



Buck Baxter and the Mysteries of Love (The Buck Baxter Detective Agency #3)

Author: *Robin Knight*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Hard-boiled 1920s private detective Buck Baxter is used to solving crimes of passion, but when his latest client turns out to be his own boyfriend, Harry Hart, Buck discovers that nothing is what it seems when it comes to the mysteries of love.

All of Wilde City is abuzz with the unveiling of transport tycoon Howard Hart's latest innovation, a rocket-train that promises to change the future of not only Wilde City, but the entire world. But not everyone has their mind on Hart Industries, including Harry—Howard's son and heir to the Hart empire—who is so suspicious of his mother's abnormal behavior that he hires his boyfriend, Buck, to investigate.

On the surface, the case looks like another secret love affair. But when Buck finds danger at every turn, he realizes this investigation is much deeper—and the stakes much higher—than he ever suspected.

From the smoke-veiled opium barge known as The Peking Empress to the opulence of the Hart family mansion—from Luigi's garlicky gangster-run Linguine Kitchen to the secret-filled carriages of The Millennium Express—Buck's latest case is about to teach him that love comes in many forms, all of which are wrapped in secrets, danger and a whole lot of mystery.

Buck Baxter and the Mysteries of Love is the third adventure in The Buck Baxter Detective Agency series. It is a campy, noir, 35k-word detective story featuring a tough and troubled leading man, a heartthrob love interest with secrets of his own and a hilarious cast of supporting characters. Enter a world of prohibition, gangsters, speakeasies, jazz clubs, star-crossed romance, brooding heroes and a mystery with a twist.

Total Pages (Source): 18

CHAPTER 1

Picture this—

A dazzling dame, richer than God, swans into the Rainbow Palace atop Wilde City Tower, jewels draped across her neckline, diamonds dripping from her earlobes, priceless stones sparkling on every finger. She strides with confidence and poise like some elegant birdlike creature from ancient mythology, turning heads as she graces the room with her presence. Champagne awaits her at a table for two, her silver-haired husband gazing approvingly at the woman he married. He enjoys watching her command the attention of everyone in the room just by walking across it. He adores the way she plays the part of the beautiful, elegant aristocrat, a prize for men to desire and women to envy.

Outside, the sun sinks and stars appear, twinkling like the gemstones she wears.

Inside, waiters arrive with caviar and lobster, poached pears and Chantilly cream, and after dinner the husband and his wife take to the dance floor as the band plays.

By the time their chauffeur-driven Lincoln Limousine drops them off at their mansion in the hills overlooking the lights of the city, it's well after midnight. While he fixes a brandy for himself, his wife complains of a headache, no doubt the result of too much champagne and dancing. The husband jokes about her coming down with a case of "affluenza," and his wife responds with a light shimmer of laughter— exactly what he wants to hear— before she tells him she'll take the upstairs guest room tonight in case her ailing head interrupts his sleep.

She kisses him goodnight while he pours himself another drink.

Minutes later, the window to the upstairs guest room opens, a square of light falling on the branches of the tree growing next to the house. A woman's silhouette appears, and as the figure reaches for the nearest branch and climbs out the window, the diamonds that catch the moonlight confirm that it can only be Mrs. Crystal Hart making the daring escape from the mansion.

At one stage, the magnate's wife loses her grip and almost falls, but she recovers well.

It's almost as though she's done this before.

From the side of the house, the Lincoln Limousine rolls quietly along the gravel drive, it's headlights off. It pulls up beside the tree and the chauffeur jumps out of the vehicle, catching Mrs. Hart as she lets go of the lowest branch and falls into his arms.

The chauffeur is handsome, strong, and half her age.

He places her feet gently on the ground and opens the passenger door for her before closing it soundlessly.

He gets in behind the wheel, and with the engine purring softly the car makes its way slowly down the drive.

Crystal Hart has no idea as she flees with her lover into the night, that hiding behind a tree in the palm grove on the lawns of the estate is her son, Holden. He's been watching her behavior over the past few weeks, noticing subtle changes in the way she holds herself at the dinner table, sliding her food back and forth to give the appearance that she's eating, the way she glances away from her husband before she finishes asking him how his day was as though she no longer wants to know the

answer, and the way she's started moving her wedding ring up and down her finger as though the weight of the rock on it is becoming too much to bear.

These are things her husband has failed to notice. He's far too distracted by the giant moving cogs of Hart Industries to see that his wife has distractions of her own. So long as she plays her part as the loyal, loving wife of the richest man in town, Howard Hart is happy to believe his marriage is as healthy as his bank account.

But their son Holden has noticed the changes in his mother.

He also heard her whispering on the phone the night before, organizing tonight's secret rendezvous with her lover.

As he steps out of the shadows of the palm grove, watching the car cruise quietly down the drive of the estate, concern grips his heart.

He knows he needs to find a way to end this affair, not because his father deserves better, but because he knows his father will always put his wealth and power first.

No matter who he must hurt to do so.

He was more distracted than I'd ever seen him. He changed his tie three times, he poured a drink and never once touched it, he lit a cigarette from the packet he kept in the top drawer of his writing desk in case one of his guests ever wanted a drag, before remembering that he himself didn't even smoke. When he turned away from me and started pacing the floor of his penthouse apartment—right when I was about to lay a kiss on him—I'd had just about enough.

“Jesus, Harry. What in the Sam Hill is wrong with you today?”

“Nothing.” His tone was snappy. Defensive. Not the Harry I knew and loved.

“Everything’s fine. What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that your shoes are on the wrong foot. You’re walking like a duck. It’s kinda cute, I’ll grant you that, but somewhat concerning at the same time, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m telling you I’m fine.”

“And I’m telling you that something’s up. You’re hiding things from me again, ain’t you.”

“So what if I am? I’ve told you before, Buck, there are some things you don’t need to know about... for your own good.”

“My own good? Whoever said there was anything ‘good’ about me?” I grabbed his hand, and when he tried to pull away, I tightened my grip and yanked him closer, stealing the chance to plant that kiss on him while I could.

He caved and kissed me back before pulling out and looking deep into my eyes. “There’s plenty good about you, Buck. You just enjoy playing the bad boy too much to admit it.”

“You think there’s a bad boy inside me?”

He hitched an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. And later tonight, I wouldn’t mind that bad boy inside me. But first, I got work to do... and so do you.”

I sighed. “Tell me about it. Stella’s been riding my ass for weeks to try and drum up new business, but it’s like every mystery in Wilde City seems to have dried up. I ain’t sure whether this town suddenly decided to clean up its act, or this is just the quiet before a storm.”

Harry tugged himself out of my arms and stepped away, that distracted, faraway look on his face once more. “I’m sure something will turn up. You know what they say about trouble; it always finds a way of creeping back.”

“I hope you’re right. Trouble is the only way this Buck makes a buck. Hell, even Mamma Marlow and Bugsy Brown have quit warring for a spell.” Of course, I had my own theories on that, namely the fact that Bugsy had recently fessed up that he was none other than my dear old pops, something I was still coming to terms with, as no doubt he was too. I even went so far as to guess he was taking a break from the cement boot business just to try and prove himself as some sort of sensitive, caring, fatherly type, setting a good example to his son by easing back on the number of stiffs he dumped in the river. I had to admit that finally knowing who my old man was made me wonder whether my love of crime came from the fact that bad news didn’t just run in the family, it practically galloped. It also begged the question—if Bugsy was my father, who the heck was my mother?

I guess it was fair to say that Harry wasn’t the only one with a lot on his mind lately.

Not that I was about to let him in on the thoughts running through the twisted labyrinth inside my brain because, well, there were some things that he didn’t need to know either... for his own good.

And if there was one thing I was sure about, Harry was nothing if not a good person.

He was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

And if I needed to keep him safe from my secrets, maybe I needed to respect his need to protect me from his.

I stepped up behind Harry as he stood in front of the mirror, changing his tie once more. I took his hips in my hands and looked at his reflection over his shoulder. He

stopped flip-flopping the damn tie into a knot for a moment as I said, “I know something’s bothering you. I know you don’t want my help, but I want you to believe me when I say there ain’t nothing you can’t tell me. I’m the one person who’ll keep your secrets safe. Of course, if you don’t wanna talk, I get it. Just promise me you won’t shut me out.”

He turned and this time it was he who kissed me. “I won’t. I need you, Buck. I love you. What’s bothering me has nothing to do with you. I guess I just need a little time to figure things out.”

I smiled. “I love you too, my handsome Harry.” I planted another one on his kisser, long and sweet.

Maybe he’d tell me his secret in time.

And maybe I’d tell him mine.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:48 am

CHAPTER 2

I pushed open the door to my office and tilted my head to one side, gazing in confusion at a sight I wasn't exactly expecting to see.

“What the fuck are you doing up there?”

Like a cat that had tried clawing its way up the wall, my self-appointed assistant, Stella Darling, was hanging from the thick black curtains covering the windows. Only then did I realize—“And where the fuck did those curtains come from?”

Stella responded by wagging her little legs and screaming at me. “Don't just stand there, you big stupid lug! Get me down from here before I plunge to my death, would ya?”

I shut the door behind me, kicked aside the two chairs lying on the floor—obviously Stella had stacked one on top of the other to climb as high as she did—then casually reached up to rescue her.

“Jeepers, that was a close call,” she said as I sat her on the edge of my desk. “At one stage I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. I tell ya, it's like a maze of muttonheads inside my skull. This gal's had the displeasure of meeting way too many yellow-bellied alligators in her time. Speaking of unreliable men, where've you been, anyway? I was expecting you back here an hour ago.”

“Is that how long you've been hanging there? And what the heck is with the curtains anyway?”

“It’s a security measure, you dummy. Ever since you told me that Bugsy Brown was your daddy dearest, I’ve been expecting one of Mamma Marlow’s boys to stake out the abandoned apartment building across the street, pull out his pistol and pop one right between the eyes... first you, then me.”

Ah yes. Despite the fact that I didn’t want to mention my parental predicament to Harry, I had inadvertently blurted the news to Stella in a state of shock, minutes after Bugsy confronted me in the dark alley that night. It was a moment of weakness, and one I was expecting to regret for some time.

“Stella, why would anyone wanna kill you ?”

“Because clearly I’m the brains of this operation. Did you ever think to put curtains up? No, because you’re too stupid.”

“I ain’t too stupid not to put curtains up, I’m too broke . Stella, you know all too well we ain’t had a client knock on that door in weeks. We ain’t got the money for curtains. How the hell did you pay for them, anyway?”

“I sold your pot to some dirt-bucket on the boulevard.”

“You what? Jesus, that was my last stash. Where am I gonna find the money for another visit to Madame Chang’s?”

“What’s your problem? Ain’t you got yourself a fancy rich boyfriend now?”

“Just because he’s fancy and rich, doesn’t mean I wanna stoop to being needy and desperate. I’ve always made my own way in life, and that ain’t about to change. I have no intention of becoming a burden for Harry to carry. Trust me, when the money comes rolling in, it won’t be because of my rich boyfriend. It’ll be because opportunity came a-knocking.”

At that moment, there came a knock at the door.

Stella and I looked at each other in wide-eyed surprise .

“It’s opportunity!” Stella whispered.

“Better still, it’s a new client! Hopefully.” Quickly I lifted her off the desk.
“Remember what I told you. Always act like a pro in front of our customers.”

“Sure thing, toots. If you think it’ll help.” Stella promptly began pushing her tits up.

“Not like a prostitute! Like a professional. Act like a professional.”

“Okay, okay. Take it easy, I knew what you meant.” She grabbed a notepad and pencil, then righted one of the chairs by the window and hoisted herself up onto it. There she sat, cross-legged, licking the tip of the pencil and ready to take notes.

I picked up the other chair, sat behind my desk, and as a second knock rapped on the door I called out, “Come in. It’s open.”

The handle turned.

The door squeaked open.

Suddenly my brow creased in confusion... and if I’m honest, disappointment.
“Harry? What are you doing here? I thought you were a client. And I thought you had work to do.”

“I... I did. Or at least, I tried.” He stepped inside the door. He seemed anxious. “I went to the club, and I sat in my office and realized you were right. You were more than right. Not only are you the one person who can keep my secret safe, you’re also

the one person who can help me solve what's going on."

I shook my head, as though some of my baffled questions might fall out. "What? Me? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I want to hire you, Buck. I need to hire you."

I stood from my chair and crossed the room to him, watching his anxiety turn quickly to distress. I took him by the hand and led him back to my chair, sitting him down to try and calm his nerves. "Stella, would you get Harry a water please." Stella jumped off her chair as I asked, "Harry? Is everything alright?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't think anything's alright."

Stella returned with a glass and gave it to Harry, who poured the entire drink down his throat before spitting it back up with a cough and a gasp. "That's not water," he wheezed.

"Of course it's not. It's gin," Stella said. "Have you seen the color of the water that comes out of the pipes in this building?"

I took the glass off Harry and set it on the desk. "Harry, start from the beginning. What is it that's troubling you? Whatever the problem is, we'll solve it together. You and me."

Stella nodded in agreement. "That's right. We'll solve it together. You, him, and me."

I saw Harry glance between me and Stella and I sensed his reluctance to discuss his troubles in front of her. "Stella, perhaps Harry would be more comfortable if you stepped out of the room for a moment."

Stella looked at me indignantly. “He said he wants to hire you for a case, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but...”

“And ain’t I your assistant?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts. I should be here to take notes, that’s my job.”

“Yes, but there may be something of a somewhat sensitive nature he’d like to discuss.”

“Are you saying I ain’t sensitive? If you cut me, do I not bleed? If you tweak my nipples, do I not flinch? If you take a feather duster and—”

“Just step outside the room... please. In fact, step outside the building. Go buy yourself a drink, find yourself a good time, do whatever you like. Just please, give us a few minutes, would ya?”

“Fine,” she hmphed. “Maybe I can bum a smoke off that dirt-bucket I sold your pot to, if he ain’t chugged his way to Chattanooga by now.” With a clippety-clop of her heels she strutted out of the office, slamming the door on her way out.

“Will she be okay?” Harry asked .

“Stella? Stella will always be okay. But clearly you’re not, so talk to me. What’s going on, Harry?”

He wriggled restlessly in the chair. “It’s my mother. She’s been acting strangely lately. Nothing too obvious, but enough for me to notice that she’s not herself. I

started paying attention to the moments she'd sneak away to be alone. I overheard a telephone call she made, planning to meet up with someone. Then, a few nights ago, I saw her climb out of a window and meet up with my father's chauffeur."

"You think she's..."

"Having an affair? Without a doubt. She drove off into the night with him and didn't return until it was almost dawn."

"Does your father know?"

"God, no. He doesn't even seem to suspect anything's going on. But that's what worries me. If—or rather when—he does find out, I don't know what he'll do. My father is a powerful man. Powerful and proud. If he discovers my mother is having an affair, it will crush him... and he will in turn crush her."

His feet tapped the floor, his breathing became short, and his fingers bunched into fists on his thighs. I had never seen him so agitated, scared even. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to find out who this chauffeur is, where he lives, why he feels such a burning desire to put my mother's marriage—her safety—at risk like this. I need you to convince him to call it off. I need you to do what it takes to remove him from my mother's life before someone gets hurt."

His request sounded more like something you'd hire Bugsy Brown or Mamma Marlow to take care of. "Harry, I'm a detective, not a knee-breaker. I can find this guy, but it ain't my business to 'remove' someone who's having a fling with your mother."

"Buck, I need you to do this. Or find someone else who will." He stood, and gripping

my forearms he kissed me forcefully then said, “Trust me, Buck. No good can come of this. I need this affair to end before any real trouble begins. Will you do this for me?”

What could I say? The man I loved was rattled.

He was begging for my help.

He was fearful his mother’s wayward actions might trigger something terrible and tyrannical in his father.

Having grown up without parents to care and worry for, what he was going through was completely foreign to me. I couldn’t imagine how he was feeling. Perhaps one day, I would.

I kissed him back. “If you need my help, you got it, babe. No matter what I gotta do, I’ll take care of it for you.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:48 am

CHAPTER 3

“Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Hart Industries to launch whizbang new rocket-train this Saturday. The future is here! Extra, extra, read all about it!”

Dressed in his tattered jacket with holes in the toes of his shoes, Skip the newsboy was spruiking the news of the day just to make a dime.

I had more than a dime, thanks to the advance payment from my latest client. Before he left my office, Harry had pulled a wad of cash out of his pocket and jammed it into my fist.

“This should cover costs... and then some.”

As much as I needed the cash, I shook my head. “Harry, I’m not taking any money off you. You’re my—”

“Client. At this moment, I’m not your boyfriend. I’m your client. If I expect you to do this job properly, then you’ll need a down payment in order to start your investigations. Take it. I mean it.”

I hesitated. “It seems so... transactional. I don’t want our relationship to become business over pleasure.”

He smiled. “If you’d prefer pleasure over business, then come over later tonight. I promise, I won’t be so stressed. Knowing you’re on the case makes me feel more at ease already.”

I took the money, kissed him before he left, then headed out onto the streets of Wilde City.

Skip was always a good place to start. The kid had his nose to the ground and eyes like a hawk. Yes sir, those peepers of his didn't miss a trick. If there was a scandal on the streets, you could put your money on Skip knowing the who, where, why, and how of it. And so, that's exactly what I did. As I strolled casually up to him, I pulled out a dollar bill—enough to buy his entire bundle of rags—and handed it to him.

Skip winked, handed me a newspaper and asked, “What kinda news you lookin’ for today, Mr. Baxter? You wanna know the latest on Mr. Hart and his rocket-train?”

“Kid, I couldn't care less about Howard Hart and his flashy toys, but I am keen to know what his wife's been up to lately. Tell me, you seen Hart's Lincoln Limousine cruising the streets at strange hours?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. The last week or so I've seen it comin' and goin' at the crack of dawn.”

“Where's it coming and going from?”

Skip smirked. “Jeepers, Mr. Baxter. I'd love to tell ya, but I seem to be forgettin' things lately.”

I rolled my eyes. “Perhaps if I give you another dollar you could go to the doctor and see about that memory of yours.” I slipped him another crisp bill.

“Well, whaddaya know, I suddenly remember. The Cheshire Hotel. Not exactly the ritziest place in town.”

“Did you see who was driving?”

“A chauffeur. Dapper fella, the clean-cut type, at least half her age.”

“Her?”

“You know exactly who I’m talkin’ about. Mr. Hart’s missus. She was always sittin’ low in her seat, like she didn’t want nobody to see her, but ain’t nothin’ skips past Skip. I tell ya, that chauffeur’s got a flat tire if he thinks he can get dizzy over a dame like Crystal Hart and get away with it. He might be hungry for a little high-class hoochie, but the only thing that fella’s gonna be eatin’ soon is lead.”

I couldn’t disagree. I flipped him another bill. “Thanks kid. Keep your wits about you and stay safe, ya hear?”

I turned to leave, but Skip called after me. “Mr. Baxter, that ain’t all the news I got for you today.”

I angled my head to look back over my shoulder. “Oh yeah?”

He waved me closer and hushed his tone. “Bugsy Brown’s been lookin’ for you.”

“You don’t say.”

Skip nodded. “He told me if I sees ya, he wants to meet you for dinner tomorrow night at Luigi’s Linguine Kitchen . Eight o’clock sharp.”

“He does, does he?”

“You in trouble with all the wrong people again, Mr. Baxter?”

I heaved a sigh. “Somethin’ like that.”

Skip chuckled and shook his head. “Heck, I so wanna be you when I grow up.”

I sighed again. “Always be careful what you wish for, kid. It might just come true.”

CHAPTER 4

The Cheshire Hotel was, as Skip put it, not exactly the ritziest place in town. The wallpaper in the lobby was peeling, the sofa in the waiting area was frayed and frazzled, and the coffee table in front of it was balancing on three legs. The lights in the chandelier above blinked with a last flicker of life, and there was a dark red stain on the carpet that either came from a wine bottle or a dead body. Kinda reminded me of the building where I rented my office, which in a way made me feel right at home. It was, however, the last place one would expect to find the wife of the town's richest man.

Behind the check-in desk was a tall, thin man with his back to the lobby. He was wearing a sweaty undershirt almost as stained as the rug on the floor, and at first, I thought he was checking keys on the board behind the counter.

As I stepped up to the desk, I soon realized that was not the case. "Excuse me. Sir?"

The man responded with a grunt, then a groan, then a visible shudder ran down his spine. Yet he did not turn around to acknowledge me .

"Sir? Hello?" I dinged the bell on the desk.

The man simply groaned even louder.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

Suddenly from somewhere out of sight I heard, "For Pete's sake, we can hear you..."

we're just choosing to ignore you!"

Instantly I recognized the voice. "Stella?" I turned to look around the lobby but there was no sign of her.

"Buck? Is that you?"

I crouched low, glancing under the broken-legged coffee table then squatting even lower to look under the tattered sofa. "Stella? Where are you?"

"I'm right here, you big patsy!" From behind the counter trotted Stella, shimmying about as she pulled her stockings up and her dress down, at the same time licking the suspicious sheen off her lips. "What the hell are you doing here? Did you follow me?"

"No! Did you follow me?"

"No! You told me to go out and find myself a good time, which is exactly what I was doing... until we got rudely interrupted. Ain't that right, Lanky Larry?"

Lanky Larry spun around behind the counter, still shuddering as though teetering on the brink of pleasure while he fumbled with his trousers and hitched up his suspenders.

Apparently, Stella felt right at home in this dive too. "Sorry to barge in on your romantic tête-à-tête, but I'm here to see the manager of this fine establishment and ask a few questions."

"Ooh, is this about the case?" Stella tippy-tapped excitedly in her heels. "Are we on a new case right now?"

“ I’m on a new case right now. You look like you’re too busy tootin’ Lanky Larry’s trombone to solve anything.”

“On the contrary,” Stella said, wagging a finger at me. “Tootin’ Larry’s trombone could in fact work in our favor right now.” She turned to the man behind the counter. “ Hey, you up there in the clouds. If you ever want me to finish that tune, you’ll tell Buck Baxter here whatever he wants to know. Capiche ?”

Lanky Larry still looked as though he was dealing with the situation in his trousers when he muffled a grunt and asked me, “What is it you wanna know?”

“Apparently you’ve had a man and woman check in briefly—maybe only for a couple of hours or so—on more than one occasion in the past few days.”

He looked at me with a vague expression on his face. “Mister, this is a sleazy, two-bit hotel. That’s what happens every day.”

“Let me be more specific. You’ve had a handsome young fella with a rather wealthy looking female—fancy clothes, perfect hair, fine French perfume—checking in lately. She’s the kinda dame who don’t usually check in to a place like this. You catch my drift?”

Lanky Larry twigged on. “Oh yeah, I remember them. They sneak in real quiet, go upstairs for an hour or two, then take off before sunrise. Only...” He pondered a moment, gathering the few thoughts he had.

“Only what?” I asked.

“Only, he ain’t the only one invited to the party each night.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she ain’t just pitchin’ woo with the one fella. Once they check in, three or four other mugs head on up to their room. All of ’em dressed the same—black suits, black hats, black ties. I don’t doubt their havin’ one helluva time up there... and yet, I ain’t never heard a peep outta that room. No records playing, no laughin’ or screamin’ or glasses clinkin’. Whatever they get up to in there, they’re as quiet as church mice.”

“Even a church mouse can get up to no good,” Stella said, screwing up her face with suspicion.

“I agree.” I turned back to the manager. “Lanky Larry, you think we could borrow the key to that room and have a quick look around? ”

Lanky Larry hesitated uneasily. “It’s hotel policy not to—”

“Ah, don’t be such a stupid putz!” Stella lambasted. “You want the key to my heart? Then hand over the key to that room already.”

Lanky Larry instantly spun on his heels, grabbed a key off the board behind him, and slapped it down on the counter. “Room sixty-nine. You might wanna take the stairs, the elevator keeps getting stuck. We think there’s a stiff in the bottom of the shaft, but nobody wants to look.”

“That explains the smell in here,” I muttered.

“And here I was thinkin’ it was my breath after that baloney and pickle sandwich I had for lunch,” added Stella. “I tell ya, you gotta be careful what you put in your mouth these days.”

We didn’t need the key to room sixty-nine after all. When we got there, we found the door already ajar. Cautiously I nudged it open with one hand.

The room was dank and dingy. The dying light of day struggled to break through the closed curtain, only managing to peep through the tears and holes that had been eaten through by moths. I reached inside the door and flicked on the light. The bed had been roughly made, and given the number of stains on the sheets there was no telling how often they were washed and changed. In one corner was a writing desk with a broken lamp, and against the far wall stood a wooden closet beside a crookedly hanging painting of a daffodil-filled vase, the only splash of color in the room.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Stella asked quietly, as though the room had ears.

“I’m not entirely sure, but this unlocked door makes me think we’re not the only ones looking for it.”

I stepped inside the room with Stella on my heels, almost literally. I closed the door behind us. “Harry believes his mother is having an affair. What we want to know is the identity of the fella involved.”

“Or fellas,” Stella pointed out. “Lanky Larry practically said there was a Roman orgy going on up here.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. There’s no real evidence yet that Mrs. Hart is even having an affair.”

“I think those stained sheets on the bed would beg to differ.”

“Given the state of this place there’s no telling if those are new or old. Just start searching the room, would ya? The gentleman could have dropped something out of his wallet or left a matchbook from his favorite dive bar behind. It’s not like the maid does a bang-up job of tidying up. There could be anything in here that might give us a lead.”

I started with the unemptied trashcan under the writing desk while Stella looked under the bed. I found nothing but a shriveled brown apple core, a scrunched-up cigarette packet and a chewed-up ball of gum that looked as though it had turned as hard as stone. Meanwhile, Stella crawled out from under the bed and dusted her hands off.

“Anything under there?”

“Not unless you wanna question a big dead rat to see what he knows.”

I turned to the closet and opened the door.

Unfortunately, I didn’t see the fist till it clocked me square in the face.

I stumbled backward and fell on my ass on the floor.

The closet doors flew open and a goon with a patch over one eye lunged at me.

Stella screamed.

The goon landed on top of me and threw another punch while I was down, this time hitting me in the jaw.

Stella grabbed the trashcan and tried to wallop the guy over the head, but he shoved her so hard she hit the ground and slid across the room.

I tried to fight back, but the grinning one-eyed goon seized my fist and began crushing it. He laughed and uttered something in German.

I replied by kneeing him as hard as I could in the balls.

He gasped in pain, let go of my fist, and I smashed my knuckles into his nose.

He staggered backward and I reached for him, grabbing the lapel of his jacket.

I was about to throw another punch, but he yanked free of my grasp, lurching backward and stumbling for the door.

I pulled myself off the floor and tried to race after him, but my head was spinning and by the time I teetered out the door, the goon had already disappeared down the stairwell.

I turned back to the room and helped Stella up. “You okay?”

“Better than you,” she said, sizing up my face and pulling the handkerchief out of the breast pocket of my jacket before dabbing it to my cheek which was wet with blood. “He really walloped you good.”

I winced. “Ow. That hurts.”

“Don’t be such a big baby, I’m tryin’ to clean you up before you bleed all over the floor. God knows this poor room don’t need you adding to its woes.”

“I wasn’t saying ‘ow’ to the cheek.” I looked down at my still bunched-up fist and opened my palm.

Stella followed my gaze as we both looked down at a lapel pin sticking into my finger.

I winced again as I pulled it out of my finger, then turned it over in my hand to see the emblem on the front.

“What’s that?” Stella asked, unfamiliar with the criss-crossed symbol in my hand.

“If I ain’t mistaken, it’s the emblem for a new political party starting to rear its ugly head over in Germany. I think they call it a swastika.” I held the red, white, and black pin up for closer inspection. “Something tells me Mrs. Hart ain’t having no run-of-the-mill affair.”

CHAPTER 5

“Buck? What the fuck happened to you? Who did this? Are you okay?” Harry pulled me through the door to his penthouse and into his arms. He held me tight, then pulled me back to examine my face, the cut on my cheek, my swollen nose. “Do you need a doctor? Who the fuck did this to you? Please don’t tell me it’s because of my mother’s case?”

I had decided on the way to his place not to worry him about the investigation. “Nah, this was just some drunk bozos in an alley. You should have seen what I did to them.”

Between my decision to conceal the recent development with Buggy Brown, and now this, it appeared I was the one with all the secrets.

“Jesus, they could have killed you. Did you go to the police?”

“God, no. You and me both know the cops in this town ain’t got a clue. I tell ya, I’m fine. Just a little sore is all.”

“Well, I’ve got just the cure for that.”

At the well-stocked drinks cart in his lavish living room, Harry poured both me and him a long generous gin and tonic, the booze splashing over the ice as he filled our glasses almost to the top.

I sat myself down on the couch and he slid beside me, handing me my drink and

setting his on the coffee table while he had a closer look at my face. “You know you got a black eye coming up?”

“I do? I ain’t looked in a mirror yet.”

“You might not want to.”

“Hey, you sayin’ I ain’t pretty?” I joked.

Tenderly he took my chin in his fingers and placed a kiss on my lips that was softer than silk. “You’re pretty, all right. And you’re mine. Which means it’s my job to take care of you.”

Getting up from the couch he made his way over to the kitchen, opened the icebox and returned with the biggest, juiciest steak I’d ever seen, gleaming on a plate. “Put your head back.” Gently he laid that big old slab of meat over my eye, the cool, soothing ribeye melting to the contours of my face.

“Aahhh,” I sighed. “That feels good.”

“It does? It was supposed to be dinner, but lucky for you it’s not the only meat I planned on feeding you tonight.”

I pulled the steak away and eyed the mischievous look on his face. “It’s not?”

He took my drink off me, put the steak back on the plate, and set them both down on the coffee table in front of us, then guided my hand straight to the bulge in his crotch.

I didn’t need an instruction manual on what to do next.

Sliding off the couch, I quickly positioned myself on my knees between his spread

legs.

Not taking my eyes off his swollen, pulsing crotch, I unbuttoned his trousers. He raised his hips off the couch for a moment, long enough for me to slide down his trousers and boxer shorts and unleash his cock, stiff and bobbing and beckoning to me.

I took the base of it in one fist, squeezing a gasp out of him before opening my mouth and taking in the slit-shiny crown.

The taste of him, sweet and salty, instantly relieved the pain in my jaw, my eye, my goddamn everywhere.

I slid his cock all the way to the back of my throat, slicking the shaft with my saliva, before pulling it out, sucking on the head, and ramming it down my throat again.

I blew him without restraint, without grace or delicacy, but rather with a passion so untamed and ravenous that his groans became ache-filled, his gasps desperate. He could have begged me to stop, but he didn't. Why? Because he fucking loved it. He loved my wild and reckless lovemaking. He loved every chance he got to let go of Holden Hart—the suave, sophisticated son of a tycoon—and become Harry, who yearned to have me devour his cock and pound his ass and leave him wrecked and battered by my love.

“Ah, ah, ah!” he cried out as I quickened my pace, intensified my sucking. “Buck, I’m gonna come. I’m gonna—”

And just like that, the hot salve of his slick hard dick gushed into my mouth and slid down my throat.

I gulped hard, sucking his seed down, siphoning the strength out of him as he gasped

and rasped in ecstasy.

Before he had a chance to catch his breath, I slid his still cum-oozing cock from my lips, took his hips forcefully in my hands, and turned him over on the couch so that his face landed in the cushions and his ass was all mine.

I unbuttoned my trousers, and my own cock, hungry for Harry, sprang upward, veins throbbing and precum practically spurting from my slit.

I drenched a couple of my fingers, sucking on them like I'd just sucked on Harry's dick, then slid them into his ass, massaging his hole roughly and getting even harder at the sound of his groans.

When he was good and wet, I nuzzled the head of my cock between his ass cheeks.

I felt his muscles relax and pull me inside, all the way, till my hips met his ass. For a second he went silent, clutching his breath, then as he exhaled I pulled out before pushing inside him again... ag ain... again.

My thrusts quickened.

My heart hammered against the wall of my chest as my cock hammered his ass.

Before I knew it, I had his blond hair in my fist. I was pulling his head back, forcing him to arch his back as I pumped his ass in a frenzy of passion until soon I cried out, "Ah fuck! Fuck!"

My cum erupted inside him, the flood of heat shooting into his body.

I cried out again. "Fuck!" And he groaned with bliss and exhaustion.

Panting, I slowed my thrusts.

I let his sweaty blond hair slip from my fingers.

And huffing with spent pleasure, I lowered my body against him, my chest hot and heaving against his back.

My voice breathy, I whispered next to his ear, “I love you, Harry.”

He angled his head toward me and I kissed his neck. “I love you too, Buck,” he said. “I love you too.”

Later that night as we lay in his bed, my arms wrapped tightly around him, I felt Harry take a nervous breath as though he was unsure whether or not to say what he was about to say. Eventually he uttered, “Buck, did you read the papers today?”

I thought about the newspaper that Skip handed me earlier, the one I hadn’t read. I’d gone to the kid for a different kinda scoop, not the ink on some news sheet. “No,” I answered. “Why?”

“There’s a big unveiling tomorrow morning at Grand Central Station. My father is showing off his rocket-train ahead of this Saturday’s launch. It’s little more than a photo opportunity, a chance for my father to brag about his business now that he’s added rail transportation to his portfolio of conquests. All the press will be there, along with the city’s bigwigs and my father’s investment partners.”

“And Mrs. Hart?”

“Of course. She’s always been the trophy wife on his arm.” He paused. “I’m just wondering...” His words trailed away.

“You think your mother’s lover will be there.”

“He’s their chauffeur. He’ll be the one to drive them to the station, there’s no doubt he’ll be there. What I’m wondering is, will you attend? With me? As my guest?”

“Harry, you’ve hired me to investigate whether your mother is having an affair. If anything, I should be lying low. Besides, I’ve always had the distinct impression your father would never approve of me, despite the fact he’s never met me. I think I’m better off hiding in the shadows.”

“But don’t you see? If you attend as my guest, it’ll give you the opportunity to hide in plain sight. You can do all the investigating you need, right under everyone’s noses, and nobody will know any better. To them, you’re just another invited guest.”

I hesitated. The idea seemed dangerous, and yet it made perfect sense. “All right,” I reluctantly agreed. “But if anything goes pear-shaped, you know I’m gonna have to pull out of the case... for everyone’s safety.”

“I just want to get to the bottom of this as fast as possible.”

I felt his body tense once more. I didn’t wanna make any promises, but given the encounter with the one-eyed German at the Cheshire and the pin Stella and I had found, I was pretty certain this case went deeper than Harry first suspected. If that was so, there was no way I was going to pull out, whether things went pear-shaped or not.

I had Harry to protect...

I had a mystery to solve...

And a chauffeur to track down.

CHAPTER 6

Pigeons flapped through the shafts of morning sun that beamed down from the glass-domed ceiling of Wilde City's Grand Central Station. The sound of trains chuffing steam was almost drowned out by the throng of the excited crowd of photographers, journalists, socialites, and dignitaries making their way across the vast marbled lobby of the train station, all of them heading to the same destination, a brand new platform and trainline that had been specially built to house Hart Industries' latest innovation—the rocket-train.

Harry was staying close to me, his hand constantly brushing against mine as though he was desperate to hold it, desperate to make sure I didn't get swept away from him in the milling multitude.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I wasn't used to crowds. Hell, I hated them. They were like a collar buttoned too tight or a summer day so damn hot you couldn't breathe. "It ain't too late for me to back out now."

"Buck, don't you wanna get to the bottom of this case as soon as we can? "

"I'd rather take you home and get to the bottom of you ," I whispered in his ear.

"Settle, mister. You're on the job."

At that moment, a wave of excitement rippled through the crowd as someone said, "There it is."

Necks craned, people tried to see over each other, and the tide of spectators swept us beneath an ornate golden arch emblazoned with the words ‘Welcome to the Future.’

The crowd filtered onto a platform, cleaner and fancier than any other platform I’d ever seen at Grand Central Station. The mosaic walls were covered in promotional banners for Hart Industries featuring bright, vibrant illustrations of Hart’s fleet of luxury passenger liners, as well as his grand and imposing airships sailing over the cityscapes of Paris and Berlin. And now joining the ranks of his transportation empire were depictions of a train so fantastical it looked like something out of a Jules Verne novel.

“Is that what the rocket-train really looks like?” I asked Harry, pointing to one of the illustrated banners. “It doesn’t even look real.”

“Oh, it’s real alright. Wait and see.”

I didn’t have to wait long. As a swell of awe-filled ‘ooohs’ and ‘aaahs’ filled the space, a long, large mechanical beast came into view. It sprawled down the length of the platform like a giant iron caterpillar covered in gears and cogs, bolts and bearings, sprockets and springs and piping and portholes, round and rimmed with brass like the windows on a ship. They ran all the way from the enclosed engine in front, along the three carriages in the middle, and down to the caboose at the tail of the train.

The engine was covered in metal valves and vents that looked like the gills of a steel shark. There was a veil draped over part of the engine’s side, concealing something yet to be revealed.

The three carriages in the middle of the train were labeled with signage that read “Presidential Suite,” “Dining Car,” and “Passenger Car.”

Meanwhile, the caboose was designated “Cargo and Storage.”

But there was something that struck me as odd with the design of the train, apart from the portholes for windows: the carriages were connected with sealed passageways, joining one car to the next, making it one seamlessly linked locomotive from head to tail.

“It sure is something, huh, toots?”

The voice coming from behind me was, of course, Stella. But what the hell was she doing there? And how the hell could she see the damn train over all those heads?

The second question was answered when I spun about to see her perched like a parrot on the shoulder of Lois... or was it Lucy? Whichever it was, there Stella was with the glamorous blonde Logan twins who worked as Harry’s personal assistants.

“Stella? What are you doing here?”

“I got an invite from the luscious Logan twins, naturally.”

Lois and Lucy both gave me a red, glossy smile. “Nice to see you, Mr. Baxter.” They turned to Harry beside me. “Morning, boss.”

“Morning, ladies. Morning, Stella.”

“How ya doin’, moneybags?” Stella asked Harry before tipping her head toward my black eye. “Did you check out the shiner Buck got from workin’ your case? Good thing his eye didn’t pop right out of its socket. But hey, that’s just the hazards of the trade I guess.”

I clenched my jaw, anticipating the look of surprise and betrayal that came my way from Harry. “You told me it was a bunch of drunk bozos in an alley.”

“Harry, I can explain.”

“I think you’d better. I didn’t hire you for this case to watch you get beat up. And I certainly didn’t hire you so you could lie to me.”

“Harry...”

At a dais beside the engine of the train, several men in expensive suits appeared, with Howard Hart center stage and his wife beside him.

“Explain it to me later, Buck. My father’s about to begin his speech. Maybe you should start looking for that driver of his. Just promise me you won’t get hurt again. Like I said before, the sooner this is resolved the better.”

I felt like I’d been put in my place like a naughty child, or worse, an incompetent employee. Perhaps I deserved it for lying about the bruising I got, but it still stung. Part of me felt embarrassed, being chided like that in front of Stella and the Logan twins. But part of me also felt heartbroken and disappointed in myself that I’d upset Harry... that I’d let him down by lying to him.

I felt my face flush. Along with the shiner I was now no doubt a cocktail of red, black, and blue.

I plucked Stella off Lois or Lucy’s shoulder. “Come on, Stella. We got a job to do.”

I put her down, and as we turned to walk through the crowd, I glanced back over my shoulder at Harry. His brow twitched and danced with so many emotions—betrayal, annoyance, hurt, maybe even remorse at the way he spoke to me—that it was impossible to tell what the overriding feeling in his heart was at that moment.

Then a spectator in the crowd stepped between us, and another and another, until

soon I couldn't see him through the throng.

I was still trying to spot Harry and wasn't looking where I was going when I bumped into one person, then another, then stood on Stella's foot.

"Say, watch it, ya klutz!" she grumbled. "I know you can probably only see outta one eye at the moment, but you still got one good eye to watch where you're going."

"Sorry, you know how much I hate—"

"Bein' told how to behave by your bossy, big-spender boyfriend back there?"

"I was gonna say, crowds. You know how much I hate—"

I was interrupted again, this time by the metallic squeal of a microphone, followed by a distorted tap-tap-tap . "Can everyone hear me? Good morning, can everyone hear me?"

Every face in the crowd turned toward Howard Hart, standing in front of the microphone on the dais. Camera flashes began to pop in the front few rows of the gathering, and Howard pulled his wife close. They both smiled for the cameras.

"What's goin' on?" Stella asked, tugging at my trouser leg. "Buck, what's happening? Geez, where are those leggy Logan twins when you need 'em?"

I sighed impatiently and picked Stella up, shuffling her into a piggyback position where she could peer over my shoulder at the proceedings about to take place.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us here today to unveil not only the very latest in innovation and technology, but the jewel in the crown of Hart Industries; a mode of transportation destined to take not just Wilde City, but the

entire world into the future.”

Rapturous applause echoed through the station, as Hart not-so-modestly tried to quell the crowd with a lowering of his hands. “I know, I know, this is cause for much excitement. The all new rocket-train is a project years in the making, using state-of-the-art mechanics in its engineering and the finest lavishly-appointed interiors to create the ultimate first-class, high-speed rail experience. But have you come to expect anything less from Hart Industries? First, we conquered the seas with our luxury fleet of ocean liners. Then we conquered the skies with our flotilla of airships. Now, it’s time to conquer the land with this groundbreaking vision of the future. A vision made possible thanks to our collaboration with Berlin’s most influential tycoon, Herr Gerhard Garbutt.”

As the cheering continued, Stella and I watched a bespectacled man step onto the stage. He was the complete opposite of Howard Hart: where Howard was tall and dashing, Herr Garbutt was short and strangely twitchy; where Howard had a generous head of smooth silver hair, Herr Garbutt’s thin streaks were combed from one side of his balding scalp to the other; where Howard smiled with confidence, Herr Garbutt seemed to struggle just to summon up a sneer for the audience.

He gave a wave that looked more like he was raising his hand to the sky, and uneasily I recognized it as the salute of the new political party making waves in Berlin... the same one that bore the emblem on the pin I’d pulled off the one-eyed man’s lapel.

I turned my face to whisper to Stella. “I got a real bad feeling that things are getting more complicated by the minute.”

“You’re tellin’ me,” said Stella, not looking at me but gazing wide-eyed at the stage. “Look at the goon behind the sauerkraut.”

I turned back to see none other than the one-eyed German himself, standing in the

background behind Herr Garbutt. “God, I hate being right. This case is turning into a real fucking trainwreck, I can see it coming.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” continued Howard Hart. “While the purpose of today’s presentation is to give you a first glimpse of the rocket-train, this Saturday will be the day we truly showcase the wonders of this extraordinary machine and what she’s capable of. Believe me when I say Wilde City, and indeed the world, will never be the same again. My new rocket-train will blaze a trail not only into the next century, but the next thousand years, heralding a golden age of transportation. I give you... the Millennium Express!”

With that, the veil draped over part of the engine fell away, revealing the words The Millennium Express in shimmering gold lettering on the side.

At that moment, Hart and Garbutt exchanged a quick look that made my blood run cold. Why, I couldn’t say. All I knew was, I didn’t trust anyone on that stage. That is until...

“And joining me on Saturday’s launch of the rocket-train will, of course, be my beautiful wife and the future heir to my empire, my son, Holden Hart.” Howard looked into the crowd. “Holden? Where are you, son? Come up here and take a bow.”

I saw the top of Harry’s blond head as the crowd parted for him, before he stepped up onto the dais to the adoring cheers of the crowd.

The sound of their applause filled me with anxiety and a strange sort of jealousy. That crowd might have adored Harry, but nobody loved him like I did. Nobody knew him like I did. As he stood there waving and smiling to the crowd, with his father’s hand planted firmly on his shoulder, all I wanted was for Harry to turn to me.

To look at me!

To find me in that sea of faces.

But he was too busy soaking in the adulation.

Too busy being the son that his father demanded he be.

I couldn't bear to watch the pomp and ceremony another second. Quickly I said to Stella, "Come on, let's find that damn chauffeur."

Muttering apologies, I pushed and shoved my way through the crowd, piggybacking Stella until we reached the edge of the throng, and I lowered her down a little too abruptly. She landed with a plonk.

"Hey, careful with the merchandise, toots. I ain't a sack of potatoes, you know. You still grumpy and grouchy? You need to build a bridge and get over it, we got a case to solve. Things are just gettin' juicy, too. A high-class dame, a handsome chauffeur, a one-eyed German with a mean right hook who's pals with the richest guy in town... Who knows what'll pop up next?"

"I can't wait to find out." My tone was slippery with sarcasm, but quite frankly I could use the distraction, something to take my mind off Harry. "Over this way, I saw an exit sign leading to a loading dock. If this guy's a real chauffeur, he'll be out back trading cigarettes and scandals with the other drivers."

"And if he ain't a real chauffeur?"

"I guess we're about to find out."

While the Harts posed for family photos on the stage behind us, Stella and I made our way off the platform and out onto the loading dock.

Sure enough, a dozen drivers were gathered in a group beside their bosses' Hudsons and Lincolns, puffing on cigarettes and laughing as they no doubt exchanged stories about their employers. And while I could see Hart's limo, there was no sign of his chauffeur.

We made our way farther along the dock, away from the chatter of the drivers, and my uneasiness returned at the sight of a stack of large wooden crates, their sides stenciled with the words "Fragile" and "Do Not Open."

"What the hell's in those?" I pondered aloud.

Stella shrugged. "Fancy china. Crystal champagne glasses. Why should you care?"

"Precisely our thought," said a voice. It belonged to a man in a black suit who suddenly stepped out from behind the crates. He was accompanied by not one, not two, but three more gentlemen in black suits, as well as a fourth man... young, handsome and dressed in a chauffeur's uniform.

"Mr. Baxter, I believe," said the first man. "You're Mr. Buck Baxter?"

"How do you know who I am?"

"We spoke to Lanky Larry at the Cheshire. We know you had a run-in with Herr Garbutt's bodyguard, Hans Hammer, and by the bruises on your face he certainly gave you a hammering. And yet here you are, back for more and about to step into the middle of something you'll regret."

"And who exactly are you?"

The man pulled a badge from his pocket and flipped it open. "Special Agent Smith, Federal Bureau of Investigations."

Stella elbowed me in the knee excitedly. “I told you something else was gonna pop up!”

I ignored her. “The FBI? What the hell are you doing here?”

“The same question we’d like to ask you.”

I pointed to the chauffeur. “We’re here to investigate a suspected affair between Mrs. Hart and her driver. Although I’ve got a hunch he ain’t a chauffeur at all.”

“Special Agent Jarvis has been working undercover for several months, although we have concerns that his cover has been compromised now, given the fact that Herr Garbutt’s bodyguard was snooping around the Cheshire the same time as you. I’m afraid that’s something we can’t allow to happen again.”

“If you’re asking me to back away from my case, I’m sorry, but that ain’t happening.”

“Mr. Baxter, we’re the FBI. We’re not asking you to do anything. We’re telling you, if you don’t stop interfering with our investigation, we’ll have you and your assistant thrown in jail faster than you can blink.”

“You’ll arrest us?” Stella piped up angrily. “For what exactly?”

“How about possession of illegal opioids.”

“Oh yeah, I guess there’s that,” Stella mumbled guiltily.

“There’s also the charge of sexual solicitation, something Lanky Larry could attest to.”

“Hey, a girl’s gotta make a livin’.”

“And what you do with Mr. Baxter’s pipe while he’s not around? We’re pretty sure that’s illegal in at least twenty-three states.”

Stella gasped. “Have you been watching me? How very dare you! I hope you know I charge clients five bucks an hour for that privilege.”

“Given Mr. Baxter’s relationship with Holden Hart, we’ve been watching you both for some time from the abandoned apartment building across the street from where you work. At least we were, until someone put up those damn black curtains.”

Stella kicked me in the shin. “See? I told you we needed them.”

“It doesn’t matter now. The point is we have all the evidence we need to prevent you from being a hindrance. Of course, if you’re wise, you’ll simply drop the case and forget you knew anything about Mrs. Hart’s so-called affair.”

I hitched one eyebrow curiously. “So, if Mrs. Hart ain’t having an affair, and Special Agent Jarvis here ain’t a chauffeur, what exactly in the Sam Hill is going on?”

Agent Smith and his men laughed. “If you honestly think I’m going to tell you that, then you’re not half as smart as I thought you were, Mr. Baxter. Now why don’t you beat it before we pull out the cuffs and march you both downtown.”

I wasn’t keen on putting on a pair of metal bracelets and spending the rest of the week in the big house. Hell, I was more determined than ever to crack this case now. If the Feds were involved, then Harry’s mother was in deeper than any one of us first imagined. But getting thrown in jail wasn’t gonna get us anywhere.

So, with a reluctant tug on Stella’s shoulder I said, “Let’s go. We know when we’ve

worn out our welcome.”

“We do? I honestly ain’t sure that level of perceptiveness is in my wheelhouse.”

“Come on,” I said, forcibly dragging her away.

“Okay, okay. Fine. But if any of you peeping Toms plan on spying on me again, bring cash next time!”

“The Feds weren’t there to bust us. They were there to spy on the Germans.” I polished off another gin, set the glass down, and signaled to Ginger with a wave of one finger.

Stella and I were sitting at the bar of Ginger’s Gin Mill, trying to find a solution to the case in the bottom of an ice-filled tumbler. The gin joint was one of Wilde City’s more respectable speakeasies, decked out with private lamplit booths, sequined curtains that turned the room into a shimmer of shadows, and a bar stocked with the finest illicit booze in town, courtesy of Mamma Marlow.

“So, what’ll it be, handsome? Two more of the same?” Ginger already knew the answer, was already topping up our glasses. She was a buxom, brassy woman with hair the color of a house on fire. She had the temper of one too, although she reserved that for any schmucks who got too drunk and handsy and needed to feel the pointy toes of her shoes as she booted them out of her gin joint. For everyone else—those who knew her, respected her, obeyed her rules—Ginger was not only a good friend, but she was also a true ally when you needed one.

As our glasses filled, she glanced at me. “You know, Buck, if the wind changes, those worry lines are gonna stay etched on your brow forever. You’re too young and clever to let that happen.”

“Thanks, but I don’t feel like I’m either of those things right now.”

She slid our gins closer to us. “Then drink up. Something’s gotta smooth those cares away. It might as well be Ginger’s gin.”

With a wink she moved to the other end of the bar to serve a quiet old-timer intent on drinking his way to oblivion. I knew that feeling well.

With one elbow on the bar, I continued to think out loud, uncertain whether Stella was even listening still. “The question is, what the hell is Mrs. Hart doing sneaking off with her fake chauffeur to secretly meet with a bunch of Feds in a dive like the Cheshire?”

“Have we ruled out the idea of a Roman orgy yet?” Apparently Stella was still listening.

“Yes. I think it’s fair to rule out the orgy.”

Stella wagged her finger at me, judgy and drunk. “That’s because you walk through life with a closed mind, Buck Baxter.”

I straightened my back and creased my brow. “Excuse me. I don’t have a closed mind at all. I happen to be very enlightened.”

“Ha! Enlightened? You? Gimme a break. When you get in one of your moods, you don’t just walk around with a closed mind. You close everything. You close your ears, you shut your trap, you put up a wall so thick you couldn’t blast it open with a bazooka.”

“Knock it off, would ya? You’re starting to sound like Harry when we fight.”

“Well, maybe your prince of pennies is right.”

“Oh, trust me, Harry ain’t always right. He’s far from perfect.” I gave a sloppy gin-tanked sigh. “Some days I feel like I know him better than anyone else in the world. Some days I think—I know —I’ll love him more than anyone else has ever loved him. Then there’s days like today, when I see him turn into his father’s son, and I ask myself, ‘Do I know this man at all?’”

“I know how you feel,” Stella slurred into her gin, the rim of the glass on her lip and her brain clearly unsure whether to talk or drink... or try to do both at once. With a slosh she pulled the glass away, and with a wobbly shrug said, “Sometimes, when I look at those drop-dead gorgeous Logan twins, I ask myself, ‘Do I know these woman at all?’ But that’s because I still don’t know which is Lois and which is Lucy. Hell, there ain’t even a birthmark to tell them apart. Not a single damn mole. Sometimes in the throes of love I’ll bite one of them on the leg, you know, just so’s I can identify them by my teeth marks.”

“You really love the Logan twins? ”

“Sure, why not?”

“Then what was that you were doing with Lanky Larry?”

“That? Oh, that was just a little cash on the side. That wasn’t love. Love is much more than that. Love is mysterious. Love is deep. Lois has the teeth marks to prove that. Or is it Lucy?” She shrugged again. “At least one of them does.”

I was drunk, and Stella’s words faded away as questions ricocheted through my head like bullets from a Tommy gun.

Why was Mrs. Hart risking everything to meet with the Feds?

Did I need to bite Harry on the leg to truly make him mine?

What exactly was Stella doing with my pipe when I wasn't in the office?

I decided I was done with drinking. If I wanted any kind of clarity, I was gonna need something much stronger.

I was gonna need a visit to the Peking Empress .

CHAPTER 7

The fog always seemed to follow the Peking Empress . Even on a clear day like today, the giant red Chinese barge floated toward the dock enveloped in a mist. Slowly it drifted to the pier on the river, a figure in a black silk shirt hovering like a ghost on the deck.

As the barge neared, I heard the figure's familiar voice. "Mr. Baxter, welcome back."

The boat docked and a gangplank was lowered. I stepped on board, unsure whether it was me or the boat that was swaying, given the number of gins I'd downed at the bar before leaving Stella to her own devices.

"Good to see you again, Wuzhou," I said to the man in the silk shirt. "Have you been well?"

"Always, Mr. Baxter. Madame Chang awaits your company." He bowed graciously and gestured to the set of stairs leading below deck.

I knew the way, even drunk as I was.

Downstairs, the veil of smoke was as thick as ever. The only thing that penetrated the shroud was the glow of lanterns swinging from the beams of the barge and the cast-iron burners filling the air with plumes of opium smoke.

From behind the swirling curtains of mist I could hear the moans of stoned lovers, knowing they were languishing on cushions, exploring one another in a drug-induced

haze, tasting each another's lips, tongues, bodies.

My tingling fingers were already peeling the jacket from my shoulders.

I let it drop to the floor as I continued walking through the veil of smoke, stepping out of my shoes, loosening my tie, sliding the shirt from my skin and unbuckling my trousers, until before I knew it I had reached Madame Chang's lounge and was standing there naked before her.

Upon sensing my presence, she sat up, her sightless white-marbled eyes turning in my direction, the silks of her robe floating like tendrils of smoke in the air.

"Mr. Baxter, what a delight. Have you come to lose yourself... or find the answers to a riddle you seek?"

I wasn't sure how to answer the question, other than to say, "I think I'm looking for answers. Answers to the mysteries of love."

Madame Chang smiled, then reached forward and touched my hand. "Come. Lay before me."

As I took a step forward, two large shapes on the floor on either side of me moved forward. I heard hissing and the scraping of claws on the deck, then saw the protective glint in the eyes of Madame Chang's guardians—her two Komodo dragons.

With a silent wave of her hand, Madame Chang commanded them to stand down.

The dragons each let out a low growl and slid back behind the veil of smoke.

"Come, Mr. Baxter. Lay yourself down."

Like a slave boy in some strange opioid-laced opera, I did as she asked and laid myself down at her feet, my body naked, my eyes glazed, and my head spinning in a slow ethereal swirl .

Gently she stroked my temples, and my eyelids fluttered shut. “Speak to me of your woes, Mr. Baxter. What is perplexing you now? What twisted and tangled troubles do you need me to unravel, my darling love detective?”

“I... I...” I didn’t know where to start.

“Shhh,” Madame Chang soothed in her hypnotic tone. “Let the words find you. Don’t breathe a single sentence until the words find you .”

As she spoke, my reply drifted through the haze in my head and took shape behind my eyes. “I’m working on a case that involves Harry’s mother, but the deeper I delve, the more I fear that Harry’s relationship with his parents might one day derail his relationship with me.”

I wasn’t sure what chest of unexplored feelings Madame Chang and my drug-infused daze had just unlocked, but the honesty and clarity of my words surprised even me.

Madame Chang on the other hand seemed completely unfazed by my admission. “Family is a strange and powerful creature, and one that is relatively unknown to you, Mr. Baxter. You grew up alone, relying on nobody but yourself to survive. You are yet to experience what family can do. Sometimes it can be trusted, sometimes it cannot. Sometimes it needs love to nourish and feed it, and sometimes it tears love apart, leaving it butchered and bleeding. The love of a family—the love of a mother or father—can be one of the most puzzling mysteries of all.”

“Will it change him? Harry, I mean. He... he changes when he’s around his father. He becomes someone I don’t even know. He’s like a stranger to me when he steps

into his father's shadow."

"Then you have a choice. Nudge him out from that shadow and into the light, or leave him in the darkness." Madame Chang stroked my cheek with the back of her hand, a touch as soft as satin. "You love him, don't you? "

"Yes. I think so."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Is he under your skin? Do you feel him in your veins?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"Then you must decide—is he a parasite or a love potion? Is he your poison... or the antidote to your pain and loneliness? Only you have the power to answer that Mr. Baxter. Just remember, whatever you do, be gentle with him. You do not know the power his father wields over him. Perhaps one day you will."

I caught my breath as I suddenly sat up, remembering—"Bugsy. Oh shit, I have to meet Bugsy for dinner."

I jumped up, the plumes of smoke swirling as I scooped up my trousers and slid them on. I elbowed one arm into my shirt, scooped up my jacket and tie, then jiggled the shoes onto my feet as I hopped and stumbled my way toward the exit of the opium den.

"Mr. Baxter," Madame Chang called after me. "Know one last thing before you go."

I turned back, slinging my tie around my neck.

“The secret to true love,” said Madame Chang. “Is never keeping secrets from the one who loves you. Heed my words and one day you will find your happily-ever-after. Ignore them, and the mysteries of love will forever remain a puzzle unsolved.”

CHAPTER 8

I wasn't sure which hit me with greater force, the heady delights of Madame Chang's opium haze, or the pungent smack of garlic that seemed to suck the oxygen out of the room the second I stepped into Luigi's Linguini Kitchen .

I had stepped up to the door of the Italian restaurant warily. Two of Buggy's oversized cauliflower-eared stooges had positioned themselves on either side of the entrance like they were the king's guard, and as I approached, one of them held out his giant paw to stop me.

"Name."

"Baxter. Buck Baxter."

The pair of them eyed me up and down. "You carrying?" the other oaf asked in a low, guttural tone.

I opened my jacket to show them I wasn't wearing a shoulder holster. I lifted my trouser legs so they could see there were no weapons strapped to my ankles. "If you wanna search anyplace else, you're gonna need to buy me a drink first."

They both gave me a blank, humorless stare before waving me inside.

I stepped through the door, and that's when the wallop of garlic sent me teetering backward a step or two. It was a moment before I steadied myself, looked around, and realized the restaurant was completely empty but for a lone figure sitting at a

table in the far corner.

Correction, he wasn't sitting at the table, he was slumped at it.

Even from where I stood and his drooping position in the chair, I instantly recognized him. "Bugsy?" When I saw that he wasn't moving, I hurried across the restaurant toward him, alarm bells ringing in my giddy head. "Bugsy!"

As I neared, I saw his chin resting on his chest, blood oozing from his lips.

I saw the half-finished plate of pasta in front of him.

I saw the blood all over his shirt, bright red seeping from at least six or seven gunshot wounds.

"Oh, fuck!" I whispered in a panic.

Bugsy Brown, the father I never got the chance to know, was dead.

How had someone snuck in here and murdered him without anyone knowing?

What the fuck were the goons at the door doing?

Did they even know their boss—my father—was dead?

A wave of emotion swept over me and I leaned toward him, taking his shoulders in my hands. "Bugsy! Goddammit, Bugsy! Who did this to you?"

Suddenly the corpse gave a cough and a splutter.

It jolted and shuddered.

I jumped back, then watched as Bugsy's eyes blinked open, realizing he wasn't a corpse at all.

"Buck? Is that you? Jesus, I must have fallen asleep again while I was eating. God, I hate it when that happens."

"Bugsy? You're alive? Fuck, I thought you'd been shot!"

I pointed to his shirt and Bugsy looked down, laughing. "You thought I'd been shot? You thought I was bleeding? Kid, that ain't blood, that's spaghetti sauce."

I let out a relieved sigh, my legs swaying.

Bugsy gestured to the chair opposite him and told me, "Sit, sit!" then plucked a napkin off the table, mopped up his lips with it, then proceeded to smear the sauce all over his shirt in a hopeless attempt to clean himself up. "Ah, Jesus. Now I've gone and made it even worse. I would normally eat with the damn napkin tucked into my shirt, but I didn't want you to think I was a slob or nothin' so I left it out. By the way, you don't mind that I ordered an entrée before the entrée do ya? A man's gotta eat, right?"

"Indeed, you do, Signor Bugsy," came a voice from behind me.

I turned to see a short, stout man with a twirly moustache and a chef's hat teetering atop his head burst through the swinging doors from the kitchen, his apron just as splattered as Bugsy's shirt and his hands juggling several plates—pasta pomodoro, clams carbonara, ravioli ragu, and a mountain of meatballs.

Bugsy pushed his half-eaten plate away and licked his sauce-stained lips at the sight of the next courses being laid out before him. "Ah, Luigi! Magnifico! You've outdone yourself yet again. Come and meet my son, Buck."

I glanced from the feast Luigi laid on the table to my father. “We’re going public with our relationship? So soon?”

Bugsy shrugged. “What? Are you ashamed of your old man?”

“No. I guess I’m still just processing this whole father-son thing.”

Luigi grinned and patted my head like I was a puppy. “Ah, what a sweet little ragazzo .” The smile turned to a judgmental frown as he poked me in the ribs. “A little skinny, though. Make sure you eat the meatballs,” he demanded. “You want more garlic? I’ll bring more garlic.”

“No! I’m fine. I’ll eat the meatballs, I promise.”

Luigi’s smile returned. “Very good. Is there anything else you need, Signor Bugsy?”

“No. Grazie , Luigi.”

With a flap of the swinging doors that led into the kitchen, Luigi vanished, while I leaned across the table. “Are you sure we should be telling the likes of Luigi that I’m your son?”

“Why not? No good comes from keeping secrets.”

“Bugsy, you’ve spent your whole life deceiving the law. You’ve built an empire trading in black-market weapons and illegal booze. Your entire business model is based on secrets and lies.”

He shrugged again. “Well, maybe it’s time to turn over a new leaf. Now that I’ve finally come clean and fessed up to being your father, maybe I should start acting like one. And don’t call me Bugsy anymore. From now on, I want you to call me... Dad.”

“Dad?” It felt so unnatural coming out of my mouth.

“You don’t like it? Wait... what about Papa?”

“Papa?” That felt even worse.

“No? How about... Big Daddy?”

“Oh, we’re so not doing that.”

“Sorry, I guess I’m kinda nervous.”

“ You’re kinda nervous? You’re not the one who suddenly found out his father happens to be the city’s most notorious gangster.”

“Am I, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m not the only kingpin in Wilde City. Mamma Marlow owns half the illegal trade in this town. Hell, we’ve been warring ever since...”

“Ever since what?”

“Ever since she threw her wedding ring at me and walked out the door.”

It wasn’t exactly headline news that before Bugsy and Mamma formed rival gangs in a bid to own Wilde City, they were once a happily married couple. The bigger mystery was—

“Why didn’t I see this coming?” I muttered to myself, suddenly realizing the

possibility that—“Oh my God. Is Mamma Marlow my actual mamma?”

I breathed the words so quietly Bugsy could barely hear them .

“What are you mumblin’ about, kid?” Bugsy asked through a mouthful of meatballs. Before I could answer he waved away any response I was about to give. “Never mind. The reason I invited you here tonight was to ask a favor. Mamma Marlow, she’s an untamed shrew if ever there was one, but try as I might there ain’t no snuffing out the flame she holds in my heart. She can ambush every shipment of booze I got coming into town, she can sabotage every crate of illegal firearms I got and send every last one of my boys to the bottom of the river with rocks in their pockets and a sack over their heads, but I’ll forgive her every time. Why? Because no matter how much she hates my guts, I don’t think I’ll ever stop lovin’ that knife-wieldin’, arms-dealin’, money-launderin’, insurance-racketeerin’, narcotics-traffickin’, gun-totin’ gal of mine.” Bugsy gave a lovelorn sigh. “I guess true love never dies.” He stabbed another meatball with his fork and jabbed it in my direction. “That’s where you come in, kid.”

“I do?”

“I wanna extend a long overdue olive branch to that ballsy broad.”

“You do?”

“I wanna offer Mamma Marlow a truce. I want us to put our differences aside and join forces.”

“Join forces? Against who?”

“Against that pompous ass-hat Howard Hart, who else? I can smell a rat a mile away, even through all of Luigi’s garlic. I tell ya, that arrogant son of a bitch is up to no

good. I know it, and Mamma knows it too. Our local arms dealers have been feeling the squeeze from Hart's friends, the Germans, ever since they popped up all over town. Trust me when I say that train of Hart's is bad news. It ain't the future of Wilde City. If you ask me, it's gonna be the end of it."

"What exactly do you mean by—"

"Flowers!" Bugsy exclaimed, cutting me off and slurping down a dozen slippery strands of spaghetti that slapped his cheeks before they disappeared. "I need you to take flowers to Mamma. I'll arrange to have them delivered to your office first thing in the morning. I'll also have my boys set up a meeting between you and Mamma at her warehouse." Bugsy put down his fork and leaned forward. "Kid, I need to win that dame back, but not just for me. I wanna do it for the good of this city, but she ain't gonna let me in the door. You, on the other hand... you're the best shot I got at fixing things. Promise me you'll do it. Do it for your Big Daddy."

"Oh God, please don't call yourself that again."

"Fine. Just promise me you'll do it."

I drew a deep breath to answer him when Luigi burst through the kitchen doors once more. "Ay, ay, ay, il ragazzo ain't even picked up his fork yet, let alone tasted my meatballs! Mamma mia! "

Bugsy grinned my way. "We've been busy talkin'. And it ain't mamma mia we've been talkin' about." He licked the ragu off his lips. "So, son... what'll it be?"

CHAPTER 9

I agreed.

Then I tossed and turned all night.

I shuffled this way on Harry's silk sheets. I turned that way. I tried hard not to disturb him until eventually I caved in to my restlessness and got up.

My chest was tight, my stomach knotted.

Naked, I walked through the dark shadows of his penthouse and out onto the moonlit terrace. The night was cool but not uncomfortably so. The stars above sparkled, and the night lights of the city twinkled, but I was having trouble seeing the beauty in anything. Quietly, I stepped up to the edge of the terrace, leaned against the waist-high stacked granite wall between two potted conifers and stared up at the moon.

I couldn't get Madame Chang's words out of my head, the notion that Harry was under my skin, but did that make him a poison or the antidote to my pain and loneliness? He wasn't the only one under my skin at that moment. The reality of having a mobster for a dad was also crawling beneath my flesh like a nasty case of scabies, as was the idea that his trigger-happy ex-wife might well be —

"Don't even say it out loud," I muttered to the night breeze, for fear of making it true.

Could my real mamma really be Mamma Marlow?

Could I seriously be the offspring of the two most violent gangsters in the city's history?

Was this one of the great mysteries of love about to be revealed... or was cracking the case of my parents' identities simply going to create a whole new world of problems to solve?

"You do know you're talking to yourself, don't you?"

I turned, and there was Harry standing in the open French doors that led out onto the terrace. He was wearing his white bathrobe and had an inquisitive look on his face.

"I was?"

"Well, 'talking' is perhaps a little too generous a description. It was more like mumbling or a manic kind of uttering, like your thoughts were escaping in one long desperate jailbreak. You're not going insane on me, are you?" he joked.

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I hope not."

"Good," he smiled, stepping up to me. "Because the only thing I'm crazy about... is you."

And there he was again, the Harry I loved.

The Harry I adored.

The Harry I'd smash mountains to smithereens for, just to hold him in my arms.

I reached out for his forearm and pulled him close, and he stumbled against me, still grinning.

I felt my cock harden against his robe as I planted a kiss on his lips.

When our mouths parted, he ran his thumb over the crow's feet that were beginning to show around my eyes. "You're getting wrinkles. You're far too young for that. Maybe the stress of everything is getting to us both. This case, my father's business, my mother's indiscretions... maybe when things settle down, you and I should take a vacation. "

"A vacation?" My voice faltered. I'd never taken a vacation in my life. Frankly, I wouldn't know what to do with myself.

Harry chuckled. "Yes, a vacation. Somewhere far from the world we know, like Mexico or Paris or a cruise down the Nile. I hear Egypt is to die for."

I sighed, the idea of a trip abroad the furthest thing from my mind. Before I knew it, I heard myself ask him—"Where do you go?"

He pinched his face quizzically. "What do you mean, 'Where do I go?' Buck, I'm talking about where we should go. Together. I think a cruise along the Nile would be dreamy, don't you?"

"I'm not talking about a vacation. I'm talking about the way you sometimes disappear. Where do you go when that happens?"

He laughed, this time less amused. "You're asking me where I go? You're the one standing out on the terrace in the dead of night."

"You're not listening to me. I'm talking about every time your father's around. The you I know— my Harry—he vanishes into thin air and all I see is the son of Howard Hart."

“Because that’s who I am. Buck, I’m the heir to a fortune, and my father expects me to step up if I’m going to step into his shoes one day.” His brow creased. “Honestly, I’m not interested in fighting over this. I know you don’t get it. I know you don’t know what it’s like to have parents. There are so many days when I wished another couple had picked me, someone with no expectations, just an undying love for their son. Then I think about you in that orphanage, alone for all those years, and I have to be grateful I had parents at all.” He looked at me, and I couldn’t tell if he was feeling annoyance or compassion. “I’m sorry you’ll never know how that feels.”

Madame Chang’s voice floated through my head once again, her words like a warning on the wind—“The secret to true love is never keeping secrets from the one who loves you.”

I opened my mouth to finally unbottle my genie, to tell him about Buggy, but as I did, he silenced me with a finger to my lips. “Sssh. I told you, I don’t wanna fight. Not tonight. I’m sorry all you see is Holden Hart when my father’s around. But never forget, when it’s just you and me, I’ll always be your Harry.”

With a naughty glint in his eye, he opened his robe, wrapped it around me and pressed his naked body against me, his hardening cock warm and beckoning against mine.

“Come back to bed,” he whispered in my ear.

With his body pressed against me, I felt safe.

I felt loved.

I felt like I had found the only family I needed, right here in my arms.

No, there would be no fighting tonight.

CHAPTER 10

I drew a deep breath. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Harry was wearing only a towel as he stood in front of the bathroom mirror, shaving. It was the next morning, and our lovemaking had managed to ease my troubled mind enough for me to get one or two hours’ sleep. But the moment I woke, I knew I had to tell Harry everything.

“What is it?” He stopped shaving and turned to face me, his handsome jaw half covered in white foam.

I felt exposed, and it had nothing to do with the fact that I was stark naked.

“I...” Hesitation took hold. I didn’t want to keep my secrets from him any longer. And yet, just as I tried to push the words from my lips, my brain chickened out and changed the subject. “I... I... I need to get access to your family mansion. I need to see if there are any clues that might help break this case.”

He nodded. “You think it’ll help? Of course it will. My mother could have a bundle of love letters hidden in the drawer of her writing desk. There could be anything that might confirm— ”

“Actually, it’s not your mother’s desk I need to rummage through. It’s your father’s.”

Harry looked puzzled. “What’s my father got to do with any of this? It’s my mother who’s having the affair.”

I stepped forward. “Harry, do you trust me?” I didn’t know why the hell he should, given the information I was keeping from him.

He nodded again, not a doubt on his face. “Of course I do.”

“Then you need to believe me when I say, I think your father is up to something. I think your mother’s affair isn’t what it seems. I think your father is hatching some dicey plans, and I think he’s doing it with the help of his new German pals.”

Harry squinted, confused. “Wait, what do you mean? Dicey plans? Like what?”

“I have no idea, which is why I want to go through his den and see if I can find anything. When can we get into the house without either of your parents finding out?”

He plucked his towel off and wiped the foam from his face, his brow etched in worry as he said, “I know they’re both due to attend a breakfast at the Governor’s office. My father is presenting details of the railroad he’s built for the Millenium Express . He recently struck a deal with the Governor to cover half the costs of the rail construction. After that, I’m supposed to meet them for lunch at the Rainbow Palace. But that’s not until noon. There’s no reason we can’t go to the house right now.”

He moved quickly toward the bathroom door, but I caught him by the arm. “Harry, I only want you to get me inside the house. After that, you need to leave.”

“Why?”

“Because things could get dangerous.”

“Buck, this is my family we’re talking about. If they’re in danger, I need to protect them. I need to help you get to the bottom of this. You can’t stop me.”

CHAPTER 11

If a medieval castle and a fairy-tale palace had a love child, it would be the Hart mansion. The house and the grounds it sat on were larger and more palatial than I'd ever imagined.

"This is where you grew up?" I asked from the front door, gazing at the elaborate hedge maze, the tennis courts, and the swimming pool inspired by the fountains of Versailles.

"It wasn't as fancy as this when I was a kid. My father has made a few changes in recent years."

"Like what?"

Harry pointed. "He added the landing pad over by the maze for his personal airship. But only after he launched the fleet."

"I guess you were really slumming it before that happened, huh."

Harry ignored my sarcasm and pushed the enormous front door open.

It struck me as odd that a house this big didn't have staff to open the door for us. "Where's the butler? Don't you have a housekeeper or a maid or a dungeon master or something?"

"For some reason, my father ordered the entire staff to take the day off. I guess he

was feeling generous. It doesn't happen very often, so when it does, nobody questions it in case he changes his mind."

I followed him into a large vestibule with a Grecian mosaic floor, a curved grand staircase at one end, and a crystal chandelier the size of my office.

He led me left, through a high-ceilinged, gold-columned, grand ballroom, then through a large gallery housing some of Howard's private art collection, a sitting room with wallpaper featuring geese and fair maidens, a library and a map room, another sitting room with wallpaper featuring a fox hunt, another gallery, another sitting room, and finally he opened a door that led into a lavish den replete with a large ornately-carved mahogany desk and walls lined with honors, awards, and certificates of appreciation for Howard Hart's many contributions to various business ventures.

"I'm guessing that desk is locked up tighter than a Wells Fargo vault," I said, eyeing the opulent desk up and down.

Harry confidently made his way behind the desk and sat in the throne-like chair. "It is. But I know the key to open it. There's a hidden cipher."

Harry pushed on a carved panel on the left side of the desktop, and it opened to reveal a secret compartment. I looked over his shoulder to see a small metal gadget set inside the compartment, like a series of dials and locks.

"Something tells me you've done this before."

Harry winked back. "When I was a kid, I used to sneak the odd cigar from his drawers."

"You smoked? Are you telling me the golden-haired child of the richest family in

town smoked his old man's cigars?"

"No, I never smoked them. I sold them to the other kids at school."

"Don't tell me you needed the money," I said, gesturing to the amount of luxury that practically dripped from the walls .

"No, it wasn't about the money. It was about being my own man. Starting my own business venture."

"Like the nightclub."

Harry nodded. "My father can have his ships and trains. All I ever wanted was a place where people can dance and be happy and forget about life for a while."

Listening to his words, it suddenly struck me that Harry's nightclub was indeed the perfect metaphor for his need to step out from under his father's shadow. He was constantly referred to as the heir to his father's business, but I wondered if he even wanted Hart Industries at all.

"This is kinda fiddly," he said, turning one of the dials on the cipher. "These things are tricky to move. You could break a nail doing this."

He turned the first dial to the number fifteen.

He moved his attention to a small wheel like a clock featuring the months of the year and swiveled it to March.

His fingers then scrolled through a third dial, this one containing letters, until he formed the word "IDES."

“The Ides of March,” I observed. “The fifteenth day of March, when all manner of chaos descends upon the world.”

“You know about the Ides of March?”

“I’ve heard it’s an unlucky day.”

“That depends entirely on your point of view. Julius Ceasar was murdered on the Ides of March. For him, unlucky indeed. But what some people consider unlucky, others—such as Marc Antony—deem as fortune’s favor. As my father will often say when he’s about to expand his global empire, ‘Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war.’ He’s obsessed with Shakespeare’s Julius Ceasar . To him it’s not a tragedy, it’s a heroic struggle for power.”

Suddenly a series of clunks and clacks sounded inside the bones of the desk, and in the next moment all the drawers unlocked with a click.

Harry moved to close the cipher panel—eager to uncover what secrets might be concealed inside the drawers—but before he did something caught my eye. “Wait.”

Reaching inside the small compartment, I scraped out something hard and chipped.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“It seems you were right, you could indeed break a nail turning those dials.” I showed him the chipped broken nail in my fingers. “Red nail polish.”

“That’s my mother’s,” Harry whispered. “She’s been through my father’s desk too.”

“I get the feeling she wasn’t exactly after your old man’s cigars. The question is, was she taking something... or returning it?”

I quickly opened the first drawer on the right and a map cylinder rolled into view.

Harry opened the first drawer on the left and gasped.

I turned to see him pulling a pistol out of the drawer with his thumb and forefinger as though he was holding up a dead fish by the tail. “A pistol? My father owns a pistol? God, I hate guns.”

“Then put it down before you shoot your goddamn toe off... or mine.” I could see he was about to toss it onto the desk before I added, “Carefully! Put it down carefully, would ya?”

Daintily he laid it on the desk.

I swiveled it around so it pointed away from us, then turned my focus back to the drawer.

I pulled out the map cylinder and opened it, unrolling several maps on the desk.

Meanwhile Harry continued fossicking.

“These are maps of Wilde City Harbor,” I muttered, baffled, staring down at a map that outlined the major landmarks of the city, including Wilde City Tower, the river running along the east side, and the city’s gasworks on the foreshore. It also included a large section of the ocean beyond Wilde City and the land leading up north, much of it farmland. There was a curved dotted line running through it from the city to the sea, crossing through large patches of red. “What are these?” I asked Harry.

He looked over at the map. “I think those are the sections of farmland that my father purchased so he could build his railroad. That’s part of the deal with the Governor.”

“Is this the railroad?” I pointed to the curved dotted line.

Harry nodded. “I’m pretty sure that’s it.”

“It runs straight to the sea. What kinda railroad goes nowhere but the sea?”

“It’s his test track. I guess we’ll find out exactly where it leads tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is Saturday. It’s the maiden journey of the Millennium Express .”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on that train?”

Harry nodded.

Panic struck me. “You can’t be on that train, Harry.”

“I have to be. It’s what’s expected of me.”

“No, Harry. I’ve got a bad feeling about all this. And I’m not the only one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your mother. She’s not having an affair with her chauffeur. He’s not even a real chauffeur. He works for the FBI and your mother has been secretly filtering this information to the Bureau.”

“The FBI? Buck, are you serious?”

I nodded. “Something big is going down. Your mother has known about it all along,

and now she's trying to stop it from happening."

"You mean... my mother's some sort of whistleblower?"

"Whistleblower, informant, spy... whatever you wanna call her, Crystal Hart is trying to turn your father in without him knowing it."

"Oh God, she really is in trouble."

"You betcha. As Stella would say, 'Snitches get stitches.' Or worse." I pulled more items out of the drawer. "She's potentially shown all of this to the Feds. Look here, a telegram mentioning the completion of work by some guy named Bockenheimer. And here's the diagram of some kind of clock, or something, I don't know. And here... here's a letter from Herr Garbutt confirming a wire transfer of funds from the German Nazi Party to your father to the amount of... holy shit!"

But Harry had stopped listening to me. Instead, he was holding up something he'd found in another drawer. I recognized it instantly...

A red, white, and black lapel pin with a swastika on it.

At that moment, we both turned our heads to the window, hearing a low droning sound outside.

"What the hell's that?" I asked.

We stepped over to the window, and there in the sky, materializing through the clouds, was Howard Hart's private airship.

At the same time, we heard the rumble of several trucks and turned to see a small convoy making its way up the drive.

The trucks pulled up in front of the house and dozens of men in gray coveralls exited the front and back of each vehicle, offloading large crates and striding toward the house while the airship descended toward the landing pad beyond the maze.

“What the fuck is going on?” Harry asked, a sense of panic in his voice.

Before I could answer we heard the banging of doors and the stomping of boots through the house.

Harry and I hurried toward the door to the den and peered warily down the hall to see several men pulling artwork off the walls before sealing them in crates. Several other men took priceless vases and exotic artifacts off shelves, before hastily wrapping them and securing them in boxes.

“What is this, some kind of raid?” Harry whispered urgently. “They’re taking everything! ”

“No, not everything.” I noticed there were several items they ignored. “They’re only taking the things that are worth something.”

“Who are they? Thieves?”

“No, not thieves. They’re removalists.”

Suddenly two men came hurrying toward the den.

Harry and I ducked back inside the room. I quickly shoved everything back inside the drawers of the desk before Harry scrambled the cipher and closed the hidden compartment in the desktop.

The sound of footsteps in the hall outside grew louder.

“We need to hide,” I said. “Where can we hide?”

Harry headed straight for a tall bookcase standing against the wall. “Stay close,” he told me.

I pressed myself against him, wrapped my arms around his waist, unsure what was about to happen next.

Harry ran his fingers along the spines of the books on a particular shelf, stopped at William Shakespeare’s *Julius Ceasar* , then pulled it out an inch.

With a lurch, the bookcase—along with a circular section of the floor beneath our feet—began to revolve.

“Jesus, a secret tunnel?”

“How else do you think I got outta here with all those cigars?”

As we rotated into a dim, gas-lantern-lit tunnel, I caught sight of the men entering the den.

A moment later the bookcase sealed us safely inside the tunnel.

I was expecting Harry to lead me along the passage then down the set of stairs I spotted a short distance away, but instead he pulled another book from the shelf to reveal a peephole looking back into the den, large enough for both of us to peer through.

Inside the room, apparently unaware of our presence behind the bookcase, the two men took several pieces from the walls before turning their attention to the desk.

“That stays,” ordered a voice with a thick German accent from the doorway.

I recognized the voice and quickly angled my head so I could see through the peephole toward the door, and there stood the one-eyed German, Hans Hammer.

“The desk stays for now. Herr Hart has yet to finalize things here. A second airship has already been arranged to pick up the remainder of his belongings tomorrow morning. In the meantime, gather the accolades from the walls and make sure they’re on this shipment. The first airship leaves for Berlin in twenty minutes, are we clear?”

The men stomped their heels together and quickly started pulling framed certificates from the walls.

Harry replaced the book covering the peephole and grabbed me by the hand. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“This tunnel leads underground to the far end of the maze. From there we can sneak out through the rear of the estate without anyone seeing us... hopefully.”

As he hurried along the damp, cramped confines of the secret passageway, memories of our thwarted childhood escape through the tunnel underneath Hell’s Bells flashed through my mind.

How far we’d come together, Harry and me.

Yet there we were, still scurrying through tunnels, hand in hand, looking for a way out.

At the end of the passage was a set of stairs leading up to an old door with a slide-

bolt. Harry opened the door and sunlight filtered through thick foliage. I realized there was hedging all around us. We pushed our way through it and into the middle of the immaculately manicured maze.

“Do you know your way out?”

Harry nodded. “Like the back of my hand. Right, right, left, right, left.”

He hadn’t yet let go of my hand, and hurried me through the maze until soon we raced out through an exit at the rear of the labyrinth.

There we paused a moment and looked back over our shoulders.

Looming large beyond the maze was the airship. As we watched, a new banner was unfurled, the symbol of the swastika unraveling itself down the side of the aircraft.

Harry stared in wide-eyed shock. “What the hell is happening, Buck?”

I took a deep breath. “If I’m not mistaken, your father is about to relocate Hart Industries—and his family—to Berlin.”

CHAPTER 12

It took some negotiating to convince Harry he needed to keep his lunch engagement with his parents.

“After what I’ve just seen? How can I sit there and pretend none of this is happening?”

“Harry, you need to play the part to avoid suspicion, just like your mother has been doing all this time. If your father has any idea you know he’s up to something, this whole case will be blown.”

“But Buck, this isn’t the case anymore. I hired you to uncover my mother’s affair.”

“You hired me to stop your mother from getting hurt. Nothing’s changed.”

“Except for the great big zeppelin with the swastika flag in my back yard.”

He had a point. “Okay, yes. Except for the great big zeppelin with the swastika flag in your back yard. But nothing’s changed apart from that . We’re still going to protect your mother. We just need to do it without stepping on the toes of the Feds... or the Nazis... or your father.” My pep talk was losing more and more of its pep by the second. “Hell, just go to lunch, would ya? And don’t give anything away.”

He turned to go, but before he did I grabbed his arm, pulled him back toward me, and planted a kiss on his lips. “And remember... I love you.”

He kissed me back, then—"I love you too."

We went our separate ways, reluctantly so, but knowing that time was of the essence now.

Twenty minutes later I pushed open the door to my office to find Stella swanning about in a giddy, grinning daze. In fact, she wasn't simply swanning, she was waltzing, her dance partner a bouquet of red roses.

"Either I'm dreaming or you are." I shut the door behind me. "No matter which one of us it is, I seriously hope they wake up soon because we got work to do."

"Work-schmerk! If I'm dreamin' I don't ever wanna wake up. Just look, Buck. I got me a secret admirer! Someone sent me flowers!" Stella continued dancing as she plucked the card out of the bouquet and read it aloud. "To my one and only. These flowers pale in comparison to your beauty. Meet me for a drink at Ginger's Gin Mill. Six o'clock."

"Ah, shit," I cursed. "Mamma."

"Toots, you can call me Granny for all I care. I don't mind one iota, because I'm in love." She batted her eyelids excitedly. "Who do you think it is? Of course, my first guess is Lois. Or Lucy. Or both of them. But then again it could be that handsome Errol Hemingway from the theater. Oh sure, he turns into a total putz the second he opens his mouth, but he's still easy on the eye, don't you think? Hell, maybe he likes being gagged, that'd be a win-win for both of us. Or perhaps it's that sexy older dame we're investigating, Crystal Hart, the one who's dripping in diamonds. Have you seen the rocks on her fingers? God, I'd do anything to kiss her ring. Oh wait, she's practically your mother-in-law, which would make me your mistress-in-law. Would that be weird, toots? I'm sure you'll get over it. Maybe the four of us could get together for a—"

“Stella! The flowers ain’t for you. They’re for Mamma Marlow.”

Stella stopped dancing so abruptly she almost tripped over herself. “What the fuck?”

“I’m sorry to break it to you, but they’re from Bugsy.”

“You mean, your father?”

“That’s right. He wants to call a truce with Mamma.”

“You mean, his ex-wife?”

“Correct, and let’s stop connecting the dots before—”

Stella gasped so dramatically I thought she was about to swallow her own tongue.

“Holy moly mobsters! Mamma Marlow is your—”

“Don’t say it! Fuck! Don’t even think it!” I made a beeline straight for the bottle of gin and unwashed glass on my desk and poured until the booze splashed over the rim.

“We are not discussing the remote possibility that—”

“Mamma Marlow is your actual mamma! Fuck me sideways with a peg leg! Buck, you’re the child of not one but—”

“Don’t say it! Don’t you think I’m already stressed enough that both my parents might be gangsters?”

“Might be? Buck, between the two of them, they’ve bumped off like a thousand lowlifes and louses. Hell, they’ve probably bumped off ten thousand , when we think about all the bozos who ended up as fish food at the bottom of the river, or a buzzard’s breakfast out in the desert, or diced meat being churned outta the mincer at

Luigi's Linguine Kitchen .”

I threw up in my mouth a little. “That seriously doesn’t happen. Does it?”

“Who knows! All’s I’m sayin’ is, your madre’s a murderer! ”

“There’s no proof yet she’s my mother.”

“Not until she coos ‘Come to Mamma!’... at which point you’ll hear my voice ringin’ in your skull sayin’ ‘I told you so.’ But hey, look on the bright side. If she don’t plug you for knowing too much, she might just make you one of her untouchables... like her other son, Marky.”

“Mamma has another son?”

“Of course she does, you chump. Don’t you remember the case of the nuns with guns? Sister Bananas tried to kill her own brother Stu Whitmore because he was doin’ the horizontal hokey pokey with Marky Marlow.”

The cogs upstairs were spinning so fast I thought steam was about to blow out of my ears. “You mean... I have a brother too?”

“At least one that we know of. You could have siblings all over town. Hell, who’s to say I ain’t your sister!”

That thought was enough to make me drain my entire glass of gin and pour another. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. All I need to do now is take those flowers to Mamma as an olive branch from Buggy. Ain’t nothin’ more to it than that.” I wasn’t one who needed hand-holding—except if it was Harry with his hand in mine—but at that moment I was feeling kinda vulnerable, and before I could help myself I said to Stella, “You wanna come?”

Stella's eyes lit up. "Are you shittin' me? Does Houdini keep a spare set of handcuff keys up his ass? Of course I wanna come. I wouldn't miss this trainwreck of a family reunion for the world!"

Still holding the flowers, Stella rushed for the door.

I tipped my second gin down my gullet, and somewhat unwillingly I followed.

CHAPTER 13

“Tell that bastard Bugsy he can shove his damn flowers up his ass! The only daisies I wanna see are the ones he’ll be pushing up from six feet under!”

Stella chuckled under her breath as Mamma threw the flowers back in my face.

We were standing in the middle of Mamma’s warehouse. Her goons had been hauling crates of booze and bullets from one truck to another when we entered, at which point Mamma put her fingers to her lips, whistled like a Mississippi riverboat and hollered, “Boys, vamoose, would ya? I got me some company.”

Two minutes later, the red roses slapped me in the face.

In a pathetic attempt to ignore it, I blew a petal off my bottom lip and held up the card. “It came with a note. Bugsy wants to meet you at Ginger’s at six tonight. He wants to—”

Mamma snatched the card out of my hand and ripped it into confetti. “I told you, I ain’t interested in anything Bugsy’s got to say to me, unless it’s ‘I surrender.’”

“Actually, that’s not far off the mark. He’s willing to call a truce and end the street war between you.”

Mamma arched one eyebrow. “He is? I don’t believe you. ”

“It’s true. He said the two of you have a common enemy in Howard Hart’s German

allies.”

“He ain’t wrong there,” Mamma sneered. “Those damn square heads have been trying to muscle in on the weapons trade ever since they arrived in town.”

“Which is why he thinks it’s time the pair of you pointed your guns at them, instead of each other.”

Mamma’s eyes narrowed as she pondered my words. “Are you sure this ain’t some kinda trap?” She looked to my assistant. “Stella, I can trust you. Is Bugsy tryin’ to pull a swifty or is this deal on the level?”

Stella shrugged. “I ain’t spoken to Bugsy myself, but if Buck says it’s legit then I believe him.”

With an uncertain humph, Mamma crossed her arms. “I wish I had your faith in people. But I divorced my ex-husband for good reason, namely the fact that he’s a lyin’, cheatin’, two-timin’, double-dealin’, triple-crossin’, baloney-boned skunk... and that’s him on a good day.”

She turned and started walking away when I pulled out the only ace I had up my sleeve. “There’s one other thing. He told me the truth about who I am.”

Mamma Marlow stopped dead in her tracks.

Slowly she turned. “Now I really know you’re whistlin’ Dixie.”

I gulped, surprised that I was about to admit everything out loud. “He told me I’m his son. And since the two of you were married, I can’t help but think maybe... just maybe... there’s the possibility that you’re my...”

I couldn't finish my sentence.

I didn't have to.

Within seconds, Mamma Marlow's brash, battle-hardened exterior crumbled. A wave of emotions—a lifetime of regrets—washed over her face, turning her signature scowl into a quavering look of heartache and shame, guilt and grief.

Her chin crumpled and her eyes glassed over. "He... he really told you?"

My own vision splintered, my voice faltered, and all I could do was nod.

"Oh, Buck. My baby, Buck. Our secret is finally out." With tears running down her face she rushed toward me.

I wasn't sure whether to defend myself or open my arms.

Fortunately, Mamma wrapped me in the tightest, most tender motherly embrace I'd ever experienced.

The tremor of her body seemed to ripple through mine as this cast-iron woman—this fortress of a female—melted against me.

"Oh, my dear boy. I'm so sorry we did what we did. I never wanted to abandon you, I only wanted to give you a better life. Bugsy and I, we were falling apart. We thought having a child might mend things between us, but all we did was put you in the middle of the fight. One night, Bugsy and I almost killed each other. That's when I knew I had to leave you on the doorsteps of St. Agatha's to keep you out of harm's way. No matter how hard your life might have been in the orphanage, I knew it had to be easier than living with me and Bugsy."

I sighed. "I'm not so sure about that."

She pulled out of our hug but kept a hold of me, her fingers gripping my shoulders as though now that she had me, she never wanted to let me go. "I know you probably don't believe me, but I've been watching you from afar all these years. I know when we've met in the past, I pretended to be a stranger. But I've never stopped watching you grow."

"Really?"

She nodded, setting more tears in motion. "I'll forever regret letting you go. But I'll always be proud of the man you've become, and you did it all on your own. Oh Buck, you must hate Bugsy and me for what we did."

"Actually, I don't."

She looked surprised .

I shrugged, her hands still on my shoulders, and sniffed back a tear of my own. "If you hadn't taken me to Hell's Bells, I never would have met Harry. Or Holden as everyone else knows him."

"I know who Harry is. And I know what he means to you."

"He's something of a big deal. At least to me he is." I gave a coy smile, like a son admitting to his mother that he was in love for the first time... which was precisely the case. I couldn't help but add. "You'll like him."

"Please tell me he's nothing like his father."

"No. Sometimes. But not when he's around me."

Mamma wiped away a tear. “Well, let’s hope you’re nothing like your father too. And thank God you didn’t get his nose.” She took my chin in her hand and turned my face left and right. “In fact, now that I can get a closer look at you, it seems you got all your looks from me.” She drew a breath and said, “Maybe I will say yes to a rendezvous with Bugsy. For old times’ sake. Besides, fuck knows I could use a cocktail after this.”

Suddenly the sound of someone sobbing uncontrollably echoed through the warehouse.

Mamma and I both looked down to see Stella blubbering like a baby.

“Stella, you okay?” I asked.

She nodded through her tears and the bubbles of snot popping out her nose. “I’ll be okay. I just wasn’t expecting such a beautiful moment between the two of you. Can someone please adopt me? I’m feeling kinda left out right now.”

Before anyone could think of a reasonable answer to that request, the doors to the warehouse flew open and one of Mamma’s goons raced in. “Mamma! The cops are swarming around the riverbank. Something’s going down at the old docks.”

Quickly Mamma composed herself, swiping away her running makeup. “What is it, Lenny?”

“Apparently they’re pulling a body outta the river.”

“It’s not one of our boys, is it?”

“No, Mamma.”

“Is it one of Bugsy’s?”

Lenny shook his head.

“Then who is it?”

“Word on the street says it’s Howard Hart’s limo driver.”

I gave Stella an urgent look. “We gotta go.”

Hurriedly we turned to leave, but Mamma tightened her grip on my shoulders. “Buck, be careful. I’ve heard rumors that Hart’s new friends are shipping in more than just firearms. My boys have spotted crates carrying the sort of stuff you need to build a bomb. I know you think Harry is the bee’s knees, you just need to be careful you don’t get stung. Don’t get too close to what’s happening at Hart Industries.”

I felt my jaw tense. “I’m afraid it’s too late for that.”

CHAPTER 14

Even from where Stella and I stood a short distance away at the foot of the docks, and even with the water running over his pale, blue-lipped face and limp limbs as they dragged him out of the river with a rope, I could still make out the handsome features of the limo driver, a.k.a. Special Agent Jarvis. “That’s him alright.”

Half a dozen cops hovered around the body as they laid it down on the fish-scale-covered docks. Another half dozen were milling about a crane that had been brought in, watching the winch that had been lowered into the water with the help of several frogmen in diving suits.

As the sun began to sink in the sky, the cops on the dock covered the body with a sheet while Stella let out a sorrowful sigh. “Well, I guess Mrs. Hart can kiss the good times goodbye. No more toga parties for that guy.”

“Stella, there’s no evidence Mrs. Hart and Agent Jarvis were having an affair.”

“Are you kidding? She was banging him for sure. Who wouldn’t? Hell, I’d slide his bread into my pop-up toaster anytime. ”

“Stella, he’s dead.”

“I can see that, you big palooka. I’m not saying I’d do him now . Let the record show I do not have sex with dead guys. Except for that one time Chunky Chuck slipped off to the pearly gates without me even knowing. It wasn’t until I was helping myself to a little tip from his wallet that I realized he wasn’t just sleeping with his eyes open

again. Hey, at least he died with a smile on his face.”

Suddenly another round of shouts rose up from the docks.

The winch on the crane strained a moment, then from the depths of the river a black mass emerged. At first it was impossible to tell what it was, and frankly, now that Jarvis’s body had been retrieved, I wasn’t expecting the cops to drag anything else out of the river.

Then it dawned on me—why weren’t the other Feds buzzing about at the crime scene, pulling their badges out and ordering the cops around?

“Oh, Jesus,” I whispered, watching as waterfalls gushed from the window seals and door jams of the flooded black car being craned out of the river.

And there inside, their dead, bloated faces becoming visible as the water cascaded away, were the other FBI agents we had met outside the platform at Grand Central Station.

“Well, it’s official,” Stella said. “Everyone’s orgy days are over now.”

I leaned down and took Stella by the arm. “We need to get outta here. We need to warn Harry. I get the distinct feeling there’s a hit list... and I’m betting we’re on it.”

Stella didn’t have to be told twice to hightail it outta there.

We made it to a deserted corner a block from the docks, when suddenly none other than Harry’s limo pulled to a halt in front of us.

Lois sat in the driver’s seat while Lucy sat in the front passenger seat... or maybe it was the other way around. Through the open passenger window, I could see that the

concerned look on their faces meant this was no time for figuring out who was who.

“Lois? Lucy? What’s wrong? Is Harry okay?”

That’s when I saw Lois wasn’t just holding the steering wheel—she was bound to it, ropes tied tight around her wrists.

I yanked open the passenger door to see Lucy with her hands tied behind her back.

“Run!” the twins warned us. “Run as fast as you can!”

I did the opposite, quickly reaching for Lucy. But before I could pull her from the car, a voice with a thick German accent said, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Stella and I both turned to see the one-eyed Nazi, Hans Hammer, stepping out of the rear door of the Lincoln. “It’s time we all went for a little ride,” he said, a pistol in one hand, waving it from us to the open door, gesturing in no uncertain terms that he wanted us in the car.

“Where’s Harry?” I demanded.

From inside the rear of the limo I heard Harry shout, “Buck! Don’t get in! Run!”

Hammer cocked his pistol. “I wouldn’t take his advice if I were you, not unless you want a bullet in the back. Now, get in the car. Jetzt! ”

“Buck! Don’t do it!” Harry shouted from within.

The fact that he wasn’t getting out of the limo made me suspect he was tied up too.

Out of the corner of my mouth I uttered to Stella, “You run. I’ll make a grab for the

gun and save Harry.”

“No way, toots. I ain’t leavin’ you to take on this stupid sap alone. Besides, while you’re busy saving Harry, who do you think’s gonna save those luscious Logan twins?”

“Enough chit-chat!” barked Hammer. “You Americans! Always with the chit-chat! I said get in the car... now!”

He pointed the gun at my feet.

He fired a bullet that shaved off the side of my shoe and ricocheted into the cornerstone of a nearby building. I flinched, my feet dancing, something that made the German cackle with glee.

“Laugh it up, chucklehead,” Stella snapped. “You won’t think it’s funny when Buck and I kick your ass into next week.”

Hammer only grinned back. “Oh my, how I shall enjoy silencing you forever. Now, let’s take that ride together.”

Stella tied the rope behind my back as the German ordered, “Tighter!”

We were in the rear of the limo with Harry, his hands bound behind his back and the Nazi pointing his gun between the three of us.

The car was cruising through the streets of the city, the window separating us from the twins open so that Hammer could bark his orders at them as well. “Avoid the traffic. Easy on the corners. Take the quietest route possible to the far end of the river, as far from the police as possible. And don’t try anything foolish, otherwise everybody dies.”

As Stella finished tying my hands, I glanced at Harry beside me. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“No, but I sure as hell wouldn’t mind breaking a knuckle or two on this guy’s face.” He glared at Hammer who simply laughed back at him.

“You’re telling me. I owe this guy a shiner or two myself. So, what happened?”

“I’m not sure. It all happened so fast. I finished lunch with my parents when suddenly the limo pulled up and this asshole stepped out waving his gun. He’d already tied up Lois and Lucy in front, then he worked on my ropes. Of course, when my father finds out about this, there’ll be hell to pay.” He turned his head to the German. “You do realize any contract Herr Garbutt has signed with Hart Industries won’t be worth the paper it’s written on, not once my father finds out his investors are capable of kidnapping.”

“Oh, Master Hart,” smirked Hammer. “We are capable of so much more than kidnapping.”

“He’s right,” I said grimly to Harry while keeping my gaze leveled at the German. “The Feds are dead. Whatever plot they uncovered, it cost them their lives.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Stella—the only one of us not yet bound—suddenly lunge toward the German.

Swiftly he pointed his gun at her and she pulled herself back.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the German informed her calmly. “Otherwise you’ll regret it.”

“I got news for you, ya schlub. I pretty much regret everything, no matter what I do.

That's just the kinda gal I am. So quit tellin' me what to do."

"Oh, but if I kill you now, you're going to miss the rest of today's excitement."

I eyed him suspiciously. "What kind of excitement?"

Hammer gave a sly smile. "The kind that goes... kaboom! "

"You've got a bomb?" Harry breathed. "You're going to set off a bomb?"

"No," came the simple answer. "We're going to set off two. And that's just beginning."

"Why?" I demanded. "Why the fuck would you want to march into our city and start blowing things up?"

"To teach you a lesson, Mr. Baxter."

"Me? What's any of this got to do with me?"

"Our question precisely. Your meddling is proving quite problematic. Now it's time for those you care about to suffer."

Panic set in. "Those I care about? Who? Tell me who?"

"Firstly, your friend from the Far East. She seems very good at unraveling clues and leading you down all the rabbit holes where you don't belong. But we all know what happens to naughty bunnies. In the end, the wolf gets them."

"Madame Chang," I gasped. "Don't you dare fucking hurt Madame Chang."

The German laughed. “Mr. Baxter, we’re not going to simply hurt her. We’re going to blow her barge to kingdom come.”

“Stop the car!” I screamed at both the German and the Logan twins in front.

“Keep driving!” Hammer ordered.

“No! I need to stop that bomb. I need to save Madame Chang.”

“Then who’s going to save the targets of the second bomb? And to think, you’ve only just met your parents. What a shame to let them die now.”

“No!” I roared, struggling in vain against the ropes.

“Wait a minute,” said Harry. “Your parents? You found your parents?”

“Indeed, he did,” Hammer answered for me. “Unfortunately, now he’s about to lose them again... and this time there’ll be no coming back for their poor little Buck.”

“You fucking bastard! I’ll kill you!”

This time it was me who made a move, kicking my leg up with so much speed and force that Hammer didn’t see it coming until my foot connected with his forearm, pushing the gun away.

He fired off a bullet.

The passenger window next to Harry’s head smashed.

Stella screamed.

The car suddenly swerved right and everyone took a tumble to the left.

I threw another kick at Hammer, the steel-tipped toe of my shoe collecting him in the chin, knocking him to the floor of the limo.

I turned to the open window separating us from the driver's compartment. "Floor it, Lois!"

"But I'm Lucy."

"I don't care who's who. Get us to Ginger's Gin Mill! As fast as you can!"

The sudden acceleration tossed us all to the back of the limo, giving Harry the chance to boot an already dazed Hammer in the left cheek.

The German lurched in my direction and raised his weapon.

The car screeched around a corner and mounted the sidewalk.

Hammer practically fell onto my shoe as I threw another kick in his direction, smashing him in the right cheek.

The car barreled left, then veered again.

Hammer tried to steady himself and raised his gun once more, but Stella opened her mouth wide and bit down on his forearm so hard the German screamed and dropped the pistol.

"Stella, the door!" I shouted.

Stella pushed open the door right behind Hammer.

I kicked him again and he fell toward it.

Harry kicked him again, and the German tried to grab onto something, anything, to stop him from falling out.

But his clutching hands fumbled, as Harry and I both planted a foot in the Nazi's chest, sending him flying out the limo door and thudding onto the sidewalk, tumbling and flipping and crashing into a streetlamp, knocking the light out in a shower of sparks.

As I watched him take the fall, the Wilde City clock tower appeared at the far end of the block we sped by. The hands of the clock had just ticked past six.

"Lucy! Lois! Get us to Ginger's, now!"

"We're on it, Buck!" the twins said.

The horn blared and the limo swerved through the streets, almost taking out a cigar stand and narrowly missing Skip selling his newspapers.

Stella was already working on the ropes behind my back, setting me free.

I pulled shut the flapping door then set about untying Harry's ropes, while Stella wriggled through the window into the driver's compartment and worked on freeing Lois and Lucy.

"You've got parents?" Harry said over his shoulder as I wrestled with his ropes. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I wanted to. Every time I tried, it just never seemed like the right time."

“You’re supposed to let me in, Buck. I trusted you with my secrets, you’re supposed to trust me with yours, whether it’s the right time or not.”

“I’m sorry. What else do you want me to say?”

“Aren’t you at least going to tell me who they are?”

At that moment, the limo slid to a rocking halt and the twins called out, “We’re here! Ginger’s Gin Mill.”

I pushed open the door and called back to the driver’s compartment. “Stella, get to the Peking Empress. There’s no time to waste. You gotta warn Madame Chang. And be careful.”

“Will do, Buck!”

As I pulled myself toward the door, Harry followed. “I’m coming with you, whether you like it or not.”

I didn’t have time to argue.

I leapt out of the limo with Harry on my heels, the car hightailing it outta there behind us.

When I saw Bugsy’s two cauliflower-eared stooges standing guard on either side of the entrance to Ginger’s Gin Mill, I realized that Bugsy had cleared the joint so he and Mamma could have some privacy.

I bolted for the door, shouting, “There’s a bomb inside. Get them out now!”

The goons were slower off the mark than I expected, and by the time my words sank

in, Harry and I were already pushing through the door and rushing into Ginger's joint.

Bugsy and Mamma were sitting together at a candlelit table in the corner, while Ginger prepared cocktails for them behind the bar.

All three of them looked up in surprise.

At the same time, Harry stared at my parents, even more shocked. "Your folks are Bugsy Brown and Mamma Marlow?"

"Not if I don't get them outta here now! Quick, go get Ginger."

I raced for the table while Harry grabbed Ginger who dropped the glass she was holding.

"Buck?" asked Bugsy. "What the hell's going—"

"There's a bomb. This joint's about to blow!"

Suddenly the goons were shoving me out of the way, knocking me to the floor as one seized Bugsy and the other yanked Mamma out of her chair.

"Buck!" Mamma shouted frantically as the stooges trampled over me to get my parents out first.

I pulled myself up.

I saw Harry race out of the speakeasy with Ginger.

I saw the goons practically carrying Bugsy and Mamma out the door.

I charged after them...

Reached for the door...

When suddenly—

KABOOM!

A fireball erupted somewhere behind me, lifting me off my feet and sending me smashing through the front window of Ginger's Gin Mill.

I crashed onto the street outside, flames bursting into the night and shattered glass scattering all around me.

My ears were ringing.

Through my blurred vision I saw that the blast had knocked everyone else off their feet.

Slowly they were picking themselves up, except Harry who pulled himself up quickly, unsteadily, and hurried toward me.

"Buck?" He collapsed to his knees beside me. "Buck, talk to me! Say something! Anything!"

I groaned and grimaced as I pulled myself to my knees. "Now do you know why I didn't wanna tell you?"

I turned my head to see Ginger's Gin Mill crackling with flames. Smaller eruptions could be heard inside, along with more glass shattering as the bottles of liquor exploded behind the bar.

Harry helped me to my feet as Mamma and Bugsy limped toward us. I noticed they were holding hands. I guessed their date was something of a success.

“Buck, are you hurt?” Mamma asked urgently.

“I’m fine. We both are. But we have to go. There’s another bomb down by the docks. Do you have a car?”

“Take mine, kiddo.” Bugsy clicked his fingers at his goons and one of them slapped a set of keys into Bugsy’s palm. “Just try not to get it dirty. It just had a spit and polish.”

He tossed the keys to me and I caught them in my fist. “Thanks, Pops.”

I missed the muddy puddles by inches and swerved Bugsy’s fancy black Anderson convertible to a screeching halt at the pier where the Peking Empress docked. The barge was there, sitting peacefully in the water, its lanterns burning while the mist that always seemed to accompany the vessel drifted in swirls around the hull.

Harry and I piled out of Bugsy’s car and sprinted down the pier.

I bounded up the gangplank, the boards bouncing under my weight, with Harry right behind me.

“Madame Chang!” I shouted. “Wuzhou! Stella!”

Our shoes pounded against the deck as we bolted to the stern...

I pulled open the door leading below deck ...

And for the second time in a matter of minutes the world was swallowed by a

blinding light.

KABOOM!

This time, instead of being thrown through a plate glass window, I was hurled off the back deck of the boat along with Harry. Arms and legs flailing, we flew high into the night air—the pair of us aglow in the fireball that ascended from the exploding barge—then plunged into the river.

The water was cold and dark, but somewhere Harry's and my hands found each other.

We pulled one another to the surface, spluttering and gasping for air, as chunks of the boat came splashing down around us:

Burning, broken planks;

Flaming curtains that spiraled into the river like parachutes on fire;

A piece of the stern with the name Peking Empress on it, now charred and splintered.

“Oh my God, please tell me they made it out of there.”

“Please tell me we'll make it out of here ,” Harry said.

I turned to him and saw that his eyes were anxiously darting left and right as we treaded water. “Harry? What's wrong?”

“Buck, there's something else in the river with us. Something big... and moving.”

He was right. There was a swish in the water a short distance behind me.

I swiveled around quickly, then heard a splash just behind Harry.

“What the fuck is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I think there’s more than one of them. We need to get to shore.”

As the plume of fire and smoke continued to rise into the sky, while cinders and burning debris rained down into the river, Harry and I started to swim for the shore... fast.

Suddenly Harry flinched in the water and stopped swimming. “Fuck!”

“Harry?”

“Something just rammed me in the side.”

With a splash, a large reptilian tail thrashed through the water between us.

“Oh, shit!” Harry exclaimed. “What is that? Is that an alligator?”

“There ain’t no gators in this river,” I said, seeing the long-snouted head of a creature rise up in front of me and swim straight toward me.

“What is it then?”

I eyed the sea monster and said, “If I ain’t mistaken, it’s a Komodo dragon.”

I turned to see one headed straight for Harry. “And so is that,” I added.

“Oh God, they’re gonna kill us. Swim, Buck! Swim!”

But I grabbed his arm and stopped him. “No, wait!”

I saw the dragons slowing in the water as they approached us. I squeezed Harry’s arm to still him, only our legs moving through the water now to keep us afloat.

Then, warily—almost gently—the Komodo dragons swam right up to us.

One nuzzled its head under my arm.

The other nuzzled its head under Harry’s.

“I don’t think they want to kill us,” I said, almost wanting to laugh with relief. “I think they want to save us.”

With a swish of their tails, the dragons set us in motion through the water.

“Hold on,” I told Harry.

I tightened my own grip on the slippery, leathery beast beside me, and with an agility so sure and swift, the giant reptiles carried us across the river to a rocky beach on the banks .

That’s when we saw Stella, Lois, Lucy, Wuzhou and Madame Chang, her ethereal white gown billowing in the breeze.

As the dragons slid onto the shore, Harry and I found our feet, sodden and stumbling up the rocky bank.

“Buck! Harry! You’re alive!” shouted Stella, rushing toward me and hugging my knees so tightly she almost tripped me up.

“Is everyone alright?” I asked. “Did everyone get off the Peking Empress safely?”

“Don’t you worry about a thing, toots. Me and the twins got Madame Chang and Wuzhou off without a hitch.”

“Was there anyone else on board?”

“You mean the dozen or so half-baked muffinheads all stickin’ their fingers in the mixin’ bowl, if you catch my drift? We tried to get them to shore safely, but most of them were so stoned they fell off the gangplank into the water. Nothin’ like a cold shower to sober someone up, right?”

As the twins wrapped their arms around Harry, Madame Chang laid her hands on the heads of her Komodo dragons as though she was granting them a blessing. “Thank you, my children. You have done well.”

I looked from her to the dragons. “You sent them to save us?”

“Yup!” answered Stella before Madame Chang could reply. “They were like a pair of Saint Bernards in the snow. Except slimier. And uglier. And don’t even get me started on the stench.”

“Komodo dragons have survived for over three hundred thousand years,” said Madame Chang.

“Well, that sure as hell explains the smell. Having said that, they saved my Buck, so I guess they ain’t half bad.” Stella walked up to one of the dragons and patted it on the head. “Good doggy!”

The dragon responded by almost taking Stella’s hand off. “Yikes!”

She reeled backward as Madame Chang gave a sly chuckle. “You may approve of the dragon... but the dragon must also approve of you.”

“Unfortunately,” I chimed in. “There’s a bunch of Nazis out there who don’t approve of any of us. Tonight’s pyrotechnics were a warning, and a potentially deadly one at that. But whatever they’re plotting, this was just the first act.”

“And the one person who knows more than anything,” said Harry, grabbing my forearm. “Is my mother. Buck, if there’s anyone who’s next on the Nazi’s list, it’s her.”

I looked him in the eye and gave him a nod.

A nod that said he was right.

A nod that said I was there for him.

A nod that promised we would keep his mother safe, no matter what.

I pulled him close.

I planted my lips on his, then said, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my parents.”

“And I’m sorry I turn into a different person around my father. He brings out the worst in me. But my mother... she brings out the best.”

I took a deep, determined breath. “Then let’s go save her.”

CHAPTER 15

Howard Hart's car was not at the mansion, and the house was barely lit. But the light from one window burned bright.

"That's my father's den." Harry raced into the house. I was seconds behind him, glancing left and right over my shoulder, expecting trouble to be hiding in every shadow.

We charged through the house, room after room—half of which were now empty, the expensive pieces of furniture gone and paintings missing from the walls—until we slowed near the open door to the den and cautiously peered inside. Harry let out a sigh of relief when he exclaimed, "Mother!"

We hurried inside and Crystal Hart looked up in shock. "Harry? What are you doing here?"

"We've come to get you. You're not safe."

"I know that, darling. None of us are. Which is why I've come for these." She picked up a handful of blueprints and telegrams, maps and schematics, which she had pulled from the drawers of her husband's desk. "Holden, your father is dealing with some very dangerous people."

"I know." Harry gestured to me with a nod. "I hired my friend here, Buck Baxter, to find out why you were acting so strange, sneaking away at night."

“And let’s just say, your secret is quite the Pandora’s box,” I added.

“You have no idea, Mr. Baxter.”

“I think we’re starting to piece it all together,” I answered.

“Which means you’re next. It’s time to leave... for good. No more sneaking these papers out and discreetly replacing them without his knowing. We need to take these to someone who—”

“Someone who’s not dead yet?” I asked.

Her brow creased with fear and heartache. “You know about Agent Jarvis? And the others?”

I nodded.

Mrs. Hart held a trembling hand to her chest, trying to calm her nerves as she spoke, looking from me to Harry. “More lives are at stake. More than you can possibly imagine. When I overheard your father’s business dealings with the Germans, I couldn’t stand by and let it happen. I had to do something to stop them. Before I knew it, the FBI was involved.”

“And before you knew it, they were all dead,” I said.

Suddenly two pairs of headlights passed across the window and we heard the sound of cars braking sharply outside.

“They’re here. Hurry.” Mrs. Hart started snatching all the papers off the desk, scooping them all up and shoving them into Harry’s arms. “Take them. Take them and run.”

Harry looked at his mother with alarm as she reached into the open drawer beside her and pulled out Howard's pistol. "Mother? What are you doing?"

"You need to take this evidence and get it to someone who can stop this madness."

"What about you?"

Down the hallway we could hear the drumming of running feet, getting closer.

"I'll keep them at bay for as long as I can. Although as soon as your father discovers his desk has been emptied, I dare say you won't have long to get away."

"We're not leaving without you." Harry turned to me, pushed the papers into my arms, and grabbed his mother by the forearm.

The sound of racing footsteps grew louder and louder.

Harry pulled at his mother's arm, but she resisted.

"Go, Harry!" she ordered. "Now!"

"Not without you."

The footsteps squeaked on the floorboards as they slid to a halt just beyond the door.

Harry let go of his mother.

He shoved me against a bookcase.

He kissed me, fast and hard, then yanked at the copy of Julius Caesar next to my head.

The bookcase began to turn. “Harry?”

Harry stepped off the revolving floor. “I can’t leave her.”

I tried to grab for him, but I couldn’t reach him without dropping the papers.

The bookcase turned, enveloping me in the dimness of the tunnel.

I glanced through the quickly closing gap in time to see the one-eyed German enter the den first.

There were others behind him, but I couldn’t make them out.

The bookcase sealed shut and I heard a single gunshot.

I let the papers flutter from my arms and desperately, silently, pulled at books, trying to find the peephole until soon a small shaft of light beamed out from the bookcase.

I pressed my eye to it as close as I could.

I saw Harry with his hands gripped on his mother’s arm, the one holding the pistol. He’d clearly pushed her arm away just as she’d fired the weapon.

In the doorway, Hammer stood with one hand to his cheek, blood trickling through his fingers. He already looked battered, his clothes torn and his face bruised from the fall out of the limo. And yet he still managed to laugh.

From behind him, Herr Garbutt, Howard Hart, and several other German soldiers appeared.

“Herr Hammer?” said Garbutt. “Are you shot?”

“It’s just a graze,” he replied. “Unfortunately for her, she won’t be so lucky.”

“No!” exclaimed Howard, forcing Hammer’s arm down as he tried to raise his gun. “I thought I made it clear, I want her alive. Both her and my son. You already disobeyed me once when you tried to seal Holden’s fate the same way you did the Feds. How many times do I have to tell you, when we get to Berlin, I want the German people to see me as a family man. A man they can believe in. A man they can trust. A man they can follow into the future.”

Garbutt chuckled. “You sound like you have plans to take over the entire Third Reich. Mein Führer will not like that at all.”

“I assure you, I have no interest in stealing the limelight from your Führer . All I’m interested in is staking my claim on the world’s transportation industries. All of them. And if that means bringing Hitler’s enemies to their knees, city by city, then so be it.”

“Dad?” Harry asked, a look of disbelief and panic on his face. “What are you talking about? What are you planning to do?”

“Something your mother has been trying to foil for months. Do you both honestly think I didn’t notice all the skulking about, all the whispers and watchful eyes and tiptoeing around? What do you take me for, a fool?”

“You’re a fool if you think you can get away with this,” Mrs. Hart snapped. “You’re throwing away everything you’ve built, everything you’ve worked so hard for. You’re going to get us all killed. All because of your ego, your pride, your insatiable lust for power and money.”

“My dear, since when have you ever had a problem with my power and money? You wear it well. At least you did, until the day you decided you wanted to be brave and try to stop me. What was it, Crystal? Were you bored? Did you need a new

distraction? I could have bought you a tropical island in the Pacific if that was the case. Nevertheless, you had to go and stick your nose where it didn't belong, at the same time letting Agent Jarvis stick his cock where it didn't belong. It wasn't all business and no pleasure with the FBI, was it, my darling? At least when it came to Agent Jarvis. You really should make sure you have both earrings on when you get out of the back seat of a limousine, dear."

Mrs. Hart tried to raise her pistol again, but Harry stopped her.

The attempt was enough to give Howard a good belly laugh. "Of course, once I discovered you were sneaking all my plans to the FBI, I had no choice but to let you have your Mata Hari moment. After all, it was the easiest way to lead us to the agents helping you. But then Holden had to get involved, along with his hired help, Mr. Baxter. Tell me, son, is it just his investigative skills you pay him for, or do you hire Mr. Baxter for other services rendered?"

Harry's jaw clenched, as did mine. "If you must know," he said. "Buck is my boyfriend. I've loved him since before I ever met you. And if he was here now, he'd kick your ass. All of you."

Howard laughed again. "You see, this why you'll never walk in my shoes. Your naivety, your gullibility, your need for a happily-ever-after... quite frankly, Holden, it's embarrassing. To think you could ever inherit a dynasty as powerful as Hart Industries is ludicrous. I know I'm constantly touting you as the heir to my fortune, but it's just part of the performance, a narrative for the newspapers to print. In all reality there's no way on earth my legacy will be yours. You have no ferocity. You have no fight. You don't have a ruthless bone in your body, which is precisely what it takes to forge an empire. Hence you will forever remain in my shadow, as will your mother. You'll smile for the cameras, you'll do as you're told, and when I'm through with you, you will both quietly disappear from view. By then, the world won't even notice you're gone."

“Enough talk,” said Herr Garbutt. He clicked his fingers, and Hammer promptly walked around the desk and stepped up to Mrs. Hart, towering over her. He took the hand holding the gun in his mighty, knuckle-bruised paw, and squeezed.

Mrs. Hart’s knees buckled in pain.

“Let her go!” Harry demanded, trying to pull Hammer off.

But with his other hand, the German gave Harry a backhanded slap so hard it knocked him to the ground.

“Harry!” Mrs. Hart dropped the gun and knelt beside her son to help him up.

That was when Hammer glanced down at the empty desk. “The drawers. They’re all empty.”

Howard and Herr Garbutt raced around behind the desk to stare down in horror at the open drawers.

Immediately, Howard grabbed his wife and yanked her to her feet, forcing a whimper out of her. “Where are the documents? Where’s everything? ”

Harry pulled himself up. “Let her go.”

But before he could wrestle his mother free of his father’s grip, Herr Hammer shoved Harry out of the way and pointed the gun at him. “ Now can I kill him? Let me kill them both.”

“No!” Howard shouted. “Take them to the car. We’re leaving now, before anyone can stop us. The Millennium Express is about to make an early departure.”

Before the Nazis dragged him out of the room, Harry slid a quick, discreet glance sideways at the bookcase, and for a split second—even though he couldn't see me—Harry was looking straight at me.

And I wondered if I was ever going to see his handsome face again.

I sprinted down the tunnel, clutching the scrunched-up papers to my chest.

I reached the door that led out into the moonlit maze, then tried desperately to remember how to find my way out.

“Left, right, right,” I muttered, turning one way then the other. “No, left, left... no, right, left... fuck!”

I ran through the maze.

I took a left and came to a dead end.

I backtracked and turned right, then again, then left.

“Fuck!” Another dead end.

I turned around, perhaps too quickly, and staggered into the hedge on one side, snapping twigs and branches. The blow from the explosions earlier that evening, along with all the panic and fear and the desperate need to rescue Harry before it was too late, was obviously making my head spin and my feet unsteady.

I turned back, made a left and then another, then came to another dead end.

I saw broken twigs and branches in the hedge to my right, and realized I'd just gone around in a circle.

“Fuck!”

The curse was met with laughter.

Uneasily I realized it was the laughter of a child.

What the hell was a child doing in the maze in the dead of night?

I peered through the milky blue light of the moon, seeing nothing but hedges in every direction. “Who’s there?”

The laughter came again, this time clearer.

I knew that laugh.

From a passage to the left, a young boy suddenly appeared.

For a moment I stared in disbelief, wiping my eyes before whispering, “Harry? Is that you?”

“You’re lost, aren’t you?” the boy replied, still giggling. “Did you forget?”

“Forget what?”

“The way out.”

I nodded, staring at the boy, still rattled with shock. Was I hallucinating? Was I dreaming? Had the bomb blasts tilted my brain on its axis? I had no idea, but it was Harry alright. There was no mistaking that scruffy blond hair, those bright blue eyes, that smile that made you wanna follow him anywhere.

“It’s right, right, left, right, left. Come with me, I’ll show you.”

With that he vanished.

“Wait! Kid... Harry... wait!”

I raced to catch up with him, clutching the papers still, desperate not to lose any.

With every turn I caught a glimpse of him in the pale moonlight up ahead—the back of his head, an untucked shirt tail, the heel of his boot—before he vanished around another corner.

I followed...

Turned one last corner...

Then suddenly the boy was gone...

And before me stood the exit to the maze.

In the distance I heard car engines start up and the sound of tires peeling down the drive.

I knew Harry was in one of those cars.

I had to fight the urge to make a mad dash across the grounds and cut them off at the gates to the estate, but I knew I had to get the papers to safety first.

I also knew I had to rescue my Harry.

But exactly how I was going to do that, I had no idea.

Until I whispered to myself—

“I need a family meeting.”

CHAPTER 16

“Did you say ‘Boom-Boom’?” Mamma asked, alarmed.

“As in the ‘Boom-Boom’?” Bugsy said, face contorted with disbelief.

I screwed up my nose in confusion. “I have no idea what either of you are talking about.”

“I could take a stab in the dark,” said Stella. “But I think my definition of a ‘boom-boom’ is very different to what your folks are talking about.”

The four of us were sitting on crates in Mamma’s warehouse, the documents from Howard Hart’s desk strewn across the floor before us.

Mamma had picked up the telegram from Herr Bockenheimer telling Hart that the project he was working on was complete.

“This explains why my damn ears are still ringin’ from the blast,” said Bugsy.

“That was no tin-can boobytrap of a bomb that took out Ginger’s,” added Mamma.

“That was the work of the maestro.”

I held up my hands to make a T-shape. “Whoa, whoa. Mamma, Bugsy... time out. I got no idea what you’re talking about, so would you mind letting me and Stella in on the conversation?”

“Sorry, son,” said Buggy. “One day all of this will be second nature to you, once you become the kingpin of Wilde City.”

“Oh, slow down! Whoever said I wanna be the kingpin of Wilde City? I don’t want that job at all.”

“Sure you do. And I’ve decided I’d like you to start calling me Pops. That’s what you called me before and I kinda liked it.”

“If I’m honest, it just kinda slipped out in the moment. I wasn’t expecting it to become a habit.”

Buggy sounded offended. “What’s wrong with calling me Pops? You call her Mamma.”

“That’s because it’s her name.”

“Not when I first met her it wasn’t. Not until she decided to try to beat me at my own game.”

Mamma gave Buggy a clip behind the ears. “Maybe if you hadn’t bought that necklace for Minnie the Smoocher I wouldn’t have got so angry.”

“If you must know, I didn’t buy Minnie anything. That necklace fell off the back of a truck.”

“Mamma! Pops! Please can we forget the barney and concentrate on the ‘boom-boom’ for one minute.”

“He’s right. Why fight? I’m sorry, my delicious Mamma Muffins,” cooed Buggy in a tone that caused me instant reflux.

“I’m sorry too, my Bubby Buggy Boo-Boo,” baby-voiced Mamma.

With lips puckered, my parents caved against one another in one big messy, mushy lovefest.

“Oh my God,” I winced. “I’m never gonna save Harry in time.”

Thankfully, Stella sorted things out, jumping off her crate, stepping up to my parents, and slapping them both around the cheeks and ears. “Hey! Hey! Boo-Boo and Muffins! Put your sloppy pink bits back in your heads and quit canoodlin’, would ya! We’re heading toward a different kinda climax right now, so stop pumping the breaks and let us get on with the plot. Capiche ?”

Mamma and Buggy promptly separated.

Buggy cleared his throat and straightened his tie.

Mamma’s eyelids fluttered busily like she was trying to blink away the stars. “Of course, where were we?” she asked, before answering herself. “Ah, that’s right. Berthold Bockenheimer, otherwise known as ‘Boom-Boom’ Bockenheimer, the greatest, most lethal bombmaker in the world. He’s a maniac for mayhem, a fanatic of doom and destruction. He’s so obsessed with his explosives that he cut off his own right hand and replaced it with an assortment of tools and gadgets to make his bombmaking skills even more efficient.”

“In other words, he’s completely crazy,” interpreted Stella.

“Correct,” Buggy nodded. “He also happens to be a devoted and influential member of Germany’s swiftly rising Nazi Party.”

“So, are you saying Boom-Boom Bockenheimer set off the bombs that blew up

Ginger's and the Peking Empress?" I asked.

Bugsy nodded again. "Without a doubt. But those blasts were just to whet his appetite. Nobody hires Boom-Boom just to light up a gin joint and a Chinese junk. No, the Germans have commissioned him to do something much, much bigger."

Mamma was already looking over another document. "What's this? It looks like a giant mechanical snake."

"That's The Millennium Express ," I said. "It's Hart's rocket-train and it's where I need to be if I wanna save Harry."

"Wait a minute, who's Harry?" asked Bugsy.

I sighed impatiently. "Holden Hart. He's Howard Hart's son."

"And Buck's boyfriend," added Mamma with a wink to Bugsy.

Bugsy's eyebrows arched excitedly. "You didn't tell me you were in love."

"I guess maybe because I've been too busy trying to get you two back together, and solving this case, and doing my cotton-pickin' best to stay alive."

Mamma looked at her ex-husband with a crinkled brow. "Surely you had an inkling. Didn't you see the goo-goo eyes they gave one another after the explosion at Ginger's?"

"He probably had smoke in his eyes," I answered for Bugsy to try and shut the topic down. "And for the record, Harry and I never use words like 'goo-goo eyes.' Now, can we please get back to figuring out exactly what Howard Hart and the Nazis are up to?"

“Do you even need to know?” Mamma asked, standing up and grabbing a crowbar. “I mean, you’re certain they’re up to no good, right?”

I nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“And you’re certain they’ve kidnapped your boyfriend, loaded him onto that train, and you need to get him back, right?”

“Yes. God, yes!”

Mamma shoved the crowbar under the lid of a nearby crate and pried it open. “Well, poring over a bunch of paperwork ain’t gonna get him back.” She pulled a shotgun out of the crate, evidently one of many. “But this might.”

“What are you saying?”

Bugsy piped up. “Mamma’s saying if you wanna save your boyfriend, we need to get you onto that train... and give you the best possible chance of getting out alive. Consider this your first lesson in gangster school. Back yourself, arm yourself, get yourself the hell out of there.”

“But I don’t wanna go to gangster school! I just wanna save Harry!”

Mamma threw me the shotgun.

Instinctively, I caught it.

Bugsy and Mamma exchanged a smile at my reflexes.

“Maybe he’s his father’s son after all.” Mamma grinned.

“Or his Mamma’s boy,” Buggy smirked .

“Either way,” said Mamma. “We need to get him on that train.”

Stella started jumping up and down. “Ooh! Ooh! Me too! You need to get me on board too.”

I shook my head. “Stella, there’s no way you’re getting on that rocket-train.”

“You see, you say the words ‘rocket-train’ and there’s no way I’m not! ”

I heaved another sigh. “Okay! Okay! So what’s the plan?”

CHAPTER 17

At four o'clock in the morning, Grand Central Station had the feeling of an archeological dig site excavating an ancient lost city: vast, majestic, for the most part deserted and deathly quiet, and yet in a remote corner of the site where something exciting had just been unearthed, everything was abuzz with voices echoing orders and workers running about like ants in a nest.

Such was the case on the platform that housed The Millennium Express .

From across the cavernous, empty main concourse of the station, Mamma, Bugsy, Stella and I watched shadows running back and forth on the distant platform. We heard the shouts and commands in German, and the chuff of a train getting ready to embark on its journey.

In front of us were two baggage trolleys, a large crate on each.

I looked at my parents, both of whom were dressed in the uniforms of train baggage handlers, my mother's hair tucked under her porter's hat. I didn't ask them where they got the uniforms from; quite frankly, I didn't want to know. All I knew was that Harry was somewhere on board that train, and I needed to find him .

"So, kiddo, you ready?" asked Bugsy.

I took a deep breath. "As I'll ever be... I guess. How about you, Stella?"

Stella put up her dukes. "I'm ready to kick some Nazi ass. Or if they're too tall for me

to reach, I'll at least sock 'em in the balls. Either way, let me at 'em."

Quite unexpectedly, Bugsy gave me an awkward hug and Mamma kissed me on the cheek.

"Good luck, you two," she said. "We'll try to follow you, but who knows where that train is headed."

Bugsy pried open the lid of the crates with a crowbar.

I lifted Stella into the crate on the trolley that Mamma was about to push.

I climbed into the one on Bugsy's trolley, glancing at the shotgun that was already inside. "For protection," Bugsy had insisted. He'd also made sure I filled my pockets with enough ammunition to sink me to the bottom of the sea.

Once I was in, Bugsy handed me the crowbar then replaced the lids on the crates, using a hammer to seal us inside.

With a heave, Mamma and Bugsy pushed the trolleys toward the platform.

The sound of German orders and the busy shuffling of boots grew louder, as did the low thrum of the train getting ready to depart, until the ominous thrum of it was right beside us.

We came to a halt, and I heard Bugsy say to someone, "Late delivery. Herr Bockenheimer insisted these be added to the cargo immediately."

He must have sounded convincing, because before I knew it, I heard several men grunting as they picked up the crate I was in and slid it onto the train. I heard Stella's crate being loaded beside mine, followed by the sliding and slamming of the train's

cargo-hold door.

In the next moment, the train whistle screamed.

The train lurched into motion.

And slowly but surely—without the crowds or fanfare that Howard Hart had planned— The Millennium Express launched itself into the history books.

From inside, I used the crowbar to prise the lid off my crate. I peered outside to make sure there were no guards around. The rocking car was empty but for crates everywhere.

I climbed out of mine, then levered the lid off Stella's.

She was frantically gasping for air. "Oh my God, I thought I was gonna suffocate in there! Is that what it feels like to be buried in a coffin? Oh God, don't ever put me in a coffin, Buck. Cremate me, put me on a Viking ship and push me out to sea, feed me to the goddamn vultures if you like. Just please don't bury me when I'm dead, otherwise I'll have a panic attack and die!"

"Pull yourself together, would ya?" I yanked her out of the crate and put her down. "We need to figure out how to get to Harry."

I pulled the shotgun out of my crate then scanned the carriage. It was made not of wood, but solid iron, each panel and beam thick and sturdy. In the middle of the car was a steel ladder leading up to a hatch with a wheel lock on it, while along the walls were a dozen portholes. I peered out through one to see the outskirts of Wilde City passing by, the pale light of dawn casting a sleepy blue haze over the skyscrapers as they drifted farther and farther away.

“What the hell do you think is in the rest of these boxes?” Stella asked as she moved from crate to crate. “God, I hope there ain’t any people inside. They’d be dead by now, for sure.”

“I guess we’re about to find out.” I scooped up the crowbar and stepped up to the longest crate in the car.

I jammed the end of the bar under the lid and jimmied the crate open.

Carefully, I slid the lid aside, then picked Stella up and sat her on the edge of the crate so we could both see the contents .

On top was nothing but straw to cushion whatever was inside.

I pushed it aside to find myself staring at a long metallic cylinder, at least three-feet wide, and if the crate was anything to measure it by, no less than eight-feet long.

Set into the body of it was a clock with wires, only it wasn’t a normal clock.

“What is that gizmo?” Stella asked.

“I have no idea, but it looks like some sort of timer.” I pushed more straw aside to uncover the two ends of the cylinder. One end had fins and a propellor, the other end looked like a large drill, sparkling with diamonds.

Their reflection shimmered in Stella’s eyes. “Jesus, are those what I think they are?”

“Settle down, we’re on a hunt for Harry, not treasure.” I turned and saw an identical crate. “Looks like there’s two of these onboard.”

Looking around, I opened a different sized crate. Inside was a spiky black sphere.

“That’s a goddamn mine.”

I opened another. “This one’s packed with TNT.”

I opened another. “This one’s full of grenades. Jesus, this place is a fireworks factory just waiting to blow sky high.”

“Maybe you should be a little careful with that rifle then,” Stella pointed out. “Shoot one of these boxes and it’ll be curtains for you, me, and everyone else on this train.”

Suddenly we heard the sound of latches moving and deadbolts sliding.

I looked to the door leading to the next car.

It was solid iron with a series of locks running down one side, not to mention a door-lock wheel in the center that began to turn as we watched.

“We got company. Quick, help me get these lids back on.”

Hastily we replaced the lids I’d pried off the crates, then I scooped Stella up, dropped her into the crate I was carried in on, and jumped in after her, pulling the lid loosely over us.

Leaving enough of a gap to peer out, I watched as the door between the carriages opened and a dozen German soldiers entered.

One of them barked orders, and four men promptly lifted one of the crates containing the rocket missile, while another four men lifted the other.

As the train pitched and swayed, the soldiers carted the two crates out through the door from which they came, leaving four of the men behind.

They were about to leave, when the soldier barking the orders noticed the lid to the crate containing the grenades slightly ajar.

At the same time, I could hear Stella begin to wheeze and panic. “Buck, I can’t breathe,” she whispered.

The German glanced around to see another lid askew.

Silently he signaled to his men, pointing at the other crates for them to search the boxes.

“Buck!” Stella panted quietly.

“Sshhh! They’ll hear you.”

The soldiers stepped closer.

Stella began to hyperventilate. “But I can’t breathe in here.”

I reached for her mouth, trying to stop the noise but she slapped my hands away.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Trying to cover your big fat mouth.”

“That ain’t gonna help! I said I couldn’t breathe. What are you trying to do, finish me off?”

I peered through the gap and saw all four of the soldiers homing in on our crate now.

Stella was in such a state she began to squawk like a dying parrot.

The Germans rushed toward our crate.

“Ah, fuck it,” I muttered .

In the next moment I threw the lid off our crate, jumped up like a fucking Jack-in-the-box, aimed the shotgun, and stopped the four Germans in their tracks.

Instantly they raised their hands in the air, all of them shouting, “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!”

“Come another step closer and I will.”

The leader pointed to the crates surrounding us. “If you shoot, you’ll hit the bombs.”

“Not if I hit you first,” I warned. “Now back up.” I nudged Stella with my foot, and she came up heaving for air. “Stella, get to the ladder, now.”

“The ladder?”

“Uh-huh. If we wanna get out of here, the quickest way is up.”

“You wanna go up? Onto the roof of a moving train? Suddenly staying inside the crate don’t seem so bad.”

“Just move it, would ya!”

As Stella hauled herself out of the crate and hurried to the ladder leading to the hatch in the ceiling, one of the Germans made a move toward me, about to snatch my rifle.

I cocked the weapon. “You think I’m afraid to use this?” I swung the shotgun toward one of the portholes, fired a bullet through the glass, then aimed it back at the

Germans. “Think again.”

I reloaded so swiftly my folks woulda been proud.

The rumble of the train now competed with the whistle of air blowing in through the crack in the porthole.

A panicked look was exchanged between the soldiers.

All I cared about was me and Stella getting the hell up that ladder.

When she reached the top I lifted my legs over the edge of the crate, my weapon still trained on the Germans.

With a grunt, Stella managed to turn the wheel lock on the hatch.

I started climbing up after her, one hand on the ladder, the other still aiming the gun.

Stella grunted again as she shoved the hatch open. Wind blew wildly through the carriage, sending straw into the air as Stella clambered out through the hole.

I gave the Germans one last warning—“Stay back!”—then swiftly pulled myself up onto the roof of the fast-moving train, slamming the hatch and spinning the wheel lock, sealing it as tight as I could.

“That’s not gonna hold them for long. We need to get outta here.”

“And go where?” Stella shouted over the roar of the wind.

“Get to the front carriages. Harry’s gotta be up there somewhere.” The wheel lock started to turn. I grabbed it, trying to hold the Germans back as I yelled to Stella,

“Run! Run now!”

Her heels clacking frantically, Stella raced along the roof of the train. She reached the passage between the cargo car and the next carriage, balanced her way across the roof, then continued running across the next car.

Dawn spilled over the horizon. Wilde City was far behind us now as the train raced along a set of tracks that seemed to lead all the way to the distant sea. Beside the train line was a dirt track, no doubt used as an access road for the trucks and railroad workers needed to build Hart’s railroad.

Suddenly the wheel lock started to turn with more force.

I couldn’t hold the Germans back any longer.

Letting go of the wheel, I jumped to my feet, shotgun in hand, and raced after Stella. With a glance behind me I saw the hatch on the cargo car open.

“Run, Stella! Run!”

“Whaddaya think I’m doing, the chantoozie?”

The four Germans sprang out of the hatch, one at a time, not afraid to draw their own pistols now.

I spun about, fired off a shot that missed but at least made them all drop to their knees, then reloaded and kept charging after Stella.

As the train rocked and rambled at top speed, I made the leap over the connecting passage between the two cars, regained my balance and kept running.

That's when I glanced forward and saw that the track ahead didn't simply veer straight toward the sea...

It ended at a cliff overlooking the water.

There was no more track once the train line reached the ocean.

Howard Hart's vision was unfinished.

There was nowhere to go but the deep blue sea.

"What the fuck?" I whispered to myself.

Suddenly bullets were ricocheting off the roof all around me.

Behind me, the German soldiers had started firing their pistols.

I wanted to tell Stella to jump off the roof, to get out of the line of fire, but the train was moving way too fast.

I turned back to the Germans and fired off another shot.

They ducked again.

Suddenly a bullet flew past me, coming from the opposite direction—the front of the train.

I spun about again, and this time I saw the one-eyed German standing above a hatch on the roof of the carriage directly behind the engine.

Only he wasn't alone.

In front of him stood Harry, a human shield, with one of Hammer's arms locked around his neck.

In Hammer's other hand was his pistol, and on his bruised and battered face was that damned evil grin of his.

He fired again, twice, one bullet aimed at me and one at Stella.

I ducked.

Stella screamed and took cover behind the wheel lock of the hatch on the middle car of the train, clinging to it for dear life.

I aimed my shotgun at Hammer, but he held Harry in front of him, making it impossible for me to get a clear shot.

From behind me, the soldiers fired more bullets that sent sparks flying off the iron roof of the train.

I was trapped.

Up ahead, the end of the line was coming up fast... and in that moment, I knew it was the end of the line for me too.

Until I heard someone yell—

“Hey assholes! You hungry? Cause I got somethin’ for ya... lead sandwiches!”

Me, Stella, Harry, Hammer, and all the Germans suddenly turned to see the black Anderson convertible come tearing up the access road alongside the speeding train.

Behind the wheel was Bugsy, driving like a lunatic, while standing up in back was Mamma, a Tommy gun in her hand and a smirk on her face.

“Mom! Pops!” I whispered, a grin spreading across my own lips.

In one moment, I saw Mamma give me a wink.

In the next, she opened fire, rattling off a barrage of bullets that sprayed the Germans behind me. The lead pierced their legs, and like falling dominoes they dropped one by one off the roof of the cargo car, screaming as they plunged from the speeding train.

Mamma then turned her Tommy gun on Hammer.

Hammer turned his pistol on her, but Harry seized his chance to elbow the German as hard as he could in the stomach.

Hammer doubled over and fired off a shot.

It missed Mamma, smashing a headlight on the car.

“Goddammit!” Bugsy yelled. “This thing just had a spit and polish!”

Harry scrambled himself free of Hammer’s grip and dropped onto the roof of the train.

I turned my shotgun on Hammer, just as Mamma aimed her Tommy gun at him .

But as we both fired, the one-eyed German leapt down the open hatch into the carriage below.

Taking his place, the eight soldiers who had carried the crates away from the cargo

car suddenly sprang out of the hatch one by one, weapons blazing.

Their bullets didn't stand a chance of hitting their targets as Mamma pumped the air with lead, the ratatatatatatatatat of her Tommy gun sending every last soldier pitching and plummeting off the train.

As the last of them dropped from the locomotive, I raced across the roof of the train to Stella. "Are you okay?"

"I think so," she nodded. "But you can bet your bottom dollar I won't be booking a train trip anytime soon."

Together we turned the wheel lock on the hatch before I helped her down the first steps of the ladder. "Get below. Hang on to something tight."

"What for?"

I glanced at the cliff getting closer and closer. "We're headed for a fall."

I turned to Harry who was now running across the roof of the carriages toward me.

We charged into each other's arms, his lips meeting mine, his hands holding my face close. "I was scared to death I'd never see you again," he breathed.

I looked into his eyes. "You and me both."

From the car speeding alongside us, Bussy began blasting the horn.

Harry and I looked to see my father pointing to the cliff ahead. "Son! The train's gonna crash! It's headed straight for the sea! You need to jump!"

I looked to Harry then over the edge of the fast-moving locomotive. “We’ll never survive.”

Harry took my face firmly in his hand and locked eyes on me. “Buck, listen to me. This train isn’t a train at all.”

“Then what the hell is it?”

Harry gulped. “It’s a weapon.”

Bugsy kept blasting his horn. “Jump! Jump now!”

Up ahead I heard the hatch through which Hammer had disappeared slam shut, the wheel screwing tight.

From the cargo car, someone slammed that hatch tight as well.

I glanced at the track ahead, the end of the line rushing up to meet us, and beyond that the cliff overlooking the sea.

“We have to get inside now,” Harry said. “We have to get inside or we’re going to die.”

He squeezed my hand so tight there was no escaping his grip.

He pulled me down the last open hatch, into the train.

I lost my grip on the shotgun.

It clattered across the roof.

I tried to grab it, but I couldn't reach.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:48 am

“Buck! We have to get inside! Now!”

As I lowered myself hurriedly onto the ladder, I glanced one last time at my parents.

Bugsy slammed his foot on the brake before they reached the cliff, the car sliding to a halt.

I pulled the hatch shut.

I turned the wheel lock and sealed it tight.

With a violent shudder that shook the entire train, I realized the locomotive had just smashed through the barrier at the end of the line...

And was now sailing straight into the sea below.

For a moment, Harry and I both lifted off the ladder, floating in mid-air as the train glided off the cliff.

Then with a crash, the entire locomotive tremored.

Harry and I hit the floor, and through the portholes the view of the sky turned into a view of the ocean, a curtain of gushing bubbles parting to reveal the deep blue sea.

At the same time, the train began to groan and clatter .

I heard the clang of gears shifting, cogs turning, pipes hissing, metallic bones

bending, giving the distinct impression that the entire train was, in fact, in the process of metamorphosis...

Changing its steering mechanisms...

Altering its form and function...

Adapting to an entirely new realm.

As the floor beneath me quaked and settled, as the iron walls shuddered then seemed to embrace the atmosphere outside—the water pressing down upon it with greater force than air—I picked myself up, my ears popping.

“What the fuck just happened?” I asked Harry, helping him up at the same time. “Did this train just turn into—”

“A submarine?” said a voice from the front of the car. “How astute of you, Mr. Baxter.”

Harry and I both turned to see Howard Hart at the front of the carriage, holding a gun trained on us. Beside him was Herr Hammer, this time holding Stella in his grip, her legs wriggling and desperately trying to kick him.

“Just move a little to the left and your nuts are mine,” she spat through clenched teeth, squirming in his arms.

“Dad, what are you doing?” Harry pleaded. “You need to let us all go. This is madness.”

“Madness?” Howard challenged sternly. “My dear, deluded, pathetic son. What you call madness, I call the future. Although unfortunately for you and your friends, the future ends here. I had every intention of taking you to Berlin with me, but it seems

your boyfriend here has rubbed off on you. You're a lot more trouble than I anticipated. How regrettable. But Hart Industries must always come first. Of course, it would be a pity to kill you in the dining car. Blood stains on this exquisite carpet may well ruin my appetite. Come, let us take you into the Presidential Suite. The others are waiting for us in there."

Howard waved his gun while Hammer carried a twisting, jiggling Stella into the next car.

As we walked, I noticed Howard's exquisite carpet squish beneath my shoes.

I glanced over my shoulder.

The door to the passenger car behind us was still open...

And the door to the cargo car beyond that was open too...

Meaning that water was coming in through—

"The bullet hole in the window," I murmured to myself.

"What was that?" Howard turned to glare at me.

"I said, nice view out the window."

Howard smirked. "You should see the view through the periscope. Our target should be coming into range any minute."

"What the hell are you plotting, Hart?"

The laugh that came from the tycoon was deep, devilish, and drenched in determination. "Something nobody is expecting. Something that will change

everything. It's time to send a message. A new world order is rising. It's time to cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war."

With a shove of his gun, Howard pushed his son and me into the next car.

The lavish carriage was adorned with velvet curtains and Persian rugs, while on the leather chaise longue beneath a row of portholes sat Herr Garbutt, holding a gun into the side of Mrs. Hart. But it was the man I'd never seen before—wearing glasses that looked more like binoculars, and raising one hand that was in fact a steel ball with countless bizarre metal appendages jutting from it—who made my guts knot with dread.

As we entered the car, Hammer threw Stella to the ground.

"Hey, watch it with the merchandise," she scowled.

"I couldn't agree more," said the man with a whizzing, moving, mechanical hand, his German accent thick and his telescopic lenses zooming in and out as he set eyes on Stella. "Such a delicate, curious creature of beauty I've never seen before. With a few minor corrections I could make her... perfect."

In one swift move Stella leapt off the floor, clambered up my shoulders and climbed onto my head for protection. "Holy baloney, what the fuck is that and can you please keep it away from me? And for the record, there ain't nothin' here needs correctin'! I'm perfect just the way I am!"

The man stepped closer, his robotic hand seemingly giving birth to a screwdriver...

A pair of plyers...

A corkscrew?

“Yikes!” Stella climbed even higher onto my head like she was about to make a nest.

“Herr Bockenheimer,” said Herr Garbutt. “Perhaps you can concentrate on your next project some other time. Mein Führer is more concerned with testing the prototype of Herr Hart’s amphibious train. Your devices are in place.”

Stella’s eyes turned to saucers. “Yikes! You’re Boom-Boom Bockenheimer? Maniac of mayhem? Fanatic of doom and destruction?”

Bockenheimer’s face flushed red. “Does my reputation precede me? Oh, how you flatter me, my damsel of detachable parts.”

“Detachable parts? Ain’t nothing getting detached in here except maybe your—”

“Silence!” Garbutt barked. “Herr Bockheimer, might I remind you that you are here on the Führer ’s orders!”

“Of course,” Bockenheimer said, tearing his lens-zooming gaze away from Stella. “Yes, of course! Let the apocalypse begin!”

“Apocalypse?” Harry turned to his father, begging him, “Dad, you can’t do this. Please don’t do this.”

For a moment Howard gazed into the eyes of his son.

Then, raising his hand, he slapped Harry so hard it knocked him to the ground, blood gushing from his lip.

“Let me make one thing clear,” Howard fumed through gritted teeth. “If you and your mother will not stand by my side in Berlin, you will both rot here forever in the seas off Wilde City. No son of mine will stand in my way.” He huffed through a snarl as he added, “Then again, you never were a son of mine. God only knows who you

really belong to. And only God cares.”

“Herr Hart, it is unfortunate your family has become such a distraction,” Garbutt said.
“Mein Führer demands you do not lose sight of his directive.”

With a lingering look of disdain, Howard turned away from Harry and gave Garbutt the Nazi salute. “Hart Industries believes only in the future. Hart Industries believes only in the Führer.”

Herr Garbutt cackled. “Mein Führer is not entirely sure he believes in you. But now that your prototype is on its way to Berlin, the discussion seems rather moot.” With a glance at Hammer, Herr Garbutt calmly said, “Shoot him. In fact, shoot them all.”

Alarm swept across Hart’s face. “No!”

Hammer pointed his gun and pulled the trigger.

Mrs. Hart screamed as blood splattered over the silk curtains and Persian rugs, and Howard Hart fell dead to the floor.

Stella squealed and leapt from my shoulders, scrambling behind the chaise longue.

Harry clutched me in horror, wrapping his arms around me.

Mrs. Hart melted to the floor beside her husband as blood oozed from his temple.

Hammer pointed his gun between us, deciding who to kill, before settling on Stella. “I think this pain in the nacken should go next,” he said, pushing the chaise longue aside and aiming his pistol straight at her.

I was about to launch to my feet and crash tackle the big lug one last time when suddenly we all heard—

“No!”

Everyone turned to see Bockenheimer’s lenses moving in and out and his robotic hand buzzing madly.

“Leave her alone! She’s mine!” With a whirl, a cocktail swizzle stick spun on the end of his mechanical hand. “If you want to kill the others, then do as you please. But I’d like to escort the newfound object of my affection to the engine room. I would like her to see the wonders of my creations... before we raze Wilde City to the ground.”

Stella looked confused. “Am I seriously the newfound object of your affection?”

Bockenheimer’s telescopic lenses seemed to extend further than ever before. “Yes.” He happened to catch the string of drool with his swizzle stick. “Oh yes.”

Stella straightened her back. “Then I demand my friends get to see the engine room too! That includes the classy broad with the diamond necklace.”

She was, of course, referring to Mrs. Hart who was still crying by the side of her dead husband.

Harry was still in my arms. I looked into his eyes and asked, “Are you alright?”

He tried to turn his head to look at his dead father, but I caught his chin and turned his gaze back to me. “Hey, we’ll get through this. I’ll get us through this, I promise.”

He wiped his tears aside. “I know you will.”

Giving a hard shove, the one-eyed Hammer pushed us toward the engine car while Garbutt yanked Mrs. Hart to her feet. With Stella and Bockenheimer in the lead, we moved through the connecting passage between the Presidential Suite and the engine room.

Instantly the cacophony of sounds in the compartment struck us, along with the fact that nobody was steering this submarine. On a large console at the front of the carriage, numbered wheels spun, gears whirled, and levers turned of their own accord. It was like looking at the interior of a giant intricate clock, each moving piece beeping, clattering, buzzing, or flashing.

While the sight of such a diabolical machine of doom heightened my sense of dread, Stella simply shrieked, “There’s nobody driving this damn train!”

“Therein lies the genius of Herr Hart’s submarine locomotive,” Garbutt said. “Everything in here is automated. Everything almost has a mind of its own. He liked to call it ‘artificial intelligence’—machines doing the work of humans. One day, we’ll all be able to sit back and let machines do all the thinking for us.”

“If machines are doing the thinking,” I said. “Who’s in command?”

Garbutt laughed. “Why, we are, of course.”

“But if you let a machine do all the thinking, isn’t it just a matter of time before it outsmarts you?”

With a whizz of the drill on his robotic hand, Bockenheimer giggled maniacally. “Herr Baxter, perhaps it is you who is doing too much thinking. Fortunately, I can put a stop to all those ridiculous thoughts spinning around in your brain. If you just tilt your head a little to the left...”

Bockenheimer giggled maniacally as he came at me with his twirling drill.

“Herr Bockenheimer,” snapped Garbutt. “Restrain yourself, at least for the next few moments. We have a mission to complete.”

Bockenheimer gave an annoyed sigh, then slowly backed away, lowering his

mechanical hand. “Very well, Herr Garbutt.” He turned to the moving, mechanical console, and with a push of a green button, two long hatches on each side of the compartment opened, revealing two large tubes. And inside each tube—

“Torpedoes,” I uttered. “Those weren’t just missiles we saw in the crates. They’re torpedoes.”

“Correct, Herr Baxter,” said Garbutt. “Together, their payload is capable of blowing our target to oblivion. Care to take a look?”

Garbutt stepped up to a periscope near the front of the compartment. He snapped the handles down into place, turned it and invited me to peer through its lenses.

The view was blurry, awash with waves, until soon I recognized Wilde City’s gasworks sitting on the shoreline. Beyond it, the cityscape touched the morning sky. “My God, you’re going to blow up the gasworks?”

“Not simply the gasworks, Herr Baxter. When the facility erupts, it will ignite every pipeline leading into the city. Every underground tunnel, every power generator, every apartment in every building will erupt like a volcano. Wilde City will, for all intents and purposes, become hell on earth. When the world hears about what has happened here, panic will spread across the globe like... what’s the expression? Wildfire.”

“You’ll kill hundreds of thousands of people,” Harry breathed in horror.

“That’s the idea.”

“And my father was a part of this twisted, evil plot?”

“Your father was instrumental in its conception. You look surprised. You shouldn’t be. The insatiable lust for power can make a man do the most unthinkable things. It

can also cost him his life.” Garbutt snickered at the sight of Harry trembling with rage. “You feel betrayed by the man who raised you. Don’t worry, Master Hart, you will soon be joining him. By the time we reach Berlin, you, your friends, and everyone in Wilde City will be long dead. But enough talk. Our destination is nearing, and it’s time for Herr Bockenheimer to ready his weapons.”

Bockenheimer clapped one hand to his robotic hand with glee. “With pleasure.” As he stepped between the two devices lying inside the torpedo tubes, he muttered to himself, relishing the process that would lead to the city’s obliteration. “First, we set the timers on the weapons to exactly the same time. Taking into account the tide and currents, I’ve calculated that the torpedoes will reach the rock bed along the shoreline within ninety seconds, at which point the diamond drills will activate, allowing the torpedoes to burrow directly beneath the gasworks, which will take another four minutes. Setting the timer on each torpedo to seven minutes and thirty seconds will position the weapons at precisely the right point to rupture the gasworks and flood every one of its pipelines with a tsunami of fire.” He couldn’t help but cackle as he took one last look through the periscope then pointed to a red button on the wall beside each torpedo tube. “All we have to do is hit those launch buttons for the torpedo hatch to close, the tube to flood, and the propulsion mechanism to launch the torpedoes on their one-way trip to annihilation. It is, if I do say so myself, the perfect plan. Tailored with the utmost precision. Nothing can possibly go wrong.”

The moment the words left his mouth, an ear-piercing alarm began to ring.

Spinning red lights flashed as Garbutt turned to Hammer. “What’s happening?”

“There’s a containment breach in the hull.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Stella yelled.

The answer came in a distant explosion of glass, followed by a shudder and jolt throughout the entire structure.

With a metallic groan, the submarine began to tilt, the nose veering upward as the rear began to sink.

All eyes glanced down through the open doors of the carriages—through the Presidential Suite, through the dining car, through the passenger car—to see water gushing into the cargo car, flooding it fast.

The bullet hole had given way.

The entire porthole had blown in.

And now the submarine was sinking.

“Seal it off!” Garbutt shouted at Hammer. “Get down there and seal it off now!”

Hammer bolted out of the engine compartment.

Another violent tremor shook the vessel and the nose of the submarine lifted even higher, knocking everyone off balance and onto the floor.

“The torpedoes,” Bockenheimer gasped. “I must launch the torpedoes now! ”

He pulled himself up to kneel over one of the open hatches and set the timer on one of the weapons.

The seven-and-a-half-minute countdown began.

But before he had time to scramble over to the second weapon, Harry threw himself at him, tackling him to the ground.

Garbutt turned his pistol on Harry and was about to fire when I lunged at him, the pair of us rolling down the sloping floor of the compartment and hitting the side of

the open door.

Down through the carriages I could see Hammer closing the door to the cargo car, heaving with all his might against the gushing water.

Garbutt tried to turn his gun on me, and we wrestled for the weapon.

I heard a sharp buzzing sound and saw Harry trying to hold Bockenheimer's mechanical hand at bay, the whizzing drill aimed straight at Harry's forehead.

"Stella! Help Harry!"

But Stella was already on it, running at Bockenheimer and kicking him in the nuts with so much force that one of them must have got caught in his throat and choked his cry of pain.

While Bockenheimer writhed in agony, Harry pulled himself up and slid down the floor toward me.

His foot connected with Garbutt's fist and knocked the pistol into the next car.

It slid along the tilting floor of the Presidential Suite.

Garbutt gave Harry a furious look, then crawled into the next car for his weapon.

Beyond him, Hammer had just sealed the door to the dining car and was climbing the slanting carriages back toward the engine.

"The door," I uttered to Harry.

Together we slammed the door between the engine car and the Presidential suite shut, turning the wheel lock and sealing Garbutt and Hammer out.

Within seconds we heard the sound of gunfire, bullets slamming against the other side of the door.

In the next moment, the wheel lock tried to turn.

Harry and I held it tight, but Hammer must have reached it from the other side, his brute strength shifting the wheel an inch, then another.

“Buck! Help!”

I turned to see that Bockenheimer was back in the fight, bearing down on Stella, his drill spinning madly.

Mrs. Hart was trying to pull him off her, hitting him with her fists but to no avail.

I lunged at his feet, grabbing his ankle and yanking him away from Stella.

The vessel gave a loud metallic moan and several valves in the console burst, hissing steam.

Dials flickered and cogs spun out of control.

I pulled myself to my feet, only to be sideswiped by Bockenheimer who hurled himself at me, knocking me on top of the torpedo with the timer.

He came at me with his drill.

I tried to fend him off, my ears filled with the sound of the deadly countdown ticking over, the timer behind my head, the drill almost right between my eyes.

Suddenly Stella was on top of him, beating Bockenheimer’s head with her fists. “Get away from him, you psycho putz!”

He shook her off with a jerk of his shoulders, then thrust the drill straight down at me.

I moved my head to one side just in time.

The spinning drill missed me by a whisker...

And pierced straight into the timer on the torpedo.

Bockenheimer's eyes widened with alarm. "Oh dear. That's not good."

I turned to see what he was looking at .

The hands on the timer were now spinning twice as fast as before, flying past the five-minute mark and accelerating.

"Oh, fuck!"

Desperately Bockenheimer tried to pull his robotic hand free, but the spinning drill had caught itself inside the timer.

From behind me came Harry's voice. "Buck! A little help here!"

He was straining with the wheel lock, no match for Hammer on the other side who was slowly making ground, turning the wheel several inches at a time.

I charged for Harry, grabbing the wheel to try and slow Hammer's progress, but it was no use. We wouldn't be able to hold him back much longer.

"Buck! The timer just passed four minutes!" screeched Stella. "It's spinning out of control!"

Frantically I looked around for anything I could jam inside the wheel lock to stop it

from turning.

I noticed the handhold welded to the side of the doorway.

Quickly I reached around Harry from behind.

I unbuckled his belt, my hands working as fast as they could.

“Buck, what the hell are you doing? We don’t have time for that now.”

“Just hold the damn wheel still for a few seconds more, would ya?”

I snapped off his belt, slid one end through the wheel lock and the other through the handhold by the door before fastening the buckle as tight as I could.

Cautiously Harry released the wheel lock.

The belt held firm, the wheel unable to turn... at least for now.

“That should buy us another couple of minutes.”

“Buck! We only got another couple of minutes before this torpedo blows us to smithereens!” Stella shouted.

Harry looked at me, his eyes filled with panic. “Buck, how the hell are we gonna get outta here.”

I looked from Harry to the torpedo with the spinning timer. “The only way we can. Come on, give me a hand.”

As Bockenheimer whimpered and wailed and tried to free his mechanical prosthetic from the timer, I stepped over him to the front of the torpedo tube. “Let’s get this

thing out of here. Then the other one. It's time we all took a little swim."

"A swim?" Mrs. Hart asked, her voice quavering. "You can't be serious, Mr. Baxter."

"The timer's almost at the minute mark and moving fast!" Stella warned.

The buckle on Harry's belt began to twist as the wheel lock started to budge once more.

I looked at Mrs. Hart. "I don't think we have a choice. Harry, on the count of three. One, two..."

With a heave we lifted the torpedo—with Bockenheimer still attached to the timer—out of the tube and lowered it to the floor.

Quickly I grabbed Mrs. Hart and pushed her unceremoniously into the empty tube.

"Stella, come on. You're going with her."

"What about you and Harry?"

"We'll be right behind you, I promise."

I lifted Stella into the tube, but before she lay down, Bockenheimer stopped struggling with his robotic hand and blew a kiss into the air. "My mini mon cheri, it would seem we were never meant to be."

Stella had just enough time to flick him the finger. "Ah, stick it up your ass, you crazy fuck!"

I hit the red button beside the torpedo tube and Stella lay down, huddling with Mrs. Hart as the hatch began to shut.

“Hold your breath,” I told them through the closing hatch. “This tube is going to fill with water and shoot you out. Just hang on tight and swim like hell to the surface.”

Stella and Mrs. Hart nodded in fear as the hatch sealed tight.

We heard a whoosh from the tube and I prayed like hell that they’d be okay.

I glanced at the timer.

We had only seconds left.

Harry and I lifted the torpedo out of the second tube, letting this one clang to the floor in our haste.

With a snap, the belt buckle on the door broke and the wheel lock spun.

I shoved Harry into the tube and climbed in after him, kissing him hard. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Hammer and Garbutt shoved open the door, waving their guns.

Bockenheimer’s eyes opened in horror as he watched the spinning hands on the timer. He gulped with defeat. “Time’s up!”

I hit the red button and lay down, holding Harry tighter than ever before.

Hammer and Garbutt fired recklessly at us.

The hatch sealed shut.

The tube began to flood with water and Harry and I took a deep breath.

A second later, we felt a sudden rush as we were jettisoned out into the blue.

I opened my eyes as we were catapulted through the water away from the submarine...

And then...

In a ball of white...

The Millennium Express was ripped open from end to iron-clad end.

The eruption shattered the vessel into a million pieces, just before a shockwave from the blast slammed into Harry and me, sending us tumbling and twisting through the water, desperately trying to hold onto each other, our fingers almost losing their grip.

But in that moment, I swore to myself I'd never let go of Harry ever again.

As the explosion sent us somersaulting through the currents, I snagged his hand in mind and held on tight.

I wasn't sure which way was up or down.

My lungs were ready to burst.

I wasn't even certain if Harry was still alive.

Then suddenly I caught sight of the ripples of daylight, shimmering down through the surface of the water.

With all my strength I swam toward it, hauling Harry behind me until soon I broke the waves with a gasp, wheezing and coughing and pulling Harry up for air.

The moment he emerged, his eyes opened, wide and terrified until he realized—

“We’re alive! We’re alive!” he laughed, before scanning the waters. “What about the others? Mother. Where’s Mother? Where’s Stella?”

“Over here!” came Stella’s voice from across the lapping waves.

Harry and I turned to see Stella and Mrs. Hart looking frayed and frazzled, but very much alive. Quickly we swam over to them.

“Are you hurt?” Harry asked his mother.

She shook her head as she fought back tears. “Not physically.”

I turned to Stella to ask her the same question, but before I could open my mouth she stuck two fingers between her lips and whistled in my ear. “What the hell was that for?”

“I’m trying to call those two creepy dragons. Have you seen how far it is to shore? My little arms ain’t exactly flippers, ya know.”

“I don’t think the Komodos can hear you from all the way out here.”

“Well, I sure as hell hope something comes to our rescue.”

At that moment, debris from the explosion below began to bob to the surface... including two round orange buoys, a little burnt around the edges, but nevertheless afloat .

I pushed one over to Stella and Mrs. Hart, while Harry and I clung to the other.

In the distance stood the gasworks, and beyond that Wilde City glimmered in the

bright sunshine.

“Well,” I said. “I guess this is the part where we start kicking.”

As we began paddling our way to shore, Stella turned to me. “So Buck, I guess we can consider this another case closed. What’s next on the agenda?”

“You know what, Stella? I think we need to take a little break for a while. I was even thinking, maybe it’s time for a vacation.”

“A vacation? To where?”

I turned to Harry. “What about a cruise down the Nile? I hear Egypt is to die for.”

Harry smiled. “I’ve heard that too.”

“Me too!” Stella chimed in. “When do we leave? What’ll I pack? Oooh, can the twins come? I’ve always wanted to see them in a bathing suit. Preferably in my bathing suit, but that’s a whole other fantasy. I’ll start packing straight away...”

Whatever Stella was yabbering about, her words trailed away as I kissed Harry.

In that kiss, I imagined a world where all our problems had faded away.

I imagined myself sitting beside Harry on a luxury boat, sipping champagne in the mornings and gin in the afternoons.

I imagined a place where the only mystery that needed solving was whether Harry would make love on top of me, or beneath.

A happy sigh escaped me at the thought of it.

Of course, what really happened on our cruise down the Nile... well, that's a whole other story.

Picture that, huh.