did what he was afraid they'd do." I still wasn't looking at her. "I'm sorry."

Mariko went from standing, to crouching, to kneeling down on the floor. She muttered, "No, no, no," to herself over and over. She looked like every grieving parent and shattered widow that I'd visited when I got home from the war. She was sadness and doubt and confusion incarnate, raw emotion on display in a compact little human ball.

Only, her father hadn't been a casualty of war. Maybe he was killed by dumb luck, or by his own avarice. But he hadn't been killed in a war, unless it was a war nobody had told me about.

Mariko looked up at me, her eye makeup running down onto her curved face like rot on the side of a cherry tree. She brushed the tears in one eye away with a single finger, straight and true. "Why this, after everything else? After all we've been through, why this too?"

I was used to throwing out snappy questions and witty replies like a delivery boy tossing out papers on his afternoon route. I wasn't used to offering words of comfort, or giving explanations that didn't sting.

Mariko wiped at her tears with the side of her hands. I reached into my jacket for my handkerchief but remembered that it was still wrapped around my gouged hand. She reached up to the desk opposite the bed and helped herself to her feet. Running her hand over her face again, she walked to the other corner of the bed and sat down a few feet away from me. She stared at the wall as I had done, except that where I had been slumped forward like a man looking into a bottomless pool, she sat with a ramrod-straight back. Her gaze was frighteningly resolute.

"I suppose it's better this way," she said.

"What?" It was my day for getting caught off guard.

"He was ashamed of us. Of my mother and me."

"I'm sure your father loved you very much."

"You don't understand, not yet. He was ashamed of us, not just for where our people come from, as if he cared about such things. But he was ashamed because of what happened to us."

"The camp."

“Something unspeakable happened there, Mr. Dale.”

I swallowed. “Rick, if you please.”

A nod, then, “There was a guard there. A boy, really. He did things, made me suffer indignities beyond what our people had already suffered. He—” She broke off suddenly, then turned her head to look at me. “You must understand, Rick, as much as we hated the internment camp at Manzanar, we were hardly ever mistreated. It was a cruel injustice to be imprisoned there, but it was still America. It wasn’t a death camp.”

Two days ago, I might have made a crack about the literal torture our boys experienced at the hands of Japanese prison guards. I knew I had no cause to bring that up now.

“But this boy, he watched me. Whether we were together or separate, whether at a meal or walking through the grounds, he always had an eye on me. He looked like a dog who wants something very badly but knows its owner won’t allow it. He wanted *me*, Rick.”

My good hand, which was resting on my knee, clenched. I knew where this was going, and I didn’t like it.

“One night, after lights out, he followed me. Mother and I had been sewing until close to curfew—that was one of the things we did to pass those long, unending days. Mother was tired, so she left ten minutes or so after I did. I went back when the other women started to go back to their barracks.

“It was very quiet that night, and black. I was walking along the edge of the camp, when the trail took me behind a building. I was about to round the corner on the other side when I ran into him. The boy was drunk. He staggered, until he recognized me. Then he began saying things I will never repeat even in my own mind. I tried to run past him, but he knocked me down as

easily as if I were a small child. The wind had been knocked out of me, so I couldn't..." She drifted off, took in a small breath, and continued, "I couldn't scream."

I clenched my hand on my knee so tightly that it would have crushed anything less than bone. "Mariko, don't feel like you have to tell me anything you don't want to. Not in the slightest. I've treated you worse than I realized, maybe, and I don't want to make you think—"

"Please let me finish." Her eyes had more steel than twin blades. "I need to tell someone. Someone I can trust to keep confidence, even if it's someone I don't know beyond business."

I nodded for her to go on.

She settled herself and stared straight ahead again. It was like the hotel room wall was a canvas for her imagination, and the picture she was painting was shadowy and bleak. "He unbuckled his pants, which I had never seen a man do in front of me. I couldn't help crying when he tore away at my clothes. And he . . . he—" She looked up at me. "Do you understand?"

The breath I was holding came out in a slow exhale.

"He had a look on his face that told me he knew," she said. "Even drunk like that, he knew exactly what he had done."

"I finally had enough air to start screaming. He ran away, and some guards found me right afterwards. One of them tore off his shirt and gave it to me to cover up. The other one went looking for that boy."

"What happened to the bastard?"

Mariko shook her head. "They didn't want to convict a white man of rape on the word of a woman being interned as a potential Japanese spy. Perhaps they feared that such a scandal would cause the camps to lose whatever legitimacy they had left. I heard rumors that the boy was dishonorably discharged, but I never found things out for certain."

“What year was this?”

“1943. I was seventeen years old.”

I hadn't thought about it, but I was only six years older than Mariko. I had always felt older, thanks to the way I carried myself, but now I knew the age difference between us was inconsequential.

Mariko continued, “Father was different, after it happened. He never looked at me the same way again when he came to visit us. It was as if he knew I had been changed from his little girl into . . . I don't know the word, exactly. A survivor. But he didn't know how to treat us. It was a few months after this that he left California and headed east. He didn't have to stay away for so many years. Money or no money, we wanted to have him back. But he left then, and that was the last time I saw him alive.”

I knew I should say something, but my six-shooter motor mouth was all out of shots. Mariko's stiff upper lip finally broke, and she started crying again. I reached out a hand slowly and brushed it across her back. She leaned into me so that her head was on my chest; her sobs pounded into my chest. I couldn't see the features of her face, and if I could have, I'm not sure it would've made any difference.

“Mariko, I don't know a lot about this sort of thing, but I know what your father's face looked like when I told him you sent me. He wanted to see you. He wanted to see his little girl again.”

“You mean it?” She looked up at me with glassily moist eyes.

“I lie or tell half-truths from time to time, but not now. Not when the state of somebody's spirit is at stake. Whatever kept him from you and your mother for so long, it wasn't out of shame over what happened in the camp. He still loved you.”

“Loved me...” Mariko moved her head up slightly, so that her cheek was next to mine.

I thought about slipping away but didn't. “I'll bet he would have said it if he'd had the chance.”

When she saw that I was staying put, she turned her head and brought her lips to mine. The part of my brain that whispered “Nip” was drowned out by something more animalistic, something that cared less that she was Japanese and more that she was a woman. It was a kiss like any other. It was like kissing Shirley Mackintosh at the school homecoming dance or Donna Ray when I went off to the war. Her lips were as soft as anyone else's.

We stared into each other's eyes for a moment. Mariko looked away. “I don't know why I did that just now. After all the cruel little things you've said to me, the way you look at me like I'm a mutt in a kennel . . . But I needed to share this with somebody, anybody, even a rough man like you. Can you understand that?”

I stood up and put my hat on. “I'll probably stay up late trying to puzzle it out.” I went to the door.

“Rick?”

“Yeah?”

“I think I'll be leaving tomorrow. I'll need some time to think everything over, but I'm sure it's time to go back to my mother now.”

I was drained, emptied out by all the sneaking and shooting and talking and kissing. I didn't have energy left to say anything more than, “Alright.” I turned out the doorway and went home, trying not to think about those lips or those eyes again.

## Chapter 14

I woke up the next morning feeling like my head had been buried in a pile of jackhammers. I had emptied an entire bottle of Jim Beam in a single sitting almost as soon as I got home from the hotel, and even all that drink had been barely enough to drown out the day before.

Two cymbals crashing on either side of my skull would have hurt less than the pounding in my temples. I stumbled to my apartment bathroom, not so much walking as falling in the right direction. I knew what the mirror would show me—two rings like bloody drumheads traced around my eyes—so I left the bathroom light off and reveled in the inoffensive darkness.

It took an eon for me to turn the tap on with my sweaty hand, and nearly twice as long to remember to plug the drain. After the sink was filled up, I held my breath and dunked my head in with the enthusiasm of a kid bobbing for rotten apples.

I imagined the water soaking into my skin and washing out a weekend's worth of stress from my tired face. The fountain of youth wasn't a secret perched on some remote mountain or tucked away in a steamy, broad-leafed jungle. It was a lot humbler than most people wanted to admit.

When my lungs started giving me a hard time, I lifted my head up and let the water drip down my face and onto my bare shoulders and chest. A particularly stubborn rivulet snuck down the center of my back. I stared at where I knew the mirror hung in the darkness, and I made like I was looking into a younger man's face, one that was missing four years of scratches from rainforest tree branches and bruises from diving into the dirt every time a machine gun rang out. This fella still thought the world was a fine little oyster, one he could make his own while getting along with everybody he rubbed shoulders with. He was still happily oblivious. Or just happy.

I breathed in deeply, letting my chest expand like a bellows. My muscles weren't torn and my skin wasn't a mass of gouges like they had been in the Pacific, but I pretended like they were and felt sorry for myself for a bit. Finally, I turned out of the bathroom with an about-face that would have earned me an earful out on the parade ground.

Dressing myself was an operation so complex that it would have knocked ol' Ike and his D-Day buddies on their backs to see it. Each stretch of fabric, every button forced into its hole, was a war between an addled brain and stupid fingers. The sensations of my mind and my body weren't matching up, like a conductor who throws a switch too late while his train is grinding down the track.

I was trying and failing to button up my shirt sleeves when a confused thought floated dreamily into my consciousness. *Why am I getting dressed? We got two birds with one stone yesterday: Mariko and Papa, and McMahon's museum non-burglary-turned-heist. Two threads, stitched.*

My shoes, which had been tossed at the foot of the bed before my evening of lonely debauchery, beckoned me with a polished gleam. There were a couple of stray pieces left on this banal jigsaw puzzle. I just couldn't remember what they were.

I yawned, winced at the strain, and continued putting myself together like a good tin soldier. I made sure to tuck the photograph of Mariko's father into one of my trouser pockets before moving on to my exterior wear. After my suit coat, shoes, and hat came a pair of horn-rimmed sunglasses I usually wore when I felt like appearing more mysterious than usual. The glasses were my life preserver as I left my apartment and hit the street three stories below.

Imagining all the honks I would get if I tried to drive hung over—my head would cave in from the noise—I waited for a taxi. I slipped into the backseat, mumbled something that hopefully sounded like, “The Joslyn,” and sat back against the cab’s peeling leather seat.

The driver, a middle-aged man with stubble as gray as my head felt, got a kick out of me looking like I’d been chewed up by King Kong, and he told me so, though not in so few words. “Fellas usually show up like this at the start of the week. The wives and the kids and the jobs drive ‘em there, y’see.”

“I don’t doubt it, though in my case that’s two balls outside the strike zone for your guesses.”

“Well, it’s usually two or three things that get ‘em sauced up over the weekend. That’s all I mean.” He went quiet as he made a careful left turn and then unlocked his chatterbox again. “You know something, fella? I figure bartenders and shrinks know a lot about guys, but not as much as cabbies. Even if a guy can’t afford a shrink or gets tossed out of a bar, at least he can still take a cab. That’s how we learn.”

“Is that right?” I folded my arms. “But how, pray tell, can one know so much unless one talks less and listens more?”

“Yeah, you’re onto something.” He grinned at me in the rearview mirror. “How ‘bout you tell me how’s tricks, and I’ll listen good, like a school kid doing his algebra.”

“How about you listen quietly while I list all of William Jennings Bryan’s accomplishments as president?”

The cabbie’s brow furrowed; the folded skin looked like a grimace when it was reflected in the mirror. “Bryan wasn’t never president.”

I sat back. “Exactly. So just play mute and listen up.”

The car was silent for the rest of the trip.

## Chapter 15

With traffic, we made it to the Joslyn Art Museum in about twenty minutes. I gave the cabbie an average tip and let him roll away without another word. I paid the steps and columns leading into the museum even less attention than I had on my first trip past them on Saturday. The building was the perfect place for me in my condition, what with its activity levels being on par with a game of croquet between geriatric minor-leaguers.

The same fresh-faced, tongue-tied boy was working the front desk. My suit was a different shade of gray and my face looked like it belonged to a half-dead man, but he still recognized me when I slid my sunglasses down the end of my nose and said, "I'm looking for somebody to talk to."

The kid looked around like a dog listening for its master's whistle. "One moment, sir." He started to get up, but I moved my head a few degrees to the right, and then to the left, and he sat back down.

"I want to talk to Geoffrey Smith, the man with an encyclopedic knowledge of making sentences longer and more tedious than they need be. Where can I find him?"

The boy swallowed. "Mr. Smith hasn't been in since Saturday."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is that unusual?"

He nodded hard, making a lock of his slicked-back hair bounce down onto his forehead. "Mr. Smith usually works every day except Wednesday. He's always said that he prefers wide open spaces, like what we have in here, to any place apart from the museum."

"I'm sure the acoustics are nicely suited to his particular manner of speaking," I said. Smith's absence was too conveniently timed for my liking, and I didn't care who knew it.

“Perhaps I’ll stop by his home and check on him. Maybe he’s down with the flu. Better yet, he might have caught himself a nice case of laryngitis.”

The boy looked uncertain, though less dumbstruck than before. “I’m not sure I could provide that information, sir.”

I flashed him my private detective license. “This paper doesn’t mean much next to a badge, but it does mean I can be persistent when I ask my questions. It’s not just a hobby, see. I’m not just a nosy guy who asks for the sake of asking. I am nosy, but I get paid to be. Got it?”

He looked out across the lobby and then back up to me. “I’d feel more comfortable if it were a curator doing the talking, sir.”

I shrugged. “Bring ‘em on.”

The boy slipped away from the desk and walked into one of the galleries. I remembered the painting of the gaunt Francis contemplating the skull and the crucifix—death, and life through death—and chuckled at what the saint would think about my bloodshot eyes, as sunken from booze as his had been from prayer.

The boy came back with an older man in tow. This new figure had long white sideburns and circular eyeglasses perched on a Roman nose. He held out a pale hand with decrepitly thin fingers. If I met him on the street, I’d think he was a mortician.

“Desmond White. I’m one of Geoffrey Smith’s colleagues.” He stretched each syllable out as if his voice had physically rusted.

“Richard Dale, private detective. I would like to speak with Mr. Smith about some of the matters we had discussed at the start of the weekend. Related to the break-in you had last week.”

“Yes, the one in which nothing was taken. You aren’t here to waste anybody’s time, are you, Mr. Dale?”

I glanced at the kid. “Is he always this charming, or am I getting special treatment?”

“I do not make a habit of mingling,” White said matter-of-factly. “That was always Geoffrey’s strong suit. Most people find him to be quite . . . warm. Affable. I, on the other hand, am an art scholar, first and foremost.”

I rubbed my hands together. “Perfect. So you can tell me how one of your priceless treasures got swapped out with a forgery.”

White’s sternly wrinkled face betrayed a human emotion: mild surprise. “To what are you referring, Mr. Dale? Our collection is prestigious and above reproof. There is no chance that a forgery could be out in our galleries without one of us noticing.”

“That’s the trick,” I said, holding up a finger. “This baby’s not in a gallery. It’s with the boys in restoration, or at least that’s what Smith told me. A Grecian urn featuring Pentheus and a horde of ladies who aren’t exactly planning to swing dance with him.”

“This is ridiculous. How could anyone have tampered with that urn, when it was out of sight of the public?”

“I wondered that too, until your desk man here mentioned Smith’s absence. Maybe he skipped town when he had the chance.”

“Skipped town? To my knowledge, Mr. Dale, only criminals or those with criminal intent ever ‘skip town,’ even in these rough times.” If White could have looked any farther down his nose at me, he would have.

“Tell me, was Geoffrey Smith well-off financially? Or did he have a few too many debts to pay?”

White started to answer. “What an outrageous—”

The boy cleared his throat. “Detective, sir, um, Mr. Smith *was* a bit of a gambler.”

“Jonathan!” White cut in, once again surprising me with his capacity for emotion, restrained as it was.

“He did have a problem, Mr. White!” Jonathan was apparently eager to contribute something to the conversation. “He would always joke to me about how he was married to the games down at Carter Lake. He told me that he would start talking to people, and before he could finish a sentence, he’d already lost a week’s pay on a horse race.”

“So that’s motive,” I said. “And means are pretty well established. Smith wouldn’t have had any problems taking charge of the urn during the restoration process, would he?”

White’s lower jaw twitched. “No, he would not have had any difficulty in that.”

“Let’s take a look at the urn, then. You’re the expert. I’m sure you could spot a forgery if you took a close look.”

Desmond White’s face was drawn into lines as thin as chalk writing on blackboard. “Jonathan, wait here with Mr. Dale. I will have words with our restoration specialists.” He turned away briskly and disappeared into another one of the lobbies, leaving me with the kid.

“So you run around asking people questions all the time?” the boy asked suddenly.

I grunted in the affirmative.

He looked down at his desk forlornly. “Sounds like an awful good time, meeting all sorts of people and going all sorts of different places.”

“How old are you, kid?”

“Eighteen, sir. I’m working at the desk until I can save up enough to go to the university.”

“And then what?”

The boy laid his hands flat on the desk and stared at them. “I don’t know yet. Maybe become a schoolteacher.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Schoolteacher’s much better than being a private dick, I’m sure. Most teachers don’t get wound up enough to do this,” here I gestured to my bloodshot eyes, “after a rough Monday night.”

After another ten minutes, Desmond White returned, walking with the solemn steps of a bereaved parent.

“Was I right?” I asked casually, as if I wanted to know about the weather.

“They had set the urn aside on Mr. Smith’s orders. The morning after the break-in, he asked them to keep it covered until he told them otherwise. They wondered amongst themselves but, nevertheless, they indulged him.”

“They indulged him to the point that they didn’t spot the fake sitting right under their noses,” I said. “The fake that’s still sitting back in your restoration area as we speak.”

“Evidently so,” White said.

“And now Smith’s gone missing and left his forgery behind,” I said, not bothering to hide my triumphant grin.

This time, it was White’s lower lip that twitched. “Indeed.”

“So Smith takes the urn, fakes the urn, and runs out,” I summarized, both to sort through my thoughts and to make White squirm. “The fake is here, like you just admitted. The urn outside of the museum gets smashed—”

“Smashed?” White gasped.

I plowed on. “I found the man who was working with Smith on the outside, and the urn got busted during the process—or at least, I’m assuming it was the real urn I saw. I suppose the only question is why the thief was hanging onto the real item instead of selling it.”

“Mr. Dale, please,” White said. A few patrons were looking our way as I talked. The curator turned to the boy. “Jonathan, please write Mr. Smith’s home address down on a piece of notepad paper for Mr. Dale. Perhaps he will be able to clear things up for us after paying a visit to our friend.”

“You make it sound like you’re doing me a favor,” I said. “Maybe we ought to talk some business before I start cleaning up your messes for you.”

“I believe you have what you came here for,” White said. “Good day, Mr. Dale.”

“Can’t blame a freelancer for trying.”

“I don’t believe I care enough to, sir.” His perfectly austere face was back in place.

“No, I don’t believe you do, at that.” I took a step toward the exit before I remembered the photograph in my pocket. I pulled out the picture of Eugene Meyer and held it out to Jonathan and White. “I don’t suppose either of you recognize this man from among the museum’s many visitors?”

They both shook their heads.

“Like I said, you can’t blame a freelancer for trying.” I stuffed the photo back into my pocket and left the two without a word of explanation.

## Chapter 16

According to the address Jonathan the desk boy gave me, Geoffrey Smith lived over in Benson, near the northwestern boundary of the city, off of Sixtieth and Maple. I hailed another cab to cart me over and kept my mouth shut once we got moving. I wanted to think instead of waste time matching wits with a new driver.

Neither of the museum employees had shown even the slightest recognition of Eugene Meyer. A professional would have made sure to case the place, and Meyer's scar would have made him stand out to anyone working at the museum. Then again, I wasn't so sure Meyer had ever been a professional thief. The only job I knew he'd pulled was the one Mariko had told me about at our first meeting, the one about the haberdashery that he'd helped robbed during the war years. It didn't smack of top-shelf professionalism to me.

No, he must've had help. Someone was with him the night of the break-in, and someone had helped make the job go smoothly. I remembered an odd comment Geoffrey Smith had made when I interviewed him. I'd asked him to give me details on the break-in, and he had taken care to tell me that he hadn't heard a thing. He had been so quick to assure me that he hadn't had contact with the intruders that he forgot that I didn't know he'd been at the museum that night at all. I'd talked to as many people with guilty consciences as the next bum, and I've usually had a leg up in knowing when such people are trying too hard to hide something.

It's like a kid who does something youthfully foolish, like break his mother's favorite flowerpot while he's outside playing ball. Mother comes home, and the boy assails her with talk about anything and everything he can think of, but his mind is always going back to the flowerpot that should be sitting on the back porch but isn't. Mother doesn't know what's wrong,

but she knows her son's mind is separated from his body by at least thirty feet, and that's when she turns on the heat and finds out the truth.

Eugene Meyer hadn't been working alone, oh no. He had help, and Geoffrey Smith fit the part of the kid hiding the flowerpot. He certainly had the motivation, and a fellow like him could get his restoration assistants so tied up that they wouldn't know what was going on with the urn until the heist had been pulled and the real item had been replaced with a fake.

The drive only took a quarter of hour. I should have been able to puzzle through all of this in half that time, but my brain was still drying itself off from its late-night alcohol bath. We were in a cozy neighborhood, the sort you see on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Identical single-story houses with white walls, eggshell blue shutters, and brown front doors stretched up and down the paved streets like toy soldiers. It was quiet; the kids were at school, and the dads and some of the moms were at work. The ones who weren't at work seemed to be staying inside, which was just fine by me. Nosy neighbors asked questions.

We pulled up next to a house that looked just like all the rest and idled. Geoffrey Smith's home was the only one with a car parked in the driveway. It was a fire-engine red Packard Clipper, with a hood that came to a peak in the center like an upturned nose. It was a perfect match for its owner, though the fact that it was sitting in Smith's driveway surprised me. I had been expecting the curator to have booked it out of town by now. Why else would he have interrupted his steady work regimen of blathering in the public square?

The driver turned around to face me, his right arm resting on top of the divider while his left held onto the steering wheel. "Number on the mailbox says this is the place, doc."

I nodded thanks and handed him his fare, plus a half-dollar tip for leaving me alone on the trip. Just as I reached for the door handle, I turned back to him. "Say, could you park over on the next street and wait a few?" I gave him my most charming smile. "If you don't mind."

He didn't mind. I got out and watched him drive down the street and turn left at the stop sign. Satisfied that my ride had left, I walked up to front door of the house and knocked three times in slow, steady succession. It was a solid oak door that made a healthy rapping noise beneath my knuckles. I would have winced at the sound an hour ago, but my hangover was finally slinking away.

There was no answer. I sighed and knocked three times more. I didn't hear any movement from inside the house. *There's a car outside the house and no one inside the house, I thought. Or maybe he's going out for a walk. Or maybe he left in a cab. Or a friend picked him up. Or...*

I shook my head. That was the trouble with real cases. In stories, Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot could notice two or three minute details about an individual and unwrap that person's life story and deepest aspirations. Out on the streets, a few key details could point to half a dozen possibilities, and guessing the wrong one could get you sunk worse than the stock market back in '29.

Dissatisfied with guessing, I pounded on the door one last time. The house was as silent as ever. I glanced over my shoulder. No housewives had stepped out onto their front porch to see who was making that damned noise.

I slipped on my leather gloves and jiggled the doorknob. It was locked. Wasting no time, I stepped down from the porch and walked around the side of the house, the lawn's slightly overgrown grass brushing against my pant legs.

There was no fence blocking off the backyard, so I strolled right on in. It was a small space with no remarkable features. I walked up to the back door of the house and tried the knob. I was expecting it to be locked like its brother on the other side, but it opened without any trouble. I pushed the door open slowly, trying not to make the hinges creak overmuch, and then stepped inside.

I was now standing in a plain-looking kitchen with an empty wooden table, a marbled countertop with an electric toaster, and a chrome sink that contained a couple of porcelain dishes. It was plain in a way that I would never have guessed Geoffrey Smith's home could have been, as muted and restrained as he was loud and talkative.

There was no sound in the house except for my breathing. I closed the door behind me. "Mr. Smith? Are you in here? It's Rick Dale. I needed to ask you a few more questions." I hadn't expected an answer from within the house, and I didn't get one, either. Like it or not, I had to move farther in.

I left the kitchen and made my way down the hall to what looked like the bathroom. I froze for a moment when I saw that the light was on and the door was slightly ajar. "Mr. Smith?" I called out softly. If he was hiding in there and thought I was a prowler, he might have a razor blade waiting for my ribs.

It took nearly a minute for me to traverse the two yards down the hall. I moved like a cat tiptoeing past a sleeping Doberman. When I finally reached the door, I knocked on the frame. "If you're in here, Mr. Smith, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk. It's about the museum. You're not in trouble."

Taking a deep breath, I tapped the bathroom door inward. The door opened inward to my left. There was a sink and a toilet to my right, but I didn't pay much attention to them. What caught my eye was the dead man floating in the bathtub, steeped in his own blood.

## Chapter 17

Geoffrey Smith's mouth was open, like he couldn't stop talking long enough even to die. His wrists were stretched out over the sides of the tub. Blood drops were splattered on the linoleum floor beneath where the wrist closer to me, the left wrist, was hanging. He was stiff like a soldier standing at attention, only he was roughly horizontal instead of vertical.

I stared at the corpse like an idiot. I hadn't ever seen a dead man like this. I'd watched men get blown apart by mortars that screamed through the air like someone getting castrated. Just twenty-four-odd hours ago, I had witnessed a middle-aged wash-up get shot to pieces like it was just another day in Capone's Chicago.

But I had never seen someone who had died like this: slowly, agonizingly, and self-inflicted. I tried not to imagine how the blood must have seeped out of his wrists. I wanted to think about something that didn't reek of decay. I scrunched my face up as I thought of warm apple cider and Mother's soft bedtime kisses and . . . Mariko. For just an instant, her face floated between my eyes and my closed lids.

"Damn it," I grunted. Something on the corner of the bathroom counter caught my eye. Turning my focus to it, I realized that it was a handwritten paper note. The writing could have been done by a calligrapher. I almost picked it up but then drew my hand back, remembering that I wasn't even supposed to be in this house. Instead, I leaned forward and read the note aloud.

"Made myself accomplice to Edward Gunderson. Aggressive lenders necessitated suitable emergency funds for compensation. Examine Pentheus urn." The words stopped halfway down the page and then picked up in what appeared to be a hastily scrawled final line at the bottom. "Forgive my soul."

I bowed my head. I'd made fun of the man as hard as I could, but I knew he was harmless. He was that annoying coworker you ducked out on at the bar with the other fellas, or the annual Christmas party. He wasn't a man who deserved the same sort of death as an animal in a slaughterhouse.

I considered turning the bathroom light off, just so I wouldn't have to see the body so clearly, but I decided against it. I went back to the kitchen, picked up the telephone with a gloved hand, and dialed Martin McMahon's number.

"Omaha Police Department, Detective Martin McMahon's office, how may I help you?" It was the girl I'd talked with at Marty's the week before.

I cleared my throat. Once I was sure no nervous lumps were left in it, I said, "This is Rick Dale, private detective. The guy looking for a funny case. Is the lieutenant available?"

"One moment, please."

It was indeed a moment later when McMahon's voice came on the other end. "Is that really you, Rick?"

"Yeah, Marty. I've got news. I won't call it good or bad, just . . . news."

"Shoot, Rick. The way this week has been going in our department, I think any news not involving a homicide would be welcome."

I resisted the urge to glance at Smith's corpse. "Like I said, Marty, it's news. I may have put a lid on that museum break-in."

"And?"

This time I did look over at the body in the bathtub. "The assistant curator, one Geoffrey Smith, seemed to have been the inside man for Eugene Meyer."

“I suppose that will be pretty embarrassing news for the museum. I don’t believe the world of high art is so cutthroat that this sort of thing would be commonplace, eh?”

I sighed. “I’m at his house, Marty.”

“Did he let you in?”

“No, he was taking a bath.”

“What? Talk like a human being for once.”

“He cut his wrists, probably not while shaving. Yeah, he actually cut both of them. And he left a note, so I don’t think it qualifies as an accident.”

I imagined McMahon beating his head against his desk. “Is that your cute way of saying it was suicide?”

“It was suicide. Or at least it looks that way.”

“Give me the address and I’ll send a squad car your way. I’ll come in right on their tails.”

I recited the location to him and said, “I know two bodies in two days is suspicious, Marty. I know that. But I got a taxi driver who can vouch for me just getting here, and Smith has been dead a day and a half, minimum.”

“The thought that this all seemed oddly convenient *had* crossed my mind, soldier.” There was something strangely paternal in McMahon’s voice, a warm concern that I wasn’t used to hearing from anybody, least of all a police detective. “But you and guys like you to play ball in the rough patches of town, Rick. I understand that. You run around the dark side of anyplace long enough, you’re bound to get a few fingers pointed your way eventually. But mine won’t be one of them, at least as long as you don’t try to convince me otherwise.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding in. “You’re alright for a copper, Marty.”

“You’re alright for private help. Stay put. We’ll be there soon.”

## Chapter 18

McMahon gave me a ride in his car over to police headquarters after he'd gone over the scene at Meyer's house. I'd unlocked the front door and told the officers from the black-and-white that I'd simply walked in after trying the door from the front. I didn't plan on catching a breaking-and-entering rap, though that tended to be an occupational hazard for guys like me.

McMahon sat across from me, folded his hands, and rested both index fingers against his mouth. I looked at the family photograph that sat just as prominently on his bland desk as it had when I saw it last. "Your daughters have the loveliest green eyes," I said.

He allowed himself a smile, something I rarely got from an iron-jawed policeman. "Their mother's." He brushed some dust off the top of the picture frame and then made eye contact with me. "Like you just told me, Rick, two dead men in two days is outside the normal way of things."

"I've read that this sort of thing can happen to a gumshoe," I admitted. "A guy starts out with a couple of simple cases, and before he can sing his A-B-Cs, the whole thing explodes into half a dozen murders."

"That sounds a bit far-fetched." The stoic was back.

I shrugged. "I may be exaggerating. Nevertheless, I'm obviously less than thrilled about how things have turned out."

"Eugene Meyer and Geoffrey Smith likely aren't thrilled, either."

The line was delivered with a droll sensibility, but McMahon's face was still impassive. I didn't know whether it was a laugh line or a rebuke. Carrying on, I said, "I mean that I thought I'd had my share of death. I might have hoped there'd be less of it stateside."

“Fewer in number, but still too much,” McMahon replied. “Rick, I told you before and I’ll say it again: I don’t suspect you. Frankly, I don’t think even you’d be dumb enough to off two guys and then come hollering to us after each time. If something that crazy happens, it’s likely enough to be the truth.”

“So . . .” I looked around the office, but I couldn’t avoid the obvious question. “Why’d you bring me down here, then, if not to rake me over the coals of coincidence?”

“I need to tell you about Eugene Meyer.”

“Okay.” I decided not to let McMahon know about Mariko’s imminent departure from the city.

“Meyer was supposed to have stolen that urn from the museum on Thursday evening, right? He and his unknown accomplice make a forgery, break in, swap it out for the one under the knife in restoration, and are spotted right as they’re making a break for it.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Here’s the problem.” McMahon reached into a drawer and pulled out a notebook. “This is a journal we found in a desk at Meyer’s apartment. I was so busy talking to you that I didn’t know the boys had spotted it until I checked the evidence locker later.”

“What’s so special about the journal?”

McMahon flipped it open to a page that had been bookmarked with a brown ticket stub. “Meyer made a journal entry on the night of the burglary. It says here that he went to see the latest Bogart picture, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, down at the Chief Theater off of 24<sup>th</sup> Street.”

I pointed at the stub. “And I suppose that’s from the show.”

McMahon nodded. “It’s what we’d call an alibi, if it didn’t pertain to a dead man.”

I sat back in my chair. “Then maybe Meyer wasn’t the seller who had to steal the urn in the first place. If he was at the show while the break-in was going down, maybe he was the buyer. Except . . .”

“What, Rick? Except what?”

“My client said that her father was supposedly searching for a way to make enough money to support the family. So why would he want to buy a stolen piece of art, unless he knew where to sell it?”

“Maybe he was here long enough to get a feel for the market.”

I rubbed my temple for the umpteenth time that morning. “It’s not adding up.”

McMahon smiled. “It might, though. We found something else.” Reaching into a drawer once more, he pulled out a copper-colored key with a tag on it. “Guess what this beauty fits into?”

“A car that can travel to the moon,” I said. “C’mon, Marty, I’m supposed to be the one lording what I know over people.”

“It’s for a safety deposit box at a bank here in town.”

“What could Meyer have locked up in a safety deposit box?”

“That’s the question to answer, isn’t it?”

I stood up. “My client is Meyer’s daughter. I don’t usually tell you these things, because they don’t need to be said. But this time it matters. If Meyer named his daughter a legal representative of his estate, she could use that key to open the box, right?”

“Depends on what the bank says. And you’d need to get this key from me, first of all.”

My face fell. “Marty, this is the only lead I’ve got now. The only way to go. I can’t figure anything else out without this.”

McMahon joined me in standing up, looked outside the office, and then closed the door. “I’m not supposed to do this sort of thing, Rick. But you’re right. This is the only way to solve any of this mess. I’ve trusted you so far, and I guess I’ll keep it up.” He handed me the key, which I immediately slipped into a coat pocket.

“Can I use your phone?” I asked. McMahon nodded. I dialed the number for Mariko’s hotel and asked for her.

“She just checked out, sir,” the clerk said perkily. “We called a taxi to take her to Union Station.”

I gripped the receiver tightly. “How long ago?”

“Oh, perhaps fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks,” I said, clunking the receiver down without saying goodbye. “I don’t suppose I could get a flashing patrol car to take me down to the train station.”

McMahon grinned in reply.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, I’ll just snag a third cab. I swear, I’ll spend all my money on this job just getting carted around.”

McMahon put a hand on my shoulder as I turned to leave. “Remember that I’m trusting you not to do anything stupid, Rick.”

I nodded. “Sure, Marty.”

The hand on my shoulder gave a tight squeeze. “And don’t call me Marty, or I’ll start calling you Tricky Ricky or some junk like that.”

“There’s worse things you could do to my name, I’m sure.” I left the building as quickly as I could and flagged down yet another taxi. I had to stop someone from catching a train.

## Chapter 19

A river of gray and brown suits flowed in and out of Union Station. Fred Astaire could've waltzed from one end of the station to the other across the sea of flat-brimmed hats. I wasn't in the mood to try that myself. I was looking for a black homburg with a black bow that rested on a neat bundle of smooth black hair.

The clock on the wall was about to strike noon, and every train wanted out of the station. The odds of Mariko still being in town instead of westbound were worse than betting against Seabiscuit. But I was too thick-skulled to give up. I made my way to the ticket office and knocked on the desk.

A middle-aged woman with perky green eyes and light-red hair done up in a bun greeted me. "What can I do for you, sir?" she asked in a slow drawl.

I gave her my most charming smile and rested my arms on the black counter at a level just above my navel. I leaned as far forward as I could with the glass partition between us, like I wanted to confide in her despite the crowd around us. "Do you have a pretty good memory, ma'am?"

She seemed surprised for a moment, but she stifled it and said, "As good as anybody else's, I suppose? Might I ask why?"

I looked from side to side, as if watching for any eavesdroppers, and then leaned forward again. "Do you remember a young Japanese woman getting a ticket up front here? Now, when I say young, I mean people might mistake her for your kid sister, as youthful as you look. They might think the two of you had gone to school together."

The edge of her lip crawled upward gently. She knew I was just being a smoothie, but she liked it enough not to rap me on the knuckles for it. “I might have seen her. Why do you need to know?”

“A friend of mine is head over heels for her. Trouble is, he’s something of an idiot, and he wrecked things between them. She won’t talk to him, so he sent me to find her before she skips town for good.”

“And your friend really thinks this girl is worth going to all that trouble?”

“She is worth the trouble,” I said. “Trust me.”

The teller looked at me for a moment and then nodded. “I remember just who you’re looking for. She looked half-dead, like she hadn’t slept in a year. I sold her a ticket for the 12:10 to Denver and told her to have a nice day. She just nodded and walked off.” The woman pointed out down the line.

I looked at my watch. It was 12:08, with the minute hand just seconds from inching over to nine past the hour. I tapped my pointer and middle fingers together against my lips and then lay them on the glass, roughly on the same plane as the teller’s lips, and ran out into the lobby.

Dozens of men and women sat on the long, black benches between the teller stands and the doorways leading out to the tracks. They wrestled with newspaper sheets and fussy children as I strode past. A tall, thin man in a blue suit who was smoking a cigarette watched me as I went by. I pulled open a glass door and stared out into the train yard. It looked like any other yard: as noisy as a Sunday at the zoo, only the objects of spectacle were made of iron and steel rather than flesh and bone.

I held the door open for a family of four that was trying to get inside; it gave me a chance to survey the scene. There were three cars at rest in the station. Two were at the far end away

from me, and one was nearer to the depot doors. The closest one looked like it had just arrived; passengers were hauling their luggage off as attendants scurried around like worker ants.

I walked past this train and reached the next. Dozens of passengers were climbing aboard. Looking around, I snatched the arm of an attendant as he hurried past. He tore his coat out of my grip and grunted, "Do you mind?"

"Which train is this?" I asked, knowing I sounded like an insane man.

The attendant squinted at me. "Don't you know which train you're supposed to be getting' on?"

"I'm looking for someone. Is this the train going to Denver, or isn't it?"

"One over, but it's already about to take off," he said.

I gave him a friendly smack on the shoulder, muttered, "Thanks," and ran around the engine.

Sure enough, the last train in the yard had just blown its whistle. That piercing shriek was like a death knell. I didn't see Mariko boarding the train, so I figured she was already on it. I ran along one side of the train, trying to catch sight of her through the tiny passenger windows. There were too many white faces.

"Mariko!" I yelled, just as the whistle sounded for the second time. I couldn't even hear my own call. When the whistle had stopped, I screamed her name again. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a yard officer running up. He was right to; if I looked half as wild as I felt in my frantic search, anyone would be crazy not measure me for a straitjacket.

I was contemplating jumping aboard the train myself when a woman poked her head out from one of the windows. "Rick?" she yelled.

The guard was at my elbow now. I ignored him. "Mariko! You need to get off this train!"

“What?” The train engine had started rumbling.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. “Get! Off! The! Train!”

The head disappeared. I turned to the station guard and held my hands up. “Little misunderstanding, that’s all. You know how it is.”

“No I don’t, Mister,” the guard said. “But maybe you could tell me, inside and out of the way.”

I looked over his shoulder and saw Mariko climb down from the train with the help of a steward. She had her bag draped over her left shoulder and her suitcase in her right hand.

“Inside is right where I’m going,” I told the guard before running over to Mariko.

“You owe me a ticket now,” she said as the train picked up speed and left us standing there in the yard.

“This should be worth it.” I started walking toward the inside of the station.

“Rick?”

I turned back to her. “Yes? What is it?”

She held up her suitcase. “Shouldn’t a gentleman offer to carry a lady’s luggage?”

“Give it to me.” I took it from her.

“You would have taken it out of habit if I were white, wouldn’t you?”

I bit my lip. “Maybe I would have. Maybe I’m just a real charmer that way.” I kept walking to the glass doors.

Mariko took my arm before I could get more than a few steps ahead. “Where are we going?”

“To the bank. We’re finally going to get some answers.”

## Chapter 20

We left the station and walked down the block to wait for a streetcar. I was done with taxi cabs for a while. I helped Mariko up onto the car and then climbed in after her, still holding her suitcase.

The streetcar rumbled down the line. I turned to Mariko and gave her a wolfish grin. “See, it’s like you took the train after all.”

“You still haven’t told me why I’m supposed to be coming with you. I deserve to know. I was expecting to see my mother again, and now I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“You’re going to follow me and help me figure out what your father was really up to,” I said, slyly pulling out the safety deposit key McMahon had given me. “This baby’s the answer.”

“Let me see that!” She snatched the key out of my hand and read the tag. “He had a box at the bank that no one knew about. Why?”

“That’s what we get to find out.” I took the key back and slipped it into my pocket. “You’ll tell the bankers that you’re his daughter, and they’ll let you see what’s inside.”

Mariko frowned. “I’m not sure that’s how a safety deposit box works, Rick.”

I laughed. “Maybe not over in California—Lord knows that’s a world away from here—but we can make it work out here in the Midwest.”

She looked out onto the streets without answering. After a few minutes, her eyes narrowed even further into a squint. “Rick, has anyone been following you today?”

“What?” I looked around us. All I saw were slow-moving cars behind and beside us. We reached a corner and began to turn.

“That black coupe’s been following us for the last four blocks,” she said.

“Plenty of people are going the same direction as us,” I said, looking behind us for the car she’d mentioned. “It’s possible you’re just seeing—” I stopped talking as soon as I focused on the view into the car. The driver was a thin man in a blue suit. I’d have bet everything in my wallet that he was either smoking or had just burnt out a cigarette.

“Do you see it?” Mariko asked.

I looked back at her. “He was in the lobby at the train station. He saw me leave the ticket stand to go find you, and he would’ve seen us leave the depot.”

“Who—”

“Buddy Brannigan’s man,” I said. “He’s probably been following me around all day.”

Mariko snorted. “I thought private detectives knew how to avoid being followed.”

“I...wasn’t in the best shape this morning. Why do you think we’re taking public transportation instead of my car? I was a walking advertisement for a temperance union until about an hour ago. So I maybe let a tail get past my radar.”

She shook her head. “I’m trusting you again and again, Rick Dale. I need you to prove that you’re a man worth trusting.”

I looked up at the street signs. We were getting close to the bank address, but we couldn’t afford to let this tail see us going inside. I walked to the other side of the car and looked out. There was a bookshop across the street that stood adjacent to an alleyway. I gestured for Mariko to come over, nearly knocking a knee-high kid out with her suitcase in the process. “Sorry,” I muttered, and then pointed the shop out to Mariko with my free hand.

“Now, while the train is moving?”

“Once we reach the light,” I said. Sure enough, the light changed to red and the streetcar rolled to a stop. I hopped down onto the pavement and heard a sound of dual *klik-klaks* as

Mariko followed suit. The streetcar had just passed the bookshop when it hit the intersection, so we doubled back on the sidewalk and then entered through the front door.

A bespectacled man who was talking with what appeared to be a geriatric patron looked up from the counter, hollered, "I'll see to you in a minute," then went back to business. I set Mariko's suitcase down against the wall and ran my hand along the spines on the bookshelves.

After a moment's thought, I pulled a musty, cloth-bound copy of Plato off of the shelf and held it up to my face. Looking sideways at Mariko, I said, "They're following me, so they don't know you, or at least they didn't until today. Why don't you walk by the window and glance out to see if our friend's found himself a parking spot?"

Mariko did as I asked, sidling past the window and casually looking outward, like she was checking her reflection in a ghostly mirror. I thumbed through my book, chuckled at Socrates, and then looked back up at her. "Well?"

"I didn't see him."

I couldn't help frowning at that. "Maybe he turned the corner so he could park and double back like we just did."

Mariko nodded. "I've never done anything like this before."

"Now you won't be able to say that," I said, replacing Plato on his shelf. "Excuse me?" I said to the clerk.

He pushed his glasses back up on his nose. "Yes sir, how may I be of assistance today?"

"You wouldn't happen to have a back door leading into the alleyway beside your place, would you?"

"That would be through my storeroom," he said, putting his hands on his hips. "As you may imagine, however, only employees may go back into the storeroom."

I slid a few bills onto the counter. “This enough to secure temporary employment?”

He looked down at the money, looked over at his other customer—the man had his face planted in a Dickens hardback—and then looked up at me. “Welcome, sir.”

I put another bill down. “And how about some temporary amnesia for yourself?”

The clerk didn’t get that one.

Mariko smiled. “I think he means you should forget that we were here just now.”

“Yes, yes, quite right.” The man slid the bills off of the counter and into his pocket.

“Right this way.”

He led us through a workroom crammed with books, tomes, and volumes stacked floor to ceiling. There was an army of knowledge in that room, but neither Mariko nor I had a chance to appreciate it. The clerk opened a door that exposed us to the outside world’s brightness once more. We stepped out into the alley and he closed the door behind us.

Brick walls stood on either side of us, dark and imposing. Broken bottles and newspapers were strewn about on the concrete like refuse thrown out of a sailing ship.

“I can’t believe that actually worked,” I said.

“What would you have done if it hadn’t worked?” Mariko’s tone was halfway between curious and challenging.

“I would have made something else up. Or come up with a different plan. Maybe I would have waited for the tail to show up and then ripped his lungs out.”

“Do you win many fights, Rick?”

I thought about my answer for a moment before giving it. “I won the one that counted. I fought against the Grim Reaper as he stalked me through the jungles of Guadalcanal and the

Philippines. He took down my buddy Hodge with malaria and my pal Zucco with a mortar blast, but he never got me.” I looked her in the eyes. “And I don’t plan on letting him, either.”

Mariko’s tight face slowly loosened into a smile. “Rick, you are a professional who insults clients, a detective who knows less than he acts, and a joke-teller who is much too serious.”

I stiffened. “Words like that’ll cut me in half like a katana.”

Her smile grew larger. “That is what I mean. How you said that just now.”

If I could have hanged myself from my own tongue just then, I would have. “Damn it, but you’re right. Now let’s get out of this pigsty and find us some answers.”

## Chapter 21

The rest of the trip to the bank was uneventful. No one gave us a second glance as we left the alleyway. On our walk down the block, I made sure to check for our tail every few minutes in the reflections of store shop windows or my wristwatch, but there was no black coupe or blue-suited booby in sight, and the crowds of pedestrians around us included no familiar faces. I stayed alert, but I felt confident that our little trick in the bookstore had been enough to give us some breathing room.

The First National Bank looked like any other bank in a city, even a smaller one like Omaha. It was short, squat, and as drab on the outside as a pessimistic spinster. The doors were on hinges rather than being of the revolving variety, and I watched for a minute as people went in and out. They looked happier walking out than going in, and I hoped we'd feel the same way.

"Ready?" I asked Mariko, staring straight ahead at the doors.

"Less than you, perhaps, but ready enough." She said it with quiet certainty that assured me as much as I'm sure it did her.

I pulled open the door and gestured. "Ladies first."

She strode in, carrying her head high. I followed, pushing the door out with my fingertips to keep it open for the man coming in behind me.

I was underwhelmed by the bank's lobby. Given the various museum, hotel, and train station lobbies I had been in over the past half-week, one of them was bound to come up short eventually. The tile here was a shade paler than ivory, which made the dirt and grime of the outside world stand out when it got tracked inside. The marbling on the walls forming the cashiers' boxes looked like a swarm of angry gnats writhing in a sea of foam. Worst of all, the

only non-human living thing in the place, the obligatory plant standing in one corner of the room, looked less alive than the tile it rested upon.

I hastened my steps and caught up with Mariko as she reached the short line in front of the teller stations. I murmured to her out of the corner of my mouth, “For an art enthusiast, your father had an interesting habit of choosing the ugliest places of business.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, watching the clerks intently as they worked.

“I mean that this place is as dowdy a place to put your money as that apartment building of his was as a living space. Just an observation.”

Mariko was silent, and I followed suit until a free teller looked up and called for the next available customer. “I would like to open up a safety deposit box,” she said to the woman behind the desk.

The teller, a plump younger woman wearing brown-framed bifocals, began reaching into an unseen drawer. “We have an application form that you may fill out—”

“Forgive me,” Mariko said. “I expressed myself poorly. I mean to say that I wish to look inside a box that is already in use.” Taking that as a cue, I pulled out the safety deposit box key and laid it out on the counter.

The teller started to nod and then squinted through her bifocals at Mariko, ignoring the key entirely. “I’m sorry, I don’t recall you opening an account with us. I’m certain I would have remembered you.”

I felt my face turn red, as if some leftover alcohol had reentered my system to give me a midday buzz. I was about to interject when Mariko said, “You are correct, madam. My father, Eugene Meyer, opened the account, and I believe that he would have given me access to it in the event of his . . . unavailability.”

Now the woman's eyebrows were raised above the glasses. "'Unavailability'?"

"Unavailability," Mariko repeated.

The teller held up her pointer finger. "One moment," she said before leaving her chair. I heard a man behind me mutter, "Unbelievable," as if an extra minute waiting in line would be enough to do him in. I gave Mariko a light nudge at the elbow. "At least they're listening to us," I said.

"If I were to let people turn me down after looking at me, I wouldn't have any help at all in this life."

I entertained myself by watching the ticking second hand of my watch until the teller returned with a thin, gray-haired man in a pinstriped three-piece suit. "Welcome to the First National Bank," the manager said warmly, as if he had just encountered us while strolling through the lobby. "Let's take a look at this account and then see what we can do to help."

"My name is Mariko Meyer. I wish to access a safety deposit box opened by my father, Eugene Meyer," Mariko said calmly, reaching into a bag and sliding both the key and a yellowing paper card through the open slot of the cage between teller and patron. "This is a government-issued identification card with my name, parents' names, and my signature upon it."

The manager's eyes widened upon closer inspection of the card, and my eyes did the same as I realized the typewritten format on the card looked exactly like that of a military-issued document. *From the camp?* I wondered.

After scrutinizing the card, the manager gave us a smile that didn't reach his eyes and slid a blank piece of paper back at us through the slot. "If you could sign that and then slide it back, in order that we can compare the signature for identification purposes."

Mariko complied with neither hesitation nor eagerness, writing in an elegant, feminine hand. We gave the teller and her boss a minute to pore over the evidence, then I impatiently rapped my knuckles on our side of the counter. “Well, did her father make an allowance for her to open his deposit box, or not?”

The manager looked at me as if he was surprised that I wasn't a mute. He looked down at the signature, then at the key, then back at me. “It is somewhat unusual, but I do recall that Mr. Meyer made the special request of allowing either his wife or daughter to open his box in his absence. Well, you have key, and you have proven that you are of his blood, so I can think of no objection.” He looked from Mariko to me. “Perhaps I spoke too quickly. Who are you, sir?”

“Friend of the family,” I said nonchalantly. “Mariko's not native to this town, so I've been showing her around.”

“I see. Mr. Meyer's request made no mention of a family friend receiving access to the box.”

“If you want me to scram, you can be more direct.” I nodded at Mariko. “Go see what you can see. I'll be waiting.” I went over to the wall as the manager exited the teller cage to lead Mariko to the safety deposit area.

I was leaning against the wall, staring out through the window onto the busy street, when I saw ol' blue suit walk past. And he saw me inside, seeing him. And one of us had to make a move.

## Chapter 22

I could have bounded out after him. It might have been more gratifying in the moment, but I didn't need thrills. I needed to stay ahead of Brannigan. So, I left my spot against the wall and took slow, even steps out the door. The blue-suited man now had his neck craned forward, like he was still looking for somebody inside. He was trying to play things off as if our making eye contact had been an accident.

Standing a couple of feet to his left hand, I leaned with my back against the glass, folded my arms and asked, "Did Brannigan send you himself, or were you ordered by proxy?"

"Don't know no Brannigan," the man said, still looking around. "I'm looking for a pal who said he was s'posed to be in here after lunchtime."

"Why don't you just go inside?" I asked. "Look, we saw you tailing us when we were out on the streetcar. We figured you've been following me all day, and I'm curious about why."

He looked over at me and sneered. "I ain't got time to follow some stooge around all day. I gotta make a living. I just needed to see my friend out here."

"Uh-huh, and I just needed to deposit a million dollars just now. Real cute."

"Maybe you need to see a shrink, fella." He looked back through the window. "You're thinking some spook is tailing you. I'm thinking I wanna be left alone."

"If you returned the favor and stopped tailing us in that ugly old car of yours, I'd be more than happy to oblige." I glanced over my shoulder, back into the lobby. Mariko hadn't returned from the safety deposit boxes yet. "It won't get you anywhere to play dumb. Just tell Brannigan I'm not sticking my nose into his business, so he doesn't need to waste his men's time following me around."

The man sighed. "I'll bet you're not paid enough to be this stubborn."

“Yeah, it’s more my natural disposition. Anyway, you’ve been burned, pal, so just take it like a man. No sense in following us when we know the jig is up and we won’t go anywhere we wouldn’t want to be seen.”

“I can do my job just fine without your help,” he said.

“Could have fooled me,” I said. “You lost us after we went into that bookshop, ace.”

The look of annoyance on his face was apparent even from a side view. “Doesn’t matter, Dale. I found you again just by peeking into all these windows, so it made about as much difference as life preservers on the *Titanic*.”

“Not the most apt comparison,” I said. “Now like I said, go talk to your boss.”

The corner of his lip curled like a worm before he said, “Gotta tell ya, it’s mighty funny to see somebody the boss said fought in the Big One swinging with a Jap.”

I reached over for his lapel and pulled his face next to mine. “Listen, slime,” I rasped into his ear, “I do what I’m paid to and I try not to complain. I take the customers who pay, even if they look like a Nip. Now beat it.” I shoved him away. He stumbled a few steps backward and started to raise his fists before taking in all the pedestrians around us and lowering them.

The man sneered again. “The boss said you’d probably be a piece of work.”

I waved him goodbye. “Toodles.”

He stomped away like a dejected schoolboy. I watched him walk all the way down the block, plop into his coupe, and drive past me on the street. He made a right turn and disappeared.

I was about to head back into the bank when the door swung open and Mariko walked out, her face drawn with confusion. I noticed that she was carrying a small, leather-bound book.

“What are you doing out here?” she demanded.

“I finally met our friend from the Brannigan crew,” I said. “I gave him a nice send-off.”

“What does he know?” she asked tersely.

I frowned. “He knows you’re with me. I think I convinced him that we’re not related to the ‘Gunderson’ business at all. I guess Brannigan wants to know if I’m snooping after his would-be art dealer. His man seemed to buy it when I told him I wasn’t interested in Brannigan’s affairs. All the same, we’ll need to keep our eyes open in case he tries tailing us again.” I rubbed my hands together. “Now, what was in the box?”

She held up the book but pulled it back when I started reaching for it. “Just this. Just the book.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t been expecting gold pieces or diamonds, but until I knew what was in it, a book didn’t hold much promise for me.

“Where should we go?” Mariko asked. “I don’t like being out here on the street knowing that man could try to follow us again.”

Nodding, I took her by the arm and led her across the street. “There should be a bar half a mile or so from here. They keep the lights down low, even during the day.”

We left the bank without a blue suit in sight.

### Chapter 23

The bar had a dozen people inside it, including the sour-faced bartender and the waitress. The walls were decorated with Irish tokens like a University of Notre Dame leprechaun and a framed picture of Tom Dennison, a deceased political boss and proud Irishman.

We sat in a darkened corner, the back of my chair against the wall so that I could see out into the rest of the pub. I ordered some seltzer water and Mariko asked for a cola. After the waitress left to get our drinks, I pointed to the book in my client's hands. "Have you ever seen that thing before?"

Mariko set the book down on the table and ran her fingers along the front cover, as softly as if she expected it to purr. "Never."

"And you're sure there wasn't anything else in there?"

"Rick, there wasn't even a cobweb in that little box."

"Alright, I'm just being thorough."

The waitress returned with our drinks. Once we had smiled her away, Mariko slid the book forward and slowly opened it. There were words scribbled all over the pages in black ink. The hand was slanted and rough; I had no chance of reading it upside down.

Mariko was nodding. "This is certainly my father's handwriting. He cared more about getting the words onto the page than how they looked once they were there."

"Can you read it?" If we had gone to all that trouble to get the book only to be foiled by bad penmanship, I'd scream.

"These look like journal entries." She flipped to the start of the book. "The first date is in December 1942. He must have started this after Mother and I were taken to the camp." She continued flipping through the journal.

“Do you have any idea why your father would go to the trouble of placing a journal in a secure box?”

“He didn’t fixate on this sort of thing.” She flipped another aging page. “Nostalgia, I mean. Apart from art, he never wanted to hang onto anything old if he could help it.”

I glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was eyeing us from out in the rest of the bar. “Maybe he’s got something written in secret code for us to figure out. Or maybe there’s a map leading to buried treasure.”

Mariko didn’t answer.

I looked back over at her. Her eyes were wide, and I thought I could see a tear forming at one corner. “What is it?” I asked.

She held up a shaking finger and stabbed it onto the page she had turned to. I followed her finger and saw a photograph of a dark-haired young man. “It’s...*him*,” Mariko said in a cracked voice.

I slowly picked up the photo, which had the texture of a newspaper clipping, and held it close to my face. I had seen that boy before. He had a strong nose and glossy hair, just like his father. The boy was Declan Brannigan. Buddy’s son.

Setting the photo onto the table, I looked back at Mariko. She was biting the knuckle of her index finger on her right hand.

My mind was racing. How could the son of a Midwestern crime boss have become a camp guard out in California? And why?

“I never thought I’d have to see that face again,” Mariko choked out.

I snatched the photograph up and slipped it into my jacket pocket. “And you won’t have to.” I reached over and pulled the journal to my side of the table. “Maybe this will help.”

Mariko closed her eyes as tears began crawling down her cheeks.

There were other items tucked between the journal's pages. I reached into the folds and removed a clipped newspaper article from the *World-Herald*: "Local businessman's son arrested in liquor robbery." Skimming the article, I learned that Declan had been bagged with a group of associates shortly after the war. Taped to the article was another one, this item detailing how Declan and his crew were acquitted due to the prosecution's overreliance on circumstantial evidence.

I looked down at the scrawled words in Eugene Meyer's journal. The answers had to be in that book. As Mariko wiped her tears away, I started to read.

## Chapter 24

It was slow going to work through the looping highs and spidery lows of Eugene Meyer's handwriting, but I started getting the hang of it by the time the waitress stopped over to refill our drinks. I would read portions aloud to Mariko at a volume just above a whisper when I found something of interest.

“January 2, 1943: The men at the War Relocation Authority won't listen. I told them about how proudly Mariko sang 'God Bless America' in the school choir, and about the quilt Keiko sewed for Independence Day last year. I told them that neither of them ever even heard of Hideki Tojo or Emperor Hirohito before they saw the names in the newspapers. I told them Keiko hasn't seen her home country in nearly twenty years, and Mariko has never left California!

“They didn't listen. They nodded and said 'Erm, erm' like proper gentlemen. But they didn't listen. They told me that President Roosevelt himself ordered that these precautions be taken. I could hardly argue with President Roosevelt, could I? If I'd had more of a backbone, I might have told them I voted for Willkie in the last election.”

Mariko snorted. “He did, at that. He told us even a good man like Roosevelt would turn into a king if he sat in power for too long.”

“Pretty well-spoken for a working-class man.”

“There was a spark within him that yearned for something apart from engines and undercarriages.”

I continued my search. “April 19, 1943. The boys at the garage finally canned me. It was my own damn fault. I let slip that I'd spent the weekend down south, and George started blabbing that the next closest place south of us was Manzanar. Mr. Hoskins called me into his office and told me they couldn't afford to have a man on the payroll whose closest relatives were

accused of being spies. Things got pretty ugly, and I nearly got tossed out by some of the bigger guys who came in when they heard the yelling. I left, and I don't think I woulda wanted to stay anyways.'”

I skimmed the next few pages. “June 5, 1943. Beautiful summer day with Keiko and Mariko. They let us walk all throughout the yards. I thought there was something on Keiko's mind, something like a dark stain in her thoughts, but she didn't want to talk about anything miserable. She only wanted the three of us to enjoy this togetherness. I'd have rolled my eyes at it, but I do love her so, so I just nodded.”

The next part gave me pause. My eyes darted up at Mariko's expectant face and then dropped back down to the page. “I'm so very glad Mariko is growing up into such a beautiful young woman. To think that such a one as this could have come from me, even if only partially, makes me nearly tremble as I write. She deserves a better life than this.”

I turned the page. The paper was nearly blackened with a frenzied series of scribbles. I leaned in close and squinted, trying to make out a date beneath the marks.

“Is it the seventh of June?” Mariko's voice trembled.

“It could be.”

“See what the next page says.”

I flipped the pen-gouged pages away. The writing on the next pair of pages was choppy, with words dropping out of line like drunken men tumbling off the side of a bridge. I shook my head and slid the book toward Mariko. “I can't make this out. You're more familiar with the handwriting. You try it.” When Mariko didn't answer, I looked up at her. Her eyes were glistening.

“I . . . I can’t.” She was looking past me, past the dingy wall of this low-lit place, past the preceding five years. She was looking at the face of the man who stood like a specter in her mind.

“Okay.” I took the journal back. “I’ll try again.” I would prefer sorting through the jungle of scrawled words than facing that half-hurt, half-empty look in Mariko’s eyes. “‘June 7.’ He didn’t write the year. Didn’t bother to, I guess. ‘June 7. Mariko’s alive. Mariko’s alive. But she won’t be the same. Not after what he did. I’ll make sure they shoot him, or hang him dead. But it won’t help my little girl, will it? If he lives, it’s a crock and we live in fear. If he dies, she still has to live with what he did to her. My little girl. My only child. The boy won’t live. I won’t let him.’”

The next few pages were blank, as if Meyer had imagined he was writing in them as the days passed, when in reality they were unmarked. Finally, I came to a new entry. “‘June 25, 1943. I write this on the train to Las Vegas. It’s as close to Manzanar as any of the other big cities. I don’t know how I’ll find the boy, but I will. I’ll find him, and I’ll find some way to make him pay.’”

“So that’s what it was all about,” Mariko breathed. She wiped her tears away like she was brushing a troublesome fly off of her face. “It was never about money, or making sure Mother and I had enough to live on. It was about revenge. He left for five years because he wanted revenge.”

“But...the urn...” Trying to wrap my head around it was like picking up sand with a fork. “How does the urn fit in?”

“The urn?”

I quickly explained the Brannigan caper, or at least what I knew of it. “I just can’t figure how this urn fits into these plans for revenge. If he wanted to get at Declan Brannigan, why was he dealing with his father for a Grecian urn?”

“I don’t give a damn about an urn!” Mariko screamed, striking her fists down on the table. I jerked upright and saw half a dozen pairs of eyes were on us.

“Mariko, we need to go.”

“I don’t care about the urn,” she repeated. “Why did he need to leave us for so long?”

I stood up, set some money for our drinks down on the table, and led her outside with my hand tucked at her elbow. We stepped outside the bar and into the dying afternoon light. Commuters and busybodies filled the streets and sidewalks. I didn’t see the tail from before anywhere around us.

“Where are we going, Rick?” Mariko didn’t sound angry, but there was still an edge in her voice.

“Someplace safe,” I said, craning my neck to look for a taxi. “Damn. I don’t like sticking around on this street corner. It makes me feel like a dodo waiting to get shot off of a fence. Our friend from before isn’t following us now, but that’s no reason to sit here and play pat-a-cake. Let’s get moving and hope we see a cab on our way.”

“You’ve been leading me an awful lot of places today, Mr. Rick. I’d almost like for it to stop.”

“You get used to all the running around, trust me.”

Mariko suddenly snatched the notebook out of my hand and clutched it to her chest.

“This is all that’s left of him, and I feel like tearing it to pieces.”

I didn't know how to answer that, so I just tugged on her elbow again and said, "Let's go."

## Chapter 25

We saw a taxi cab after walking three blocks and hailed it without any trouble. Mariko tried to smile as I opened the door of the taxi for her. “Thank you, Rick.”

As I slipped into the taxi and shut the door, the driver turned around to me. “Rick? As in, Rick Dale?”

“No, my name is Rick Martin,” I said. “Never heard of anybody named Rick Dale.”

Shrugging, the cabbie turned back to the wheel and murmured, “I seen that guy’s ad in the paper. It says he’s a private detective, specializes in fidelity cases. All sounds like horse manure to me.”

“I’m sure he’d laugh at that if he were here,” I said before giving him the address to my office.

“Maybe he would laugh. Don’t suppose he could help me out with my life story.”

“Find him in the phone book,” I said. “A man in that profession has to be willing to handle all kinds of customers, I’m sure.”

“What are we going to do at your office?” Mariko asked. “I don’t think that’s a wise decision. If we know that Bra—”

I gave her a warning shake of my head and then gestured toward the driver, who was pretending to focus on the road while actually hanging on to every word we said. He couldn’t have been less subtle if he’d been wearing clown paint.

Mariko continued. “If we know that you-know-who is having you followed, wouldn’t that be the first place he’d look?”

“Here’s the thing,” I said. “I don’t know what to do next. Every time it looks like we’ve solved this thing, something else cracks it back open. So I need a quiet place to think where we can have our little outbursts without anybody staring.”

“That’s not a fair remark,” Mariko said stiffly. “I had every right to be upset.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t. I’m saying I need to be someplace where getting upset doesn’t get us noticed and maybe get us killed.”

“You folks in some kinda trouble that you needs cops for?” the driver asked, his head turned a quarter toward the backseat.

“No, we’re just dandy,” I said. “We’d be doing even better if our driver kept both eyes on the road and both ears off our talk.”

“Okay, okay, don’t jump down my throat. I get enough of that grief from my wife.”

“Wonder of wonders,” I said before turning back to Mariko. “I want to go to the office. I might prefer my apartment, but my landlord is on my back as it is with the rent, so I’m not planning on bringing a woman home either.”

“Especially one like me,” she muttered.

An uninvited lump formed in my throat. “I didn’t say that.”

Mariko patted my hand. “Forgive me. I thought that’s how your landlord might think.”

I stared at the seatback in front of me. “If you want me to put you up in a hotel and leave the book with me, that’s fine. If it would make you feel more comfortable.”

She clutched the book tight to her chest again. “Not on your life. We read it together or not at all.”

“The longer I go without figuring this out, the more my head feels like it’s stuck inside a pressure cooker. We’ve got to solve it, and to solve it we’ve got to read the book. Together it is, then.”

“Hey, lovebirds, your stop’s comin’ up,” the cabbie said. He pulled the taxi over to the curb.

Handing him his fee with only a small tip, I said, “Maybe don’t talk so much next time, huh?”

## Chapter 26

“You were a bit short with that cabbie,” Mariko noted.

“I have to keep control of a situation if I can help it,” I said. “If you don’t keep a tight rein on things, you take a bullet in the face or a knife in the side. Just my humble opinion.”

“It seems like an awful lot of trouble to be a detective in a town like this,” Mariko said.

“It’s an awful lot of trouble to be anything in a town like this,” I said.

We had come upon the entrance to my building. There was a man sitting at a bench across the street, a newspaper in his hands, as well as two men chatting at the opposite corner. They had looked up at us when we exited the cab and had stolen a few more glances at us in the past minute.

Walking toward my door, I reached into my pockets and pretended to fumble for my keys, keeping the three men in my peripheral vision. The man on the bench briefly looked up from his newspaper, and I noted the two conversing men taking a few seconds to look our way just as I pulled my office key out of my coat.

“Of course, the door’s already unlocked,” I said to Mariko out of the side of my mouth. “Step into the lobby and watch out the window. Holler out the door if you see those two bozos start walking toward me.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to talk to the fellow on the bench,” I said simply.

Making my way across the street, I came up to the man on the bench and tapped the headline on the newspaper. “Pretty great read about President Truman, huh?”

“I suppose so,” the man said, shifting in his seat.

I stood behind him and placed my hands on his shoulder, taking care to glance down his suit and note the bulge of his sidearm in his jacket. "Look, I know you and the two guys over there are Brannigan's boys," I said, as slowly and deliberately as if I was speaking to a child. "Don't bother hiding it. I already met one of your partners earlier today. He gave me the same routine, and I gave him the bum's rush, so now it's your turn."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about, Jack," the man said, trying to burrow further into his newspaper.

"You have enough of an idea to know that I'm not Jack, I'm Rick," I said before pointing to the building across the way. "And you have enough of an idea to know that that's my place over yonder, and that I'm the man you've been sent to spy on for your boss."

"Cut it out, pal," the man said, turning the page of the newspaper as he spoke.

"Do you have a license for that gun?" I asked, patting his breast pocket. The two men on the corner stared at me.

"I don't have to tell you anything about that," the man said. "I've got a permit, but you're no cop. You don't have to see it."

"How about I call my detective friend from the police force to come and pay me a little visit," I said. "I'm sure he'd pay a good deal of attention to a suspicious loiterer with an unlicensed heater in his pocket. It sure would look good on his report to say that he busted a member of the Brannigan family in his spare time, and I wouldn't mind being noted for calling in the tip."

"Brannigan's name isn't one you throw around like that, buddy," the man said, finally breaking away from his newspaper to look up at me. "He's a legitimate businessman with no criminal ties, and you would do well to remember that."

I laughed right in his face. “Buddy Brannigan looks like a beloved uncle on the outside, I’ll give you that. But underneath, he’s a shark that’s smelled fresh blood. And you and I and your friends over there all know it.”

“Okay, I’ll play along,” the man said. “For fun, let’s say I work for Buddy Brannigan. That isn’t a crime, is it?”

“No, but I’d love to talk to Buddy, now that you’re not too ashamed to admit you’re his pal,” I said. “Where could I find him at this hour?”

“Look, I can’t tell that to nobody, Dale,” the man said.

“Good thing I’m not nobody,” I said. “I’d like to remind you that having you in lock-up for unlicensed handguns and all that would give the department’s sharp-eyed detectives a chance to ask you some tough questions. Real tough questions about whatever less-than-polite activity I’m sure you’ve been up to. Doesn’t that sound like a treat?”

The mobster looked at me, looked at his two compatriots at the end of the street, and dropped his gaze to the ground. “Fine, you win, Dale. I’ll tell you where Brannigan is.”

“Rick, watch out!” Mariko yelled suddenly, her head sticking out from the front door to my building.

Tilting my head to the side, I saw a dark-suited man trying to creep up behind me with what looked like a lead pipe in his hand. I instinctively kicked backward, knocking him into the wall of the closest building.

The man on the bench butted his head backward, hitting me in the stomach. As I doubled over, I reached down and pulled his own gun out of his coat, training it on him and the two men at the street corner.

I felt a sharp pain in the side of my left knee and my legs gave out. The fourth man had just tackled me at the knees. I hit the pavement with full force, the gun clattering out of my hand as I collided with the sidewalk. The other two men ran toward us.

“Run, Mariko, run!” I yelled as I turned over and punched the mobster who had latched onto me right in his face. He fell to the ground, his nose broken and leaking blood. I sprang up and ran toward the alleyway.

“Don’t make us kill you, Dale!” one of the men yelled.

“Get as far away from here as you can, Mariko!” I cried at the top of my lungs as I turned the corner into the alley.

My jaw exploded and spots crowded in my vision. I crashed against a brick wall. A fifth man stood before me, his fists raised in triumph. I swung a wild left hook, but I was too dazed to land it. The man threw another punch that hit crunched into my jaw and knocked me down onto the cement in a heap. Before I could get back up, the others had all sprinted up to us, pointing their guns down at my battered form.

“Not such a smartass now,” the man from the bench said. He gave a nod to the fifth, silent thug, who lifted up his foot.

I saw a wicked smile on his face as the foot came crashing down, and then . . . darkness.

## Chapter 27

I drifted awake and asleep, a nightmare wrapped in a daydream.

When I finally came to for good, my head was pounding, and I couldn't see a thing. Someone had pulled a burlap sack over my head, its rough fibers scratching my face like a hundred tiny cat claws. I could feel that I was sitting on a leather seat, and the sound of an engine somewhere in front of me meant that I was traveling in the back seat of a car.

I didn't bother trying to move around. My hands were cuffed behind my back and pressed into the leather cushions behind and beneath me. There was a rod-like piece of metal jammed into my right side—a pistol.

"His head just moved," a voice to my left said. "I think he's awake."

"His head's been bobbing like a sailboat since we started," a voice to my right said. "He ain't up yet." I was slightly relieved that the man preparing to give me a series of unwanted lead injections didn't seem to have an itchy trigger finger.

"Ain't they supposed to wake up after a while?" asked the left-hand voice.

"Ain't you two supposed to shut up and do your job?" growled a rumbling from the space in front of me—the front seat.

"Sorry, Quinn," the right-hand voice murmured. For a man with a gun in his hand, he struck me as something of a limp-wrist. Given that even a limp-wristed shooter isn't likely to miss at a distance of half-an-inch, however, I wasn't keen to let him know my opinion.

We rode in silence for several more minutes. I did my best to keep my body loose, letting my head loll from side to side.

Finally, I felt the car start slowing down and heard the slight whine of the brakes. "Get him inside, fast," the man called Quinn barked.

A car door opened, then the pistol was removed from my side and a set of bony fingers latched around my arm. I resisted the temptation to tense up against the move, allowing myself to be dragged out of the vehicle as dead weight. Once I was forced outside of the car, another hand clamped around my free arm, and the pair of chatty thugs pulled me across what felt like the rough bumpiness of scattered dirt, my feet dragging soles-up and my head drooping forward.

I heard a rustling and figured that my escorts had pulled me onto grass. There was the creaking of uncoiled hinges and the *thump* of something large and wooden landing on the ground. A cellar door?

“Get him down there,” Quinn grunted.

“I’ll get his legs,” one of the men said, scooping up my ankles while another man shifted his hands beneath my armpits, holding up my torso.

I was carried downwards. The slow, rhythmic pattern of *down, pause, down*, punctuated by squeaking wood, told me I was being taken down an old flight of stairs. When we reached the bottom, I was unceremoniously thrown onto a wooden chair. I nearly slid off, but a thin-fingered hand grabbed my shoulder and set me upright.

The bag had partly slid off my head, just enough that I could peek downward and see two key details: this cellar was dimly lit, and whoever had a hold of my shoulders was standing a foot away to my right, judging from the proximity of his unpolished shoes within my field of vision.

“Daniel, you grab the rope over there,” Quinn said. “Lenny, take the cuffs off him so we can tie his hands to the armrests. I’m going up to close the cellar door.”

“I know the drill, boss,” the man next to me muttered, reaching behind me. I kept my arms loose and held my breath. I heard a tiny click before feeling one and then the other metal ring around my wrists come loose.

I moved as much by touch as by sight. My left hand snaked around in front of me and seized Lenny's right wrist. I simultaneously rose to my feet while jerking Lenny forward. I brought my right elbow up and smashed it into his nose. With the precision of a dancer, I took two quick steps around and behind Lenny, wrapping my left arm around his throat before reaching down his waistband with my free hand. I felt cold metal and plucked the gun from the front of his trousers.

Two of the men from the sidewalk fight stood across from me in a dust-caked cellar, all of us illuminated by a naked bulb hanging overhead like a stranded acrobat. Their hands were halfway out of their coats, pistols at the ready.

"Drop it," I said, pulling back the pistol's hammer with my thumb.

They both froze, eyes wide in fear and mouths curled downward in hatred.

"Where are your friends?" I took a slow step forward while guiding Lenny in front of me.

"Screw you," spat Quinn, who I recognized as the big man who bushwhacked me in the alleyway.

I pulled back the pistol's hammer with my thumb. "Where are the other guys who jumped me?"

"They went up to the house to call the boss," Lenny squeaked.

"Shut up, Lenny!" the other man said.

"Why'd Brannigan want to have me kidnapped?"

Quinn and Daniel exchanged a brief glance, their eyes throwing invisible messages across the cellar space.

“Or isn’t it Brannigan?” I asked before shaking my head slowly in thought. “This isn’t his style. This is too rough-and-tumble, too . . . too much of Donnie Sullivan. He’s on his way, isn’t he?”

Lenny swallowed, a simple movement that rippled through his emaciated body like a fishing bobber in a river.

“I say that’s a yes.” I gestured to my right with my head. “Both of you into the corner, hands on your heads. Slow steps, if you don’t mind.”

The two complied, but I didn’t take my eyes off of them. I edged over to the stairway, keeping the two in my peripheral vision. “Who’s got the keys for the car that brought us here?”

“They’re with one of the boys upstairs,” Quinn said. “You might as well give up now, Dale. Ain’t no way you get out of here alive.”

“I suppose I’ll have to ask them nicely.” I tried not to give away how rapidly my mind was working. Chancing a glance to my left, I saw that the cellar stairs were clear. “Tell Donnie-boy I send my regards.” Keeping the pistol in a tight grip, I twisted Lenny around and shoved him back into his two buddies. I sprinted up the steps like dogs were biting at my heels.

Sunlight blinded me briefly for a few steps. I heard curses and rushing feet behind and beneath me. When my eyes had adjusted, I saw that the single cellar door, still lying opposite the portal, had a lock dangling on the left-hand side. I forced the door up off the ground and slammed it close, then dove to the ground.

A trio of gunshots roared upward, splintering the wood. I threw my sleeve over my eyes for protection and scrambled for the open padlock on the ground. Still lying flat on the ground, I reached up and snapped the lock closed over the clasp of the door.

The goons had taken me to a farmhouse, a rickety, unpainted old shack that sagged against itself in quiet despair. To my left stretched open fields, and a metal windpump farther along. To my right was a wooded area, like a modern-day Sherwood. A dirt road led from the front of the house out to infinity.

I peeked around the side of the house. A slick black Dodge Custom sat in the driveway. The front door of the farmhouse, a screen door, shrieked on its hinges as it was slammed open. I drew back, my body pressed against the wall and the pistol held out half a foot in front of me.

Grass crunched under feet as someone rushed toward the cellar. I saw nothing distinct coming toward me from around the corner, only impressions: pink face, black suit, gray pistol. I lashed out with my left fist. There was a crack like chicken bones in a dog's mouth. The man fell to the ground.

I whipped around the corner, the pistol held out in a straight-armed shooter's stance. The last man from the kidnapping was on the lawn halfway between the screen door and the corner of the house. He was bringing his own gun to bear on me. I shot at him four times, the gun roaring in my hands. At least two bullets found their home in his body, and he crumbled in a bloody mess.

More gunshots rang out somewhere behind me. They were shooting their way through the cellar door. I ran to the thug I'd punched out and searched his coat pockets with my free hands. Nothing. I looked over at the soon-to-be corpse of the man I'd blasted. "Damn it."

When my hand emerged from his coat pocket, it was dyed red, but I found the keys. I yanked open the front door of the car, started the straight-six engine, and whipped out onto the dirt road. The inside of the car was so smeared, a traffic cop would think I'd murdered somebody in it.

I saw a trio of hats in the rearview mirror and floored it. I had escaped, but I didn't know what to do next.

## Chapter 28

The Dodge tore down the road in a single-minded fury. The gun was resting on the passenger seat, a travel companion that offered nothing but reproving glares. The dead man's blood on my hand dried out in the late afternoon sun. That very same hand gripped the steering wheel like it was a life preserver.

*They don't have Mariko*, I thought. Last I saw her, she was in the building. Only five men had grabbed me, and they all came with me out to the farmhouse. They had been too busy with me to grab her. *They don't have Mariko. She's safe. She has the book and she's safe.*

The sight of far-off houses on the horizon helped suppress my leaping heart rate. I eased off the accelerator grudgingly and used my free hand to pull out a handkerchief from my inner coat pocket. The white cotton soaked up the blood on my other hand and on the steering wheel.

I had killed a man, the second life I'd ended in three days. The death had been quick, and it had been in self-defense, but that didn't mean I wasn't weighed down by it. Not enough to drown me in guilt, but enough to wear me out if I had to hold onto it for too long. I threw the bloodied handkerchief out the window.

I was east toward Sixtieth Street, roughly the farthest west that Omaha reached, a modern-day version of the last trade outpost before the pioneer's departure into the untamed wilderness. I was screaming to get away from what everyone else was looking out toward.

When I reached the signposts before the traffic intersection, I saw that I was at Sixtieth and Maple, back in the Benson suburb. I blazed through the intersection, headed north, and pulled up to the curb across from the bright-red brick building that was the public library. I sighed as the engine died away. Looking to the left and then right, I reached over and stuffed the pistol into the front of my waistband.

As I ran to the front door of the library, a pedestrian said, “Hey mister, you can’t park there. City fellas are comin’ through to do some work on the street.”

“So what else is new,” I said.

“They’ll tow your car.”

“So tow it.” I yanked the library door open and stepped in.

Nobody stared at me too badly given the cuts and bruises that I surely had on my face.

“Can I help you, sir?” a young woman in a pastel blue blouse asked from behind the desk.

“You have a phone I can use?”

“Of course,” she said without missing a beat. “Right this way.” She led me to it and stood back while I dialed.

The girl from McMahon’s office gave me the same spiel as before.

“It’s Rick Dale. Remember me?” She said she did. “Look, can you patch me in to Lieutenant McMahon, please?”

“I’m afraid the lieutenant is out of his office at the moment,” the girl said chirpily. “May I take a message for you?”

“Tell him . . . tell him I called if I don’t ring again. And another thing. Has a Japanese woman shown up at the station within the last half-hour or so?”

“Not that I know of, sir.”

“Could you check, please?”

“One moment.” I heard the clunk of a receiver being set down, then the faint, distant murmur of background voices that sounded more like the ambience of a jungle at nighttime than anything belonging to an urban environment. I noticed that the librarian—or clerk, or whatever

position she held—was still at my elbow. “Would I be able to have a bit of privacy?” I asked her. “It is a library, after all.”

“Of course,” she said meekly, though I could tell her interest had been piqued by my mention of a “lieutenant.” In any case, she returned to the front desk, keeping her eyes on me as I waited.

Finally, the police secretary picked up the phone again. “Are you still there, Mr. Dale?”

“Of course,” I leaned forward.

“I’m afraid no one of that description, man or woman, has come through the station doors all day.”

*Why didn’t Mariko go to the police?* I wondered. *They could have kept her safe.* “Okay. Thanks. Remember to tell McMahon I called. Good-bye.” I pressed down on the phone’s hook and started dialing again.

I rang in the number to the main desk at my office building. After a few moments, a woman, the front desk secretary, answered. “Aksarben Offices, this is Martha speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hey, it’s Rick Dale, up on the third floor. Listen, I needed you to tell me something.”

“Oh, Mr. Dale! I’ve been hoping you could explain everything.”

I cocked my head to the side. “What? Did you see something? Talk to someone?”

“A woman came rushing into the lobby. An Asian woman, I recall. She demanded to use the phone and called the police. I overheard her saying something about a kidnapping, and she mentioned your name, and—”

“That’s fine, Martha, that’s fine. Now, where did the woman go after all that? What did she do?”

“It was so strange. Strange because of how frantic her phone call was, but perhaps not strange all by itself. She told me she was your client, but she was having trouble reaching you. She wondered if she could meet at your apartment, so I gave her your home address.”

“Bless you, Martha. Anything else?”

“Yes. She wanted to know if there was a side exit out of the building, something away from the main entrance. I asked her why, but she wouldn’t say. In any case, I showed her the fire door and she left.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that, Mr. Dale.”

“Thank you, Martha. I have to dash.” I hung the phone up. The gun was in my waistband. The destination was in my mind. I had just one more call to make, then I would find a way to bring all of this to a close.

**Chapter 29**

Dylan picked up on the fourth ring. “This is Reverend Carver.”

I bit my lip before speaking into the phone. “Dylan, it’s Rick. I don’t have a lot of time, and none to spare on chatting.”

“Rick? What’s going on? It’s nearly time for evening service. You’re not calling ahead about it, are you?”

“No. I just need to tell you I’m in trouble.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

I stared up at the blank ceiling of the library, searching for the right words. The words that were trapped in my chest, trying to burst forth like a boiling geyser. “I can’t hardly admit it, Dylan. But I’m scared.” A barking laugh erupted from my mouth. “Damn it, I’m scared like I haven’t been since before I came home. An hour ago, I was halfway to being tortured. I’ve been knocked out, shot at, chased down . . . Dylan, I don’t think I can pull through.”

“Rick, if you need help from the police—”

“It’s not like that, Dylan. I know what to do, and they don’t. It’d take too long for them to catch up. I have to finish the job.”

“What job?”

“I have to find Mariko. I have to save her, get her out of this town and away from this whole mess.”

“Mariko? Who—is that your client? The one you told me about?”

“Yeah. And I let her down. I picked a fight I thought I could win instead of looking out for her. Now I need to find her.”

“You sounded like a coldhearted smartass the last time you talked about her.”

“That’s not—you’re right, but we’re wasting time. I just needed to confide. Let somebody know what I felt. Like I said, I have to finish the job no matter how hollow it makes my gut feel. I’m just not sure I can survive it.”

The pause from Dylan’s end made me wish I was in the same room as my friend. I wished I could see him press his fingers together into a steeple and bob his head up and down, contemplating everything I’d said.

“Are you still there, pal?” I asked.

“Your armor’s finally cracked,” Dylan said. “The true Rick, the one who’s always hiding behind a witty shell. The man you used to be, as far as I can recall.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Just do one thing for me, Dylan. Something I never thought I’d ask.”

“Yes?”

“Pray for me. For whatever it’s worth, pray for me.” I hung up before Dylan could reply. I’d spent enough time as it was. Giving a nod to the woman at the desk, I adjusted my waistband and headed back outside.

### Chapter 30

The city was already towing my stolen car. I didn't look in that direction. It took five blocks of walking before I found a taxi that didn't already have a fare. As we pulled into the parking lot a quarter hour later, I noticed a shiny black Lincoln Continental with white tires. It was a strange car, strange in how it stuck out like a tuxedoed man at the beach. No one at my apartment drove a car that fancy. Something solidly mid-grade, perhaps, but nothing that fancy.

Mr. Como was waiting for me inside the apartment building. He was a short, irritable man with greasy black hair and a Charlie Chaplin mustache. I might have thought him comical if he hadn't spent so much of his life hanging over me with the guillotine of rent demands. He strutted forward from out of his office, puffing along in his little navy suit. "Mr. Rick Dale, you have much explaining to do."

A mustachioed man lounged by the elevator. He seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place him, at least not with Mr. Como jabbering at me.

"Mr. Rick Dale, there is a woman up in your apartment. A foreign woman."

The man across the way stood up a bit straighter, more attentively. I jerked a thumb across my throat to indicate silence to my landlord. Leaning forward, I asked softly, "Is she Japanese?"

Mr. Como nodded indignantly, as if his own kin hadn't been on the wrong side of the war either. "Yes, and she is up in your apartment, and she seems to be falling to the pieces."

"Falling to pieces," I corrected. "Did you let her in?"

"Yes, I let the foreign woman in. She told me she had to speak, and you were not being at the office, and now there is a policeman here, and—"

"A policeman? That him?" I nodded at the man in the elevator.

Nodding enough to half-snap his own neck, Mr. Como said, "That is him. He says he is with the police department. He sounded almost as urgent as the foreign woman."

I frowned. "When did he get here?"

"Only just before you did."

"Has anyone else you don't recognize been in through here?"

Mr. Como shook his head.

I ran my hand across my face in thought. "Say, you wouldn't happen to have seen which car he drove up here, would you, Mr. Como?"

Mr. Como's eyes lit up slightly. "A very nice car, Mr. Rick Dale. You might try to have such a nice car, if you work hard for once."

"What's the color? The make?"

"The black Lincoln. The pretty car with the wheels like angel robes."

"Right, thanks." I patted Mr. Como on the shoulder. "Soon as I get everything sorted out, I'll get you that rent check, ol' sport." Before I could hear any protestations to the contrary, I strode across the lobby toward the elevator.

As I got closer to the man, I recognized him, or rather, I recognized his distinguished walrus mustache. Officer Eccleston had been at the apartment where Mr. Meyer was killed, and he had likely been eavesdropping on me and McMahon when we discussed how that murder had tied into the museum theft. He might have even heard one of us say the word "Brannigan."

"I heard you wanted to talk to me," I said, holding out my left hand to shake. "It's, uh, Mecklenburg?"

"Eccleston, sir," he said stiffly, gingerly shaking my hand. "The department has a few more questions to ask you about that incident at the hotel."

“Well, I’ll be a lot more comfortable discussing it up in my apartment,” I said. “You can even enjoy a little drink, on me.”

“Never on duty,” Eccleston said.

“I’m sure.” I pushed the call button for the elevator. The doors opened immediately. I slipped in first, standing on the right side of the compartment. Eccleston sidled in after me. Keeping watch in my peripheral vision, I darted my left hand out and pressed my floor number, my right hand remaining at my thigh, within reaching distance of my borrowed gun.

“Swell car,” I said as the doors closed.

“Beg pardon?”

“Your car. The Lincoln out front. I think it’s a fine-looking piece of art on wheels.”

Eccleston cleared his throat. “Thank you.”

“I wonder how much you had to save for it. Being a police officer and all, you could hardly have bought it in your first year.”

He stared straight ahead. “They don’t pay us slave wages, Mr. Dale.”

“Maybe not. I just thought you might have found a nice side hustle, something I could do in my free time. I wouldn’t mind driving a car like that.”

“If you worked as much as you talk, you could buy a whole fleet of ‘em,” Eccleston cracked.

The elevator dinged and the door slid open.

“Pearls before swine,” I said, gesturing for him to proceed. He walked out of the elevator with measured steps. I followed, keeping half a step behind him. As we neared my apartment door, I said, “Would you mind knocking for me?”

Eccleston looked confused, but he did as I asked regardless.

A voice called from somewhere inside the apartment, but not close enough as to have originated immediately next to the door. “Who is there?”

“Mariko, it’s Rick,” I called out, hoping she could hear me through the door. “I’m alright. By God, I’m alright.”

“Rick, is it really you?” She sounded breathless with relief. “What happened? How did you escape?”

“I’ll tell you before too long. Do you have the book?”

Eccleston’s head jerked up slightly. I acted like I didn’t notice.

There was a pause. “Of course I do.”

I nodded. “Good. Could you please unlock the door?”

Mariko did so. When the door was halfway open, Mariko saw Eccleston and froze. “Who is he?”

“Police officer. He says he’s here to help.”

She slowly opened the door all the way. Her hair was loose and disarrayed, spilling over her shoulders in a tangled mess. “You look terrible,” she told me.

I shrugged. “Maybe it’s an improvement.” I let Eccleston step in before me, and then I crossed the threshold back into my home.

### Chapter 31

Eccleston stood against the wall. I eased the door shut with my foot, not looking back at it but keeping my eyes trained at the other man. “Mariko, could you please grab the journal?” I asked.

She frowned at me. “Rick, there is so much to talk about. So much I do not know, and anyway . . .” She looked at Eccleston.

“He says he’s here about your father,” I told her. “About his murder. He was there, the day that it happened.”

Mariko bit her lip, then nodded. “Alright. It will be just a moment.” She stepped out of the living room.

“It’s interesting that they sent you, Officer Eccleston.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I wasn’t aware that the police department was in the habit of sending beat officers to follow up on murder investigations.”

He wriggled his upper lip, causing his mustache to move up and down like an ocean wave. “I go where I’m told, Mr. Dale.”

“It’s just a funny thing. You were there the day Eugene Meyer died, now you’re here in my apartment. It’s a funny thing.”

Mariko reentered the room, the leather-bound volume in her hands.

“That’s the one with the dirt on Brannigan?” I asked, for Eccleston’s benefit. He had suddenly tensed, and his hand had slipped inside his suit jacket.

“You know what it is,” Mariko said. “Rick, what’s going on?”

“Say, Eccleston,” I said. “Did Brannigan want you to kill me now or later?”

His hand darted into his jacket, but I was faster. I had the pistol out from my waistband and trained on him while he was still reaching for his shoulder holster. Eccleston stared at the barrel of my gun for a moment, then he slowly took his hand out of his pocket and held both of his palms forward.

“You must be making some nice money on the side to afford that Lincoln. Some nice Brannigan money, the kind he’d pay to have a faithful old officer on the force. Somebody who could be in the area when Brannigan’s boys ran a hit on a valuable mark like Mr. Meyer. Somebody who could overhear private conversations between police detectives and private dicks. Somebody fast enough with a gun to kill a man, but discreet enough to be forgotten after he did it.”

Eccleston took in a deep breath and sighed. “Brannigan knows about the book. He wants it real bad. Bad enough to knock off the loudmouth detective who’s been making so much trouble for him lately.”

“That sounds about right,” I said. “Turn around, and kneel on the ground.”

He did so slowly. When he was helpless, I struck him over the head with the butt of the pistol, relishing the *crack* of metal against bone perhaps a bit too much. He toppled over onto the carpet. I put the gun back in my waistband before kneeling down.

“You did that like it was nothing,” Mariko said. I half-hoped she was saying that out of admiration, but when I looked up at her, I saw fear in her eyes and disgust in the shape of her lips.

I looked down at the unconscious officer. “Part of the job. Not the best job, but still a job. We can’t afford to have him conscious while we talk, especially with what he already knows. Could you please hand me some tape? I have a roll in a drawer.”

“I am not a maidservant. I don’t have to run around your apartment grabbing things.”

I waved a hand over Eccleston. “Would you like to wrestle with him in case he wakes up?”

“You *try* to be this infuriating,” Mariko said, returning a moment later with the roll. Once I had bound Eccleston’s hands, feet, and mouth, as well as removed his pistol from its holster and set it on my kitchen table, I sat down and wiped my face with a towel. Getting up, I grabbed my telephone from the countertop and called Mr. Como so that I could ask him to summon the police.

“The police, Mr. Rick Dale? You have the police up there, yes?”

“Actually, this officer pulled a gun on us. We’re a bit confused, too, but we need some help.”

Mr. Como began swearing in Italian before hanging up. I put the receiver down and slid the phone away from me.

“What happened?” Mariko asked finally. “After the men attacked you and I ran inside. What happened?”

I gave her a quick summary of my escape, then asked, “Why didn’t you go straight to the police station? They could have kept you safe there.”

Mariko shook her head. “I was afraid. You are the only one who understands all of this, Rick. I couldn’t imagine trusting anyone else.”

“It can be hard to do the smartest thing in the moment. I know I didn’t.” I pointed to the book. “Alright, so what the hell is all of this really about?”

“I already read it, in the hours waiting here to see if you would return safely.” Mariko looked up at me. “It was blackmail. An incredibly stupid attempt at blackmail.”

“Blackmail, huh?” I leaned back in my chair. “Let me think. Your father tracked Declan Brannigan down, right? And he wanted to blackmail Buddy over the fact that his son attacked you while in uniform.”

“And that is where the urn comes in,” Mariko said. “My father spent several months here learning about the criminals, the ‘bosses’ here in the city. He learned about Brannigan’s sense of culture, and his plan to steal from the Joslyn Museum. Brannigan had convinced a curator to serve as an inside man.”

“Geoffrey Smith,” I said. “And your father wanted in on it.” I tapped my chin. “The urn was his cut. He threatened Brannigan with the charge of rape against his son, and his price was the urn.”

“That was my father’s plan. He would use the evil that had been done to us in order to profit our family.” She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I am sure he would not have informed Mother and myself about how the money was secured.”

“But something went wrong,” I said. “Brannigan had him killed, and the curator too. They killed the curator and made it look like a suicide. I bought it at first, but everything that’s happened, everything you’ve told me, makes it seem too convenient to have been anything but murder.”

“That wasn’t all,” Mariko said. “My father wanted to double-cross Brannigan. He would take the urn for himself, and he would send his journal to the newspapers before leaving the city. That was his plan.”

“But that’s not what he did. He had his book locked up at the bank for safekeeping, probably before the heist went down. He got the urn as his asking price, then he stayed in town for days, even knowing Brannigan wouldn’t want to keep him alive because of what he knew.”

“But why?” Mariko asked. “Why wouldn’t he leave after he got what he wanted?”

I thought back to everything Meyer had told me, everything he’d said. I snapped my fingers suddenly. “‘Forgeries!’”

“What?”

“Maybe your father didn’t leave because he *hadn’t* got what he wanted. When we spoke, he used the word ‘forgeries.’ Not ‘forgery,’ as in, one false urn made to fool the museum staff. But ‘forgeries,’ plural. As in, at least two. One for the museum . . .”

“And one for my father,” Mariko said quietly.

“Two fake ones to dish out, while Brannigan got to keep the genuine article. Your father must have realized the switch when he got a chance to look at the urn back at his hideout.”

“Of course Brannigan would do such a thing,” Mariko said. “He had no reason to give my father what he had asked for.”

“Especially if he suspected your father would try to put one over on him first. That’s the thing about blackmail. If you give in once, you give in for the rest of your life, or until the blackmailer pushes too hard and gets himself killed.”

“For my father, I suppose the first push was too much,” Mariko said somberly.

I looked back over to Eccleston, who was beginning to stir. “Well, we don’t have to let his death be pointless. I won’t pretend like I’m acting purely out of idealism. I don’t want Brannigan trying to gun me down anymore. We have to end this, and I think we have our link.”

## Chapter 32

As Eccleston came to, I sat him up, removed the tape from his mouth, and held my apartment telephone in front of him. His eyes started creaking open. “Wha...”

“I want to talk to Buddy Brannigan, Officer.” I had the dial ready to spin.

“I can’t . . . don’t know . . . don’t talk to Brannigan. Report to . . . to . . .”

I leaned forward. “Who gets all of the mole’s dirty little secrets?”

“S-S-Sulli . . .”

“Sullivan,” I spat. “You answer to Donnie Sullivan.”

“Y-yeah.” His eyes were finally coming into focus. “I talk to . . . Donnie Sullivan. He talks to Brannigan. Brannigan don’t talk to me.”

“Fine,” I said. “What’s the number to reach Sullivan?”

He gave it without any complaints. I was connected within a few minutes. The man on the other end said gruffly, “Who is this?”

“Your old pal, Donnie boy. I’m still alive and kicking, worse than an Irish mule. Worse than you, even. But I repeat myself.”

“I’m gonna kill you,” Sullivan growled.

“If you try hard enough, you might manage to give me bad dreams. Right now, you’re just giving me indigestion. Now listen up. I’ve got Eccleston, I’ve got a juicy little book, and I’ve got a deal to make.”

“There is no deal,” Sullivan said. “We get what we want. We stop you snooping. That’s the end of the story.”

“I’ve got Eccleston here. He tried his best, but he’s tied up in the middle of my apartment with nowhere to go. And I’m sure the police will be interested to talk to him about what the inside of a Brannigan job looks like.”

“What do you want, Dale?”

“You, me, and Brannigan meet at Elmwood Park. Lots of trees, not too many people. Oh, and Declan comes too.”

“Declan? He’s just a kid.”

“I think he has enough of his father’s lack of altruism in him,” I said darkly. “The four of us meet at Elmwood Park tomorrow morning at ten. I give you the blackmail stuff you’ve been trying to nab, you bring the urn that all this fuss has been about, and you swear to stop trying to mount my head on the wall.

“We ain’t got any urn here.”

“I already figured it all out, Donnie, so don’t waste my time. You Brannigan chumps are really bad about that. Just everything ready for tomorrow, like I asked. Deal?”

“I won’t say ‘deal’ to you, punk. But I’ll be there.”

“If you’re not all there, or if you don’t have the urn, I take a stroll down to the newspapers and give them a new headline story. Maybe they’ll even give you a free spot in the pet section of the classifieds.”

“I hate you.”

“Ten o’clock, Sullivan, or it all goes public. You know what I mean.” I hung up.

“I don’t know how you get anybody to talk to you, Dale,” Eccleston muttered.

“Here’s the first step.” I put the tape back on his mouth.

We waited for the police to arrive. After another five minutes, there was a knock at the door. I answered it and was prepared to explain what had happened when McMahon pushed me aside. "My wife had whipped up a nice cordon bleu, too," he grumbled, looking from me to Eccleston.

I explained what happened, from my kidnapping up to the point of my knocking Eccleston out.

"It's a lot to take in," McMahon said. "A lot, yet nothing substantively proven, so it's really almost nothing."

"Maybe not for long," I said. "I have an idea for what to do with Brannigan," I said.

"Shoot."

I laid out my plan aloud while the uniformed men who came in behind McMahon scooped Eccleston up and dragged him away.

"It might work, Rick. It might also get you killed."

"I'll get killed anyway if this doesn't let up. Can you help me out, Marty?"

He nodded. "And then you buy me a nice bottle of wine. I've bent over backward a lot for you lately, Rick."

I shook his hand. "Thanks, Marty. Good night."

After they'd all left, Mariko asked, "Do you know what you're doing?"

"I barely knew what I was doing at the Philippines, and I made it home alive."

"Even so. Where shall I sleep?"

I gestured toward my bedroom, wanting to be chivalrous this time. "You in there. I'll take the couch."

### Chapter 33

I used to wander through Elmwood Park when I came back from the war. I'd just put one foot in front of the other, trying to keep the "Hup-two-three-four" of Marine cadence out of my mind. That park was a lot quieter than it had been in the jungles of the Pacific. Over there, a never-ending animal hum threatened to cut through my brain like a buzz saw. The only thing worse than the screech of combat was the night stillness that wasn't still at all. The park, on the other hand, promised quiet, and it delivered.

Mariko and I arrived at the park at a quarter to ten. We were alone, at least for now. I was finally driving my own car again, well past the hangover symptoms that had appeared on a morning that couldn't truly have been a mere twenty-four hours prior. I had the journal, plus another black book, this one much thicker, and bound up in a leather strap. Mariko carried this one. The cover read "Politics, by Aristotle" but that wasn't what was inside of it.

We left my car in a lot a few blocks east of the park. I walked on the right side of the sidewalk, closer to traffic, allowing Mariko to walk on my left. It would have been a natural gesture for any other lady, but I had to think before I acted on this occasion. My mind and my heart were still not yet aligned.

"It hardly seems possible," Mariko murmured.

"What?"

"One way or another, we've reached the end of this whole, dreadful business."

"Yeah. I been thinking about that."

She brushed my arm. "I haven't let a day slip past without thinking about my father, every day for the last four years."

I looked over at her. “You’re sure you want to do this? It sure as hell won’t be easy on you.”

She stared straight ahead, as unmoving as the sphinx. “It must end. Your way is the best way yet conceived. It will work.”

I didn’t reply.

“It *must* work,” she said.

We reached the broad stretch of green that bordered Dodge Street. A healthy number of cars rumbled past, breaking through the silence I had once longed for there. Five men in dark suits, as well as a shorter man in a gray outfit, were standing roughly seventy-five yards ahead of us on the concrete pathway.

Mariko breathed deeply. “I can’t see him yet.” She gripped my left hand with her right.

After a moment, I gave her hand a comforting squeeze in response. “He can’t hurt you anymore. Not on your life.”

Brannigan stood confidently at the front of the pack in his gray suit, a lion at the head of his pride. Beside him loomed Donnie Sullivan, who hovered at his boss’s side like a brutish shoulder devil. On his left was the tall, thin man with the same dead eyes as a shark’s: Declan Brannigan. There were two more men, the type I could’ve seen in a James Cagney picture, behind the trio. One had his hands folded in front of himself, while the other had his encircled around a parcel wrapped in brown paper. Brannigan’s men all looked alike. They all wore their hats at that same, stupid, cock-eyed angle, like they thought it made them look tough, except it only made them look like kids wearing hats that were too big for them.

As we drew closer, Brannigan held out his hands like a father waiting to embrace his children. “There’s the man, there he is!” he said with a crooked smile.

“Still here in the flesh,” I replied. “Though not with much help from present company.”

Brannigan glanced at Sullivan and gave a distinctive roll of his eyes, like a perpetually annoyed dog owner. “Donnie-boy gets overzealous sometimes, yes he does. Occasionally tries to run things without my say-so. He knows better though, doesn’t he?”

Sullivan’s jaw tightened into a block of ice.

As we came within a few yards of the party, I kept slightly ahead of Mariko to protect her from their view.

Brannigan noticed the move. “And what do we have here?”

Sullivan screwed his face up even uglier than usual. “You didn’t say nothin’ about a lady, Dale. That wasn’t part o’ the deal.”

“I thought you wouldn’t say ‘deal’ with me,” I answered coolly. “She’s more a part of this than just about anyone else. Anyone else save one.”

Just like at the church that Sunday, Declan Brannigan stood mute. He tried to look past me at Mariko, his steel-gray eyes boring into me like twin needles. “Son of a bitch,” he murmured when he finally caught sight of the girl.

Mariko was looking off into the woods, deliberately avoiding eye contact. I didn’t blame her. It would have been a rough gang even if her attacker hadn’t been part of that brood.

“You don’t talk to her,” I said to Declan. “Not unless I say so.”

“I don’t think you should be giving orders here, Richie,” Brannigan said, a knife concealed beneath the suave tone of his words.

I slowly pointed out the two hired hands at either side of the main trio. “You don’t need the muscle. In fact, I doubt you’ll want them listening in.”

“We don’t even know what we’re talkin’ about,” Sullivan rumbled.

“Don’t play dumb,” I said. “Even you can’t pull it off that well, Sullivan. We’re here to talk about the blackmail and the urn. The whole bloody mess, start to finish. Maybe you trust these guys with your life, Brannigan, but do you trust them with your secrets?”

Brannigan gave a little sniff of a laugh. “You seem less jovial today, Mr. Dale. Almost like you mean business this time around.”

“Here’s what I was thinking: We walk a little ways into the park, just a touch off the beaten path. You leave your men in your car out on the street. We talk, we swap, we go home and live our lives. Does that stick?”

Tapping his fingers against his chin, Brannigan thought for a moment and then gave a slight nod. “We’ll search you, of course.”

“I’d almost be offended if you didn’t,” I said. “But you’ll leave your guns too. Fair’s fair. Shall we?”

Brannigan’s two thugs looked uncertain. Their boss gave a wave of his hand down the pathway into the trees. Finally, the two men started walking. The rest of us followed in silence. After about two minutes of steady walking, our shoes tapping against the concrete like a platoon during drill, I said, “I like here well enough.”

Sullivan’s bullish head swiveled back and forth. “Anybody could come up,” he said disdainfully.

“We’re all smart enough to keep quiet until the prying eyes and ears go away, yes?”

“This’ll be just swell,” Brannigan said. “The sooner we finish this, the better.”

We stood separate again, Mariko and I facing off against Brannigan, Declan, and Sullivan. One of the thugs handed the urn to Sullivan while the other one patted me down. He turned to Mariko, who was wearing a dress. After running his eyes up and down her body—it

was impossible to say how much of this was a visual search for a weapon—he walked over to Sullivan, who reluctantly handed him a pistol from his coat pocket. Likewise with Declan. Brannigan was apparently unarmed. The two silent thugs walked down the sidewalk we had just entered. After a minute or so, we heard the twin slams of car doors.

With his men gone, Brannigan held out his hand like he wanted me to give him alms. His hand was pudgier and greasier than I remembered.

I shook my head. “We talk first. We lay it all out, then it’ll be finished.”

Brannigan pulled his hand back. “I get the funny feeling you talk just for the hell of it, Dale.”

“Hell’s part of it,” I said. “But that much you already know.”

### Chapter 34

“All this started a long time ago,” I said. “Back when some fella named Brannigan got off the boat and decided he’d start making a whole army of little Brannigans now that he was in the New Country. Why the hell not? America meant freedom, after all.”

“Don’t get too cute, Richie,” Brannigan said, a note of warning in his voice. “Even my patience gets worn thin after too many cracks like that.”

“It’s how you tell a story,” I said. “But I’ll try to rein it in. Anyway, one of these little Brannigans grows up and becomes a businessman. He sets up shop in Omaha, of all places, halfway between Podunk and Big Shot City. Halfway between nowhere and everywhere, so I guess he was somewhere. The only trouble was that this businessman had a son, a son he loved but couldn’t stand, not the way he was.”

Declan glared death in my direction.

“This son, he had something in his mind. He maybe didn’t see other people as people, more like ants under a magnifying glass. When he looked at friends, neighbors, boys and girls—especially girls—he was missing something everybody else had. So this son, this too-cold son, he leaves Omaha and goes west. Because that’s for young men, of course. Maybe his father forced him, maybe he went on his own. Either way, he found himself working at a little prison camp. A prison camp for people whose greatest crime was . . .”

I trailed off, remembering the surge of unease and even vitriol that I’d felt the first time I saw Mariko in my office. “Whose greatest crime was looking too much like Hideki Tojo. The son was a guard there. Perhaps he was a decent one, scrubbing dishes and keeping watch with the best of them. But he had a hunger. There was a very beautiful young girl in this camp, and the best part was, according to Mr. FDR himself, she was hardly a person at all.

“So the son did something that even his father, whose dealings might have put a few people in the ground, was ashamed of. He attacked this woman. He raped her. But he escaped punishment, of course, because he was white and she wasn’t. And his daddy had money.”

Somewhat to my surprise, Declan didn’t brace to defend himself. He glared as he had been doing, but behind his eyes, he gave off a sense of . . . hollowness. Not shark’s eyes; they were even emptier than that.

The other two men seemed content to let me continue my spiel—Sullivan had gone so far as to set the wrapped urn down on the grass—so I obliged them. “There was a catch, though, an almost poetic catch. The son’s daddy had money and connection, but the girl’s daddy had something a lot stronger, something that ran a lot deeper. He had a thirst for revenge. So he took after the son, this girl’s father did.”

I made eye contact with Buddy Brannigan. “And that’s when father met father. One said, ‘I got this pretty black book. It has all my memories, even the ones from the worst day of my life. Would you like to hear them? Would you like for the newspapers to hear them?’ And the other father said he would not like for anybody to hear them. ‘The cost of your silence, dear sir?’ he asked.”

I smiled blandly. “‘A Grecian urn,’ the first father said. ‘One with a picture of a man being torn apart. Pentheus, a man who loses his life before he really has the chance to find it.’ But it doesn’t end there, of course. Instead of revenge, the first father obtains only a fake piece of pottery. Followed by murder, guns, razor blades in bathtubs, kidnappings in broad daylight.”

Looking between Sullivan and Brannigan, I shook my head sadly. “You oversold your hand, boys. In poker, you don’t go all in on the first hand, or the second or the fifth. But you did. You went all in, and now three people are dead.”

“Swell story, Richard Dale,” Brannigan said with an icy smile. “But who cares about a swell story if you don’t have any proof, any evidence? This is detective work, not philosophy. You can’t just talk about it. Without proof, it’s just empty air.”

“I still have the book,” I reminded him. “You were afraid enough of the book to play along with Gunderson, or Meyer, or whatever name you knew him by. You played along until you had the chance to take him out of the picture. Do you really think the papers would be any less interested in this book now that murder is involved?”

Brannigan shook his head in resignation. “Alright. Let’s make the switch.”

I held up a hand. “I want Declan to read from the book.”

“What the hell for?” Sullivan said.

“Cause it’s one of my terms, and a cheap one at that,” I said. “Do you want to risk everything you’ve worked for in life over a quibble?”

Brannigan thumped his son on the back. “It’ll all be over soon, son.”

Declan stepped forward. I held out the black journal. “I bookmarked the page.”

He took it and thumbed to the correct spot. Clearing his throat, he read in a monotonous, unnaturally uniform voice. “June 7. Mariko’s alive. Mariko’s alive. But she won’t be the same. Not after what he did.” Declan’s gaze snapped up at Mariko. Finally, she was staring at him eye-to-eye. She had drawn to her full height, and it was a good thing I was slightly interposed between them, because she might have leapt at him in a frenzy if I hadn’t been.

“Go on,” I said to Declan in a low voice.

His eyes slowly dropped back down onto the page. “I’ll make sure they shoot him, or hang him dead. But it won’t help my little girl, will it? If he lives, it’s a crock and we live in fear.

If he dies, she still has to live with what he did to her. My little girl. My only child. The boy won't live. I won't let him."

Tears glistened in Mariko's eyes, but she stood up straight and strong nevertheless. For the first time, Declan's eyes betrayed emotion. He looked uneasy, uncertain, as if the dimmest of lights had begun to flicker in a perfectly darkened cave.

"Do you understand what you did, Declan?" I didn't know if the boy, all twenty-odd years of him, was crazy or mentally infirm, or just plain evil, but that wasn't why I was asking. As I talked, everyone's eyes were directed at the young man, and not at Mariko, who had shifted behind me as she removed the leather strap from the thick hardcover she'd carried with her.

"I—I—the girl—I thought she'd like it," Declan said. "The other girls—they seemed to."

"The other girls?" I asked coldly. "There were others? Before Mariko?"

"Not like that!" Brannigan said quickly. He put a hand on Declan's shoulder. "Right, son? Not like that?"

Declan was staring a hole into the ground. "I . . . don't . . . know."

"It's amazing how far a parent will go for a child, isn't it?" I said. "Good or evil, it's still your child."

"You can't prove nothin', Dale!" Sullivan said with a sneer.

I shrugged. "Not about the assault from all the way over in Manzanar. Not about half the wicked things that went on this week. But I can prove enough."

At this, Mariko opened the Aristotle book, which really wasn't a normal book at all. It was hollowed out, with a .38 Detective Special, a snub-nose pistol, tucked inside the gap. Mariko pulled the gun out and shot it into the sky.

Brannigan ducked down, Declan froze, and Sullivan leapt forward in a rage. He was too big for his own good here, though. I pushed Mariko to the side and stuck my foot out as Sullivan charged forward. He lost his balance and fell to his hands and feet. I lashed my feet out, connecting with his temple. His head snapped to the side as my heel opened up a gash in his cheek. Sullivan collapsed to the ground; even a big guy like him had a brain as sensitive to concussions as anybody else's.

Several men in suits, as well as a handful of uniformed police officers, broke into the clearing, their guns pointed at the Brannigan group. "On the ground, now!" one of the officers screamed. Those of us who were still conscious obliged.

As the police rounded us up, Lieutenant Martin McMahon walked up to me with a bigger grin than I had thought possible on his normally impassive face. "Son of a gun, it worked," he said with a whistle. He pointed at the parcel. "That's the urn, right?"

"Yeah. The real one, the one that all the fuss was about."

McMahon raised an eyebrow and nodded toward Mariko. "And the gun?"

I smiled. "Accidental discharge. She's still new with these sorts of things, you understand. It's just lucky that you officers were all close enough to hear it and come running to help when you did."

"And lucky that we found Brannigan, his right-hand man, and his son all sitting on top of a stolen piece of artwork."

"All while you have a Brannigan mole ready to confess back at the station, too," I said.

McMahon winked at me. "Son of a gun."

### Chapter 35

The museum was quiet for a Friday afternoon, perhaps because most of the schoolchildren and day workers would still be chained to their desks and assembly lines for at least another hour. Patrons floated in and out of the exhibit areas like noncommittal ghosts, displaced and listless.

Mariko and I stood near the pedestal where the urn was supposed to be displayed. There was a paper sign that noted the museum's need to finish retouching it. They'd hopped to it as soon as the police had returned the urn the previous evening. Above the note was a photograph of the artwork. The image of Pentheus in his death throes was obscured by the additional layer of representation posed by the photo. I suppose that was how I felt: obscured, blurry-eyed, even a bit numb. The previous week had chewed me up and spit me out.

Mariko had begun to cry. She held out a shaking hand and brushed it against the image.

"So much for something that looks like so little," I said. "All because one man said it was special, and a few more people believed him."

"But I'd like to think Father's at rest now," Mariko said, wiping her eyes. I took out a handkerchief and offered it to her without a second thought. "Thank you," she murmured.

No one was staring at us, and I wouldn't have cared if they had been. We'd won our own private war together, Mariko and I. That wasn't something three years in the past; that was the here and now. I reached over and took her hand, offering the closest I could to a reassuring smile. "C'mon. Let's go."

We walked through the remaining exhibits of the Joslyn Museum. "I want it to be a perfect day," Mariko said, "but I know it cannot be. There is still so much trouble."

“Yeah. Brannigan will bounce out of jail soon enough,” I admitted as we entered one of the painting galleries. “And who knows about Sullivan. Maybe his boss’ll feed him to the wolves to save his own hide. And we can’t pin Geoffrey Smith on any of them, and I already got the guy who got your father.”

“A mess,” Mariko said simply.

“A lot of people won’t get justice.” I looked at the portrait of Saint Francis, the El Greco with the floating skull and crucifix. “At least not in this life.”

“You must still live here, even with all of that,” Mariko noted.

“McMahon told me after they took Brannigan downtown that I’d better start carrying a gun.”

“Will you?”

I patted my jacket, where a shoulder-holstered pistol rested like a viper hiding beneath a rock. “I already owned the gun. I just thought I was smart enough to make do without it.”

“You don’t think so now?”

I looked down at her. “I used to think I was smart enough to tell my friends from my enemies just by the look of ‘em. You got me fairly sorted out on that account.”

Mariko smiled wanly. “You are ever the charmer, Mr. Rick Dale.”

Suddenly, impulsively, I leaned down and kissed her. It wasn’t like the one before, but it was enough. Enough to convince me I wasn’t dreaming, and that she was as much of a living, breathing woman as any I’d ever met, and maybe more so.

She started to speak and then swallowed. “Rick, I—”

“I don’t know. It seemed like something the Rick Dale I want to be would do. The guy who’s clever and daring and never gets it wrong, never misses a trick.”

Mariko put her arms around my neck. “To hell with him, I say.” Standing up on her toes, she kissed me back.

We walked out into the sunlight, still holding hands. The golden beams caressed us like gentle fingers.

It was the best and clearest light I’d ever seen.