

THURSDAY

JULY 30, 1942

7:45 a.m.

Bayou La Croix, Mississippi (northeast of New Orleans)

“My man missed his window. I never got his call.”

The speaker was Sebastian Grimm, a young captain in the Waffen-SS, a branch of the German Army under the direct authority of *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler. Grimm’s youth and freckled complexion sometimes led others to underestimate his abilities. But that would be a mistake. When circumstances dictated, Grimm could be as tough and mean and ruthless as any highly-trained infantryman. Otherwise, he maintained a veneer of cool detachment.

The sun was barely up. But even at this early hour, the still morning air hung heavy with the sounds of buzzing insects and the cruel weight of oppressive humidity. It was the end of July and, aside from August, no month was hotter or more unpleasant in the Deep South. Sebastian Grimm was sweating profusely from every pore. The heat and humidity were simply overwhelming.

Captain Grimm fanned himself slowly with an improvised hand fan. He had fashioned it from a large, slightly rounded piece of tree bark he found earlier this morning on the grounds of the rented bayou house.

Grimm could not fathom such heat, not in the early morning, not at any point of any day. Such conditions were unknown in Germany, indeed anywhere in northern Europe. *What he wouldn’t have given for a simple electric fan.* Not that it would have done him any good in this disgusting backwater hovel. Electricity had not yet arrived in this desolate and ugly corner of the world, an unanticipated source of discomfort to both men as they tried to cope with the heat.

The second man in the room was a senior German diplomat newly arrived at this location. His name was Günter Kesselring. The car he drove was an unusually nice one for these parts, a Custom Super Eight Packard purchased for his use by a loyal industrialist in Baton Rouge.

After passing through several hands to hide its provenance, the Packard was delivered to Kesselring the day before yesterday by Rudyard Pfingsten, a leading citizen of a predominantly German community located just west of the city of New Orleans. Pfingsten had warned him that to keep its monthly fuel

ration allotment the Packard would soon have to be registered with the state's newly organized motor vehicle department. With the advent of war, car manufacture had ceased in the United States five months ago. Now only doctors and clergymen were permitted to purchase new automobiles still held in inventory by dealers.

The senior man began to pace anxiously, his treasured meerschaum pipe in hand. It was unlit and not yet stuffed with smoking tobacco.

In short order, Kesselring came to stand beside Grimm in the backwash of the bark fan as Grimm moved it to and fro. He slowly air-dried the beads of sweat from his hands in the moving air.

"Why don't you give me that fan so I can cool myself?" Kesselring suddenly demanded.

"Go find your own piece of bark, you lazy fool."

"Unverschämt schwein. Impertinent bastard."

The windows of the small bayou house were wide open. But inviting in the outside air did not improve matters. The intensity of heat inside the house and the level of humidity remained unchanged.

The stagnant air was drenching hot and dripping wet. Being soaked in sweat was becoming an everpresent state for these men. *And the smells?* Oh, my. The banks of the nearby bayou were slathered in mud, hot sticky yellow mud. When the afternoon rains came, as they did nearly every day this time of year, fish got washed onto the banks and soon became hopelessly entangled in the overgrowth. Then, when the high waters receded, the dead fish rotted in the blazing sun.

The heat was oppressive, the air heavy and thick with humidity and alive with the sounds of bullfrogs and flying insects. Cypress trees ringed the house, each draped in a curtain of Spanish Moss, each a home to unseen animals at night.

"I do not like this place," Kesselring said.

"Nor do I," Grimm replied. "It was not my choice. Pflingsten made the arrangements before I even arrived."

"Can we agree never to meet here in this place again?"

"Yes. Before our next meeting, I will find someplace better. Maybe a place with electricity and running water."

Kesselring looked nervously at his pocket watch, studied the carved bowl of his smoking pipe, then said, "Your man Heinrich. Has he ever missed his window before?"

"Günter, please. We are in America now. In this country we speak English. In this country, Heinrich Brock goes by the name Henry," the younger man said.

What Sebastian Grimm lacked in authority he made up for in arrogance. He both feared and loathed Günter Kesselring, and with good reason on both counts. The older man had no business being here in the United States. In fact, he would never have been in the United States at all, if not for the influence of his father, General Field Marshal Albert Kesselring.

“Fine,” Kesselring said, contemplating the empty smoking pipe. “Then let me rephrase. Has your man Henry ever missed his window before?”

“Yes, once before. But on that occasion, he checked in with us by radio about two hours later. He had been mixing it up with a colored woman in a local whorehouse and lost track of time. Or at least that is what he said when Pflingsten and I interrogated him afterwards. It never happened again until today.”

“How long has your man Henry been out of touch?”

The older man stuffed his meerschaum pipe with aromatic tobacco and proceeded to light the contents of the bowl with a wooden match. He loved this pipe. It had been a gift from his father, the Field Marshal. Now, pipe in mouth, Günter Kesselring looked the part of the senior diplomat that he actually was. It was illegal for him to be in this country. The United States and Nazi Germany had broken off diplomatic relations at the outbreak of the war.

“Henry has been dark for three days now.”

“*Was ist die bedeutung von ‘dark’?*”

“It means silent or out-of-touch.”

“Oh, yes, I see. Dark. Good word,” Kesselring said. “We must notify Oberst Richter that your man has gone dark, as you say.”

“English, please.”

“As if the Americans would not line us up against a wall and shoot us dead if we got caught.”

The younger man frowned and pawed through a metal strongbox filled with manila file folders marked TOP SECRET in German. He found the one he wanted and pulled it out.

“Fine. English it is,” Kesselring said. “We must notify Colonel Richter at Waffen-SS Headquarters of the delay. Oberst Richter insists on regular updates, you know that. This Higgins business has become a big issue with Himmler and with Göring. Our orders come from the highest levels. Göring believes these landing boats could win the war for the Americans. We must interrupt their production at all cost.”

“I am well aware of our orders, Herr Kesselring. *Stören und Zerstören*. Disrupt and Destroy. Those are our orders, and sabotage is our mission. It is the mission of all our teams. *Stören und Zerstören*.”

“How dare you use that arrogant tone with me.”

“My tone has nothing at all to do with it, Kesselring. Do as you must. If you feel the need to contact Colonel Richter, then by all means please do so. I cannot stop you, nor will I try. But I am under orders of my own. The job Himmler has given me is quite different from your own. I need to find my man, Henry Brock.”

“And where will you look for him?” Günter Kesselring puffed on his pipe. Circles of smoke billowed skyward. He pulled out his metal pipe tool and gently tamped down the thatch of burning tobacco in the bowl.

Captain Grimm looked on with uncharacteristic envy. A fine meerschaum pipe, rich in color from years of use, was an unmistakable symbol of status.

Meerschaum was a soft and relatively rare mineral. It was sometimes found floating in the waters of the Black Sea. Easy to carve, much prized by pipe smokers for its porosity, valuable on account of its relative scarcity.

Meerschaum hardened upon exposure to solar heat or when dried in a warm room. In the hands of a skilled craftsman, a rough block of meerschaum could be bored out to fashion the bowl for an exquisite smoking pipe, then the exterior of the bowl carved with sharp tools to render the likeness of a sea captain, perhaps, or the face and bosom of a beautiful woman.

Kesselring found deep satisfaction in Grimm's envious look. To know that he possessed something another man coveted made Kesselring feel powerful.

In its natural state, the soft mineral resembled sea-foam, hence the German origin for its name. "Foam of the sea." Meerschaum. The porous nature of the material drew moisture and tobacco tar into the stone, allowing a man a dry, cool, and flavorful smoke. Over time, as a meerschaum pipe was smoked, it would gradually change color. Older meerschaums would turn incremental shades of yellow, orange, red, and amber beginning with the base and moving up. The bowl of Kesselring's meerschaum pipe was nearly fire-red from years of use.

"Where in the city will you look for him?" Kesselring repeated his earlier question.

Grimm put aside his envy. "Ever since Henry Brock was a young man, he has made it a habit to frequent whorehouses or else get sex on the street."

"*Bordsteinschwalben?*"

"Crudely put. But yes. Curbside swallow. It is in his file. He did so regularly in France during the Great War. Then, after the war, when he settled in New Jersey, he was known to frequent the red-light district in Atlantic City. It is what led to his divorce. Following his divorce, he moved here, to New Orleans, a city known for its *hurenhaus*. There is an area of the city where brothels were once legal and prostitution is still tolerated. The locals call it Storyville. Along Basin Street, just east of the French Quarter."

"Yes, I have read of it in this book of yours," the diplomat said, motioning to the fat volume on the table.

"It has been useful, that book," Grimm said. "The *New Orleans City Guide*. It was supplied to me as part of my training package. Five hundred pages. Every detail there is to know about the city. Churches. Restaurants. Museums. Dance halls. Street cars. Everything. That Jew-lover Roosevelt hired thousands of out-of-work authors and university professors to write these city guides to many American cities."

"Yes, yes. It was in my briefing packet as well. Mahogany Hall. House of whores. *Das Hurenhaus*. Basin Street is quite famous for such establishments. Mahogany Hall even more so. I have seen the fancy brochures

these scum, these *abschaum der Erde* hand around. The *Blue Book*. They are filled with pictures that advertise their exotic women and the crude services these women perform. All photographed by that Jew Bellocq.”

“I must object, dear sir. E.J. Bellocq is no Jew. The man is French Creole, and quite talented with a camera.”

“Jew? Creole? What is the difference? They are all mutts.”

“E.J. Bellocq is no mutt,” the younger man protested. “He is white and comes from a wealthy family. John Ernest Joseph Bellocq. That is his full name. His brother is a Jesuit priest. Bellocq has assembled an amazing collection of photographs. Landmarks. Sailing ships. Machinery. Also a collection of high quality nudes. Women from the Storyville area. That place — Mahogany Hall — has quite the history. One of a handful of high-end brothels on Basin Street. At one time it was run by Lulu White. But no longer. Now the Sicilian mob has seized control of it, along with several other brothels. But in its day, Mahogany Hall was known as a sumptuous Octoroon Parlor. It reportedly cost forty thousand dollars to build — an unimaginable sum at the time. It housed forty women.”

“You sound like you are in love, Sebastian. What do you plan to do? Go door to door looking for our lost whoremonger?”

“Yes, if I have to. Every last whorehouse in the city is listed in the *Blue Book*, even the cribs. But there is a man I am familiar with who might be able to help me track down Brock. A policeman.”

“*Polizist?*”

“Yes, a police officer, one with ties to the Sicilian mob. Goes by the name of Earl Ray Mackerel.”

“I prefer we not bring the Gestapo into this, certainly not a brown shirt with sticky fingers.” Günter Kesselring’s tone was filled with derision.

“I really don’t think the man’s fingers are sticky. Anyway, this is America. These sorts of men are police, not Gestapo. There may be no other way.”

“Let me see Brock’s file,” Günter Kesselring ordered, pointing to the file folder in Grimm’s hand. It was stamped top-secret in red letters: STRENG GEHEIM.

“If you insist.” Waffen-SS Captain Sebastian Grimm handed the other man a manila folder that was labeled:

Baron Heinrich von Brockdorff.

“Ah, yes. The Baron,” Kesselring said, paging through the contents of the file.

“Is that on the level?”

“Is what on the level?”

“The barony.”

“Oh, yes. Our man Brock is the genuine article. Or at least he once was. Baron Heinrich von Brockdorff. Veteran of the Great War. Outcast from the

German noble family of the same name. Father tossed him out of the family for consorting with a Jewess. Now a naturalized American citizen. In the States, he goes by the name of Henry Brock. With the loss of his nobility, Henry has become an enemy of the ancient barony system.”

“Which is what makes the man a natural ally of The Führer.”

“Yes. That is precisely how and why we recruited him,” Günter Kesselring said. “That plus the promise of a handsome reward.”

“According to his dossier, Henry had several children by that same Jewess,” Grimm said. “He has one grandson that we know of. Russell Brock. An American serviceman now serving in the Pacific. A United States Marine.”

The diplomat shook his head in disgust. “The Japanese should never have attacked Pearl Harbor. This was unexpected and inconvenient. The attack forced Hitler’s hand. Under the Tripartite Pact, Germany promised help if Japan was attacked. But Germany had no such obligation should Japan be the aggressor.”

“So why did The Führer go before the Reichstag last December and declare war on the United States, when he did not have to? It was one of the last times the Reichstag met. Why bring the Americans into the war, when it was not necessary? It seems a mistake to me,” Grimm said.

“You dare question The Führer?”

“Not in so many words, but yes. Everyone knows that von Ribbentrop advised against a declaration of war against the Americans.”

Kesselring sucked pensively on his pipe. “Yes, I know von Ribbentrop well. German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. He had tried to make the case to The Führer that the addition of another antagonist, the United States, would overwhelm the German war effort. But The Führer thought otherwise. By then, the U.S. Navy was already attacking German U-boats in the water. Plus, The Führer despised President Roosevelt for his repeated verbal attacks on Nazi ideology. Hitler continues to believe that once Japan has defeated the Americans that Japan will turn west and help Germany defeat the Russians.”

“*Wunschdenken*. Wishful thinking. *Ein Wunschtraum*. A pipe dream. Can we trust the slant-eyed heathens to honor the agreement, the Pact?”

“No, we cannot.” Kesselring shook his head. “I was there that day, in the Reichstag, the day of Hitler’s speech. Göring sat in his usual spot. December 11, 1941. Hitler addressed the Reichstag to defend the declaration of war against the United States. He said the failure of Roosevelt’s New Deal was the real cause of the war. He said that with the support of American plutocrats and the Jews that Roosevelt has attempted to cover-up the collapse of his economic agenda. Roosevelt incites war, Hitler said, then Roosevelt falsifies the causes and wraps himself odiously in a cloak of Christian hypocrisy that slowly but surely leads the world to war. Hitler’s very words. When he was done, the Reichstag leapt to its feet in thunderous applause.”

“Hitler wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Derision for The Führer?”

"Maybe just a little," Grimm admitted. "You know what the people say, don't you?"

"No, what do the people say?"

"The people sometimes call the Reichstag the *teuerste Gesangsverein Deutschlands*."

Kesselring chuckled, then caught himself. "The most expensive singing club in Germany?"

"Yes, due to the frequent singing of the national anthem during sessions."

"Captain Grimm, you best keep that seditious thought to yourself, yes?"

"Yes, of course. We are all agreed. The Fatherland will prevail; it must prevail. Our job here in the United States is to help ensure the Fatherland's inevitable victory. Now that America has entered the war, Henry Brock is an integral part of that plan."

"This man who fucks Jews and sleeps *mit huren*? Such a man is an integral part of our plan?"

"We fight the war with the soldiers we are given, Herr Kesselring. It is not necessary that we like them, only that we can work with them. What I must do now is to find him, Brock. Brock himself must take personal delivery of the explosives."

"What sort of explosives?" Kesselring asked.

"RDX."

Kesselring answered with a blank stare.

"Yes, I have forgotten. You have no training. You are not a soldier. RDX. Hexogen. A form of explosive that can be molded by hand. Individually wrapped satchels of *plastiksprengstoff*. The explosives necessary to carry out the demolition will be arriving onshore shortly. They are to be delivered to a location not far from here. We have no choice now but to see this thing through to the end."

"And I must radio headquarters. You have a wireless, yes?"

"Open that closet door. The wireless is inside." Sebastian Grimm pointed across the front room of the rented bayou house.

"Yes, and I will also need the code phrase for the day."

"Let me pull out the book. Ah, yes . . . here it is . . . three words . . . BEAUT KRAUT EGO. You must transmit the three code words in precisely that order. But Kesselring, before you do, put that *von Brockdorff* file back in the box with the rest of them. We will need to take the strongbox along with us in the boot of the Packard when we leave. Later, we must find someplace safer than the trunk of an American automobile to safely store them."

THURSDAY

JULY 30, 1942

7:58 a.m.

“Little Palermo,” French Quarter, New Orleans

Nico Carolla was built like a tank, wide at the shoulders, solid through the middle, with strong arms and thick legs. He would win no beauty contests, not with that scar running down his left cheek.

Nor was Nico Carolla a man to be taken lightly. When Nico Carolla gave an order, he expected it to be obeyed down to the last detail. Sometimes he had to enforce his will with the small pistol he carried with him in his pocket, a .25 calibre *Bernardelli* semi-automatic. Most times, a stern order and a fierce look would suffice.

“I am not at all happy with this week’s receipts.”

Those were the first words out of Nico Carolla’s mouth after he entered the brothel and took a seat at the table in the back room. Nico’s personal bodyguard, Luca, stood at his side. Before them stood Hector, hands in his pockets and slouching. Lady Belle, the madam, would join them shortly.

“I am not happy with this week’s receipts,” Nico said again. “Nor those of the week before. I am warning you, Hector. I better not find that someone in this house has had his hand in the till. Hands with sticky fingers can be easily removed. We take them off at the wrist with a hack saw.”

Hector stiffened at the threat. Nico’s penchant for violence was legend. The entire Carolla family had the same violent reputation. Sylvestro, Nico’s grandfather, shot and killed a federal narcotics agent during an undercover drug bust ten years ago. It bought him two years behind bars. Nico’s father died in a gunfight.

“No, Nico,” the smaller black man said nervously. “No one be robbing you. I promise. Mah hand not been in no till, not now, not never.” Hector’s eyes darted rapidly between Nico and Nico’s bodyguard. Luca was often the source of whatever pain Nico dished out.

“Well, I can see that your hand has been somewhere, Hector. *Che cazzo?* How did you come to have that fancy ring you are wearing? You pinch it off someone?”

Hector's face turned white, at least as white as any black man's face could turn. It worried him when Nico started using funny-sounding words he didn't understand. "Well . . . I . . . well you see . . ."

"Hector, I do not enjoy being lied to. Especially not by some Negro. I have cut off a man's hand for less. I have cut off his zibb just to make a point."

"I likes both mah hands — and mah zibb. I ain't stealing from you, Nico. Nots from you. Nots from your family. Nots from anyone. Your father paid mah moms a fair price for de place. No skimming goin' on here, not by me, not by anyones else. Receipts are down 'cause de law be squeezing all the houses. City be wantin' every last one of dem closed."

"Yeah, people like my brother Earl Ray want it both ways. American police are different from the Carabinieri back home. But once a fascist, always a fascist."

"I knows you told me once before. But where be home again?"

"Monreale."

"Dat be in Alabama?"

"Monreale. It is a village in Sicily. Near Palermo. On the north coast of the island."

Nico found such discussions boring and tedious. He had an agile mind which easily outshone the light of the dim bulbs he had to work with each day. When Hector answered his explanation with a blank stare, Nico just sighed. "Sicily. It is a large island off the coast of Italy. In the south of Europe."

"At least you knows from where you come. Most us colored folk don't even knows from where our family come."

"All Negroes the same. Came to the Americas as slaves from Africa. My people don't knuckle under so easily. *Madre di Dio*. Mother of God. A Sicilian man would never allow himself to be captured and sold into slavery. A Sicilian man would rather die first."

"Abraham Lincoln freed de slaves. I be a free man. I belongs to no one."

"Free in name only," Nico observed. Luca, still standing beside him, smirked and nodded his head. He wore a shoulder holster beneath his arm. It bulged with the weight of a revolver, a Colt .38 Special.

"All men be slaves in some way, Mistah Carolla. Even important men like your own self."

"You a philosopher now?"

"Just sayin' . . ."

"Negroes not like Sicilians, Hector. We were hunted by the Fascists in the old country. Here in America the *famiglia* have had to muscle their way into every one of our businesses. The Matranga family was the first to settle in this area. Carlos and Antonio. They adopted American names. Charles and Tony. The two brothers set up shop here in New Orleans more than a generation ago. Ulysses S. Grant was still President at the time. The brothers Matranga opened a saloon and a brothel."

"But you be Mafia, not no simple tenant farmer."

"*Merda*. You calling me a criminal?"

"I call you no such thing, Nico. But people talk. They say you be in organized crime."

Nico laughed. "Crime is many things, Hector. But organized, it is not. Back in the day, the two Matranga brothers had running feuds with all the other Sicilian families."

"The Provenzano family? I heard tell 'bout a big fight. I think mah moms told me. There was a fight. Down by the docks."

"You must separate the corn from the cob, Hector. Even Davy Crockett has a legend, and some of it is true."

"But your legend actually be true. We all hears things 'round here, things de families be into. Extortion. Bootlegging. Labor rackets. Dat be how Matranga brothers did business. They collected tribute from Dago laborers. Also from slow-minded dockworkers. Also from the rival Provenzano crime family."

"Now that is a word I do not like."

"What word?" Hector asked fearfully.

"Dago. I do not ever want to hear that dirty word come out of your mouth again. *Capiche?* Never again."

"Yes, sir." Hector nodded slowly as Nico continued with his story.

"The part about the Provenzanos may be true," Nico said. "At one time the Provenzano family held nearly total control over commercial fruit shipments coming into port from South America. Carlos and Antonio began to move in on Provenzano fruit-loading operations. They threatened the Provenzanos with violence. Killed a few of them. Eventually, the Provenzanos withdrew and gave the Matrangas a cut of the waterfront rackets. Later, the Provenzanos pushed back. By the late 1880s, the two families had gone to war over the grocery and produce businesses. Each side employed large numbers of Sicilian *Mafiosi* from their native Monreale. The war was large enough to draw the attention of outsiders, including the local *polizia*. Before long, the police chief of New Orleans got involved. His name was Hennessy, David Hennessy."

"Dat be one story mah moms never told me. Mah dads neither. Mon Pappy worked for Master Higgins back in de day, he did. I was just a boy. In dem days, the boat plant on City Park Av'nue next to the Trades School was much smaller than tis today. Mon Pappy worked on the loading dock. I play'd in the fact'ry yard. I watched him whilst he worked. Mon Pappy and dis other fella took plywood planks off de railcar. Drilled holes in the planks. Bolted dem to dese crossbeams. Fastened dem together to makes seats and floors of dem older Higgins boats. First the *Wonder* boat; later the *Eureka* boat. When dey were assembled, dem boys would put the finished boats on a railcar and bring dem over to Bayou St. John where they would drops dem in de bayou, get dem wet and drive dem out onto Lake Pontch'train."

"You done interrupting me, boy?" Nico asked impatiently. "Where is Lady Belle anyway? She should have been here by now."

"You want I should go look for her, Boss?" Luca asked, eager to be helpful.

“Yes, do that. I have better things to do with my time than stand here and yack with this colored boy all day.”

Hector took no offense. “Why not tells me de rest’a your story whiles we waits fer Belle?”

Yes, yes. Now where was I? Oh, yes, Police Chief Hennessy. It was late summer. The year was 1890. Hennessy began investigating the two warring organizations, the Matrangas and the Provenzanos. But the man’s investigation did not last long. Hennessy was shot dead one night, killed while walking home alone. This is how those sorts of problems had always been dealt with in the old country. Any government official stupid enough to get in the way of the Sicilian Mafia ended up dead, usually face-down in a roadside ditch.” Nico used his index finger to figuratively slit his own throat.

Nico Carolla continued. “But America at the turn of the century was different from Sicily. The murder of Police Chief Hennessey created a huge backlash from the city. Charles and several members of the Matranga family were arrested. They were put in front of a judge, put on trial and later acquitted. Hung jury every last one of them.”

“Dat probably be when all de trouble started.”

“You are not wrong about that, Hector. The judge’s decision to release the Matranga gang members drew strong protests from the locals. They were outraged by the outcome of the case. It amounted to jury tampering in the face of overwhelming evidence. A lynch mob stormed the jail. They hanged nearly a dozen Matranga members still waiting to stand trial. The backlash affected *Mafiosi* across the country. The crime families met and soon agreed. The Hennessey lynchings led the American Mafia to adopt a hard and fast rule. Policemen and other law enforcement officials were off-limits, not to be harmed.”

Nico continued. “Charles Matranga himself was able to skip town and escape the vigilante lynchings. Later, when Charles returned to New Orleans, he resumed his position as head of the New Orleans crime family. He eventually forced the Provenzanos out. Matranga would then rule over the New Orleans underworld until shortly after Prohibition. That is when he turned over leadership of the syndicate to my grandfather, Sylvestro, in the early 1920s. Most people know my grandfather by a different name. Silver Dollar Sam. *Nonno* is still alive, still helps run things. My father Michael was one of three children *Nonno* had with my grandmother Caterina. She is dead now, God rest her soul.”

“No no?”

“*Nonno*. Means grandfather in Italian.”

Nico pushed back from the table and got to his feet. He strolled into the front room. It was lavishly furnished, but in a garish, almost barbaric manner. Gaudy tapestries. Heavy drapes. Ivory curios. Leopard skin rugs. Cut-glass candelabra.

“Now I am done talking, Hector. History lesson is over for today, done and complete. Get me a drink. Get me the cashbox. Hand over last night’s receipts and tell me what this is all about.”

Hector handed Nico the cashbox as well as the dead German’s belongings. Then he cleared his throat to speak.

“Kentucky Rose pinched this here book off a john middle ‘a’ de night last night.”

“Kentucky Rose? The young octoroon?”

“She don’t like dat word. But yes. Dat be her.”

“Spare the whore’s feelings, of course.” Nico laughed. “One black grandparent; no other black ancestors. I don’t know any other word besides octoroon. Mulatto?”

“No, dat be a child with one Negro parent, one white parent,” Hector said.

“Ah, mulatto. Yes. Like a mule. What you get when you cross a horse with a donkey. We have a parallel word in Italian. Arab traders have a similar word — *muwallad* — a person of mixed ancestry.”

“Yes, dat be Kentucky Rose. A person of mixed ancestry. A quadroon be de child of a mulatto and a white. Dat makes dem one-fourth Negro. A *griffe* be de child of a mulatto and a Negro. They got three-fourths Negro blood. Dat is what I am, a *griffe*. But, like I said, Rose pinched dis here book off a john earlier today, last night really.”

“*Che minchia?* That girl brings in a lot of business to the house. I can’t have her stealing from the men. She will give the house a bad reputation. Men may begin to go elsewhere. Maybe Rose needs to be punished. Maybe you do as well. You stole that ring didn’t you?”

“Please don’t punish Rose. She didn’t do nothin’ wrong.”

“But you said she nicked this book off a john.”

“I lied.”

“*Che cazzo!* What the fuck? What would possess you to do such a thing, Hector? And why hand the stolen thing to me?”

“Nico, please. Fore you get upset. Take a look at what I be giving you.”

Nico Carolla slowly turned the pages of the book. His eyes widened as he tried to comprehend its contents. Luca looked over his shoulder.

Hector asked. “You understand any dis stuff? I haven’t had much schooling mah-self.”

“I am Sicilian, Hector. Not German.”

“Dat be what this be? German? I thought de wops and de Heinie Krauts were allies. In the war, I mean.”

“Strange bedfellows more like. Plus, the Carolla family are not wops. Nasty word, that. Wine gone flat. That is how Sicilians translate the word. Back in the old country, it derives from slang — *guappo* — which means thug, one who struts about. It is how the arrogant men of Naples greet one another on the street. Sicilian men are not like that. We know our place. And we certainly are not in league with the Nazis. They are fascists, like Mussolini. Bad for business. We want no part of those people.”

Nico continued to turn the pages. He stopped at one of the hand-drawn maps and studied it more closely. "What is this? Directions to some buried treasure? This looks like City Park."

"I cain't say," Hector said quietly. "Why not give it to yor brother? Earl Ray may be the only one here'bouts with detailed maps of de parish."

"He will want to know who you robbed to get your hands on this book. Besides, we have operations at some of these spots marked on the map."

"Bad *juju*. De john died in Rose's bed," Hector said flatly. "Me and Rose, we took dat book off de dead man's body. It be sewn into de lining of de man's shirt vest."

"Is that so? *Che cazzo?* What the fuck did you do with the body?"

"Still upstairs," Hector said sheepishly. He pointed.

"How long has it been up there? A corpse starts to stink after a few hours."

"Ain't been long. Middle of de night dis mornin'. But me and Rose had no ways to move the body. You have a truck. Maybe Luca, plus one or two of your strongbacks can get de body downstairs, out de backdoor and into de truck."

"You got it all figured out, don't you Hector? What to do with the body, what to do with the book. How about that fancy ring?"

"Due respect, Boss Man. But I wouldn't be standin' here askin' for your help if'n I had it all figured out."

"Well we cannot dump the body here, not in the river and not in Pontchartrain. We will have to cart the remains across the state line into Mississippi, then dump the body in Bay St. Louis. At least that will place the corpse in someone else's jurisdiction."

"Thankya Boss."

"Don't thank me yet. You and Rose have to sew this book back into the lining of the dead man's vest. Whatever is written on the pages of this book, I want no part of it. *Madre di Dio*. Let the book be discovered by someone else when they recover the body."

"You sure 'bout dat?"

"As sure as I am ever going to be."

"And what abouts de ring?" Hector asked.

"Keep it for all I care," Nico said as Luca walked back into the room with Lady Belle trailing behind. "But don't be surprised if someone doesn't come looking for it before long. That ring is no trinket. It is worth something to someone. Now put it in gear, as you people say. Both of you!"

THURSDAY JULY 30, 1942 8:03 a.m.

Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans

“You fool! You’re doing it all wrong!” Andrew Higgins boomed. He was the military’s foremost boat builder. “Don’t cut the engine as you approach the shore. Gun the damn thing!” The trainees were practicing boat maneuvers out on the choppy waters of Lake Pontchartrain. An early morning storm was brewing in the distance.

“But sir, the Coast Guard taught us to always throttle back in shallow water or on approach to a pier.”

The coxswain was a young man, one of nearly two dozen onboard the landing craft, each no more than twenty years of age. To a man, every last one of them had enlisted in the Coast Guard and were now enrolled in the Higgins Boat Operators School. The school had been organized the summer before at the request of Marine Corps General Holland Smith. Nevertheless, Higgins paid all of the school’s operating costs.

“I don’t give a fuck what the Coast Guard taught you, boy. You were taught wrong!” Higgins boomed again, more red-faced than before. “And the same goes for the rest of you Coasties. This is a Higgins boat, not some damn, second-rate Yankee skiff. A Higgins boat is not like other boats. It is made to be run up on a riverbank or over a bar or onto a rocky beach. Gun it, I tell you, or we will surely run aground and get stuck but good!”

Andrew Higgins was in a foul mood. He had only yesterday returned from Washington, D.C., where he testified before several congressional committees. He told them in no uncertain terms how disgusted he was with the Navy’s recent cancellation of the multi-million-dollar Liberty boat contract. That contract had been extended to him only sixty days before. The adverse decision had cost him oodles of money and set his business plan back by months, if not years.

Higgins growled. “Step aside, boy, and let me take the wheel.”

Higgins pushed the young Coastie roughly aside and throttled the boat up to full speed. The bow fairly leapt out of the water as he charged the concrete banks of Lake Pontchartrain at top speed, nearly 20 knots. The boat’s Gray Marine diesel engine was basically indestructible, if a bit noisy and

messy. But, like a sawed-off shotgun, it was hard to argue with the engine's effectiveness.

"Jesus H. Christ, we are all going to die," the young man exclaimed as he fell back against the gunwale.

"Rubbish! We are going to learn how to drive a Higgins landing boat. Hell, the Brits have been driving these things without problem since before we Yanks got in the war. If the Limeys can learn to do it properly, so can you pirates."

Andrew Jackson Higgins was not a man to be trifled with. Rough-cut and brusque. Hot-tempered and out-spoken. Foul-mouthed and brilliant, with a wild imagination. The man had been trained in the school of hard knocks. He knew everything there was to know about building and sailing small boats, and he expected these men to learn the basics as well as he — small boat handling and navigation; use of compass; position finding; essentials of celestial navigation; signaling; emergency boat and engine repair.

The motor was running full bore, now, as they closed uncomfortably fast on the concrete shore. He shouted over the roar of the engine.

"Your average man is a chickenshit. His every instinct tells him to cut his speed when a boat runs aground on a sandbar. But this craft operates full throttle. And it continues to do so until it clears the bar. Even when troops are jumping from the boat on the beach, the engines continue to run wide open. It's counterintuitive, I know. But that is why you boys are here — to learn how to do it the right way, which is to say the Higgins way."

The young man nodded his head, as if he agreed. But he held tight to the gunwale expecting to be thrown from the boat at any moment. The other trainees onboard the LCVP were doing the same.

"Believe me," Higgins said. "The boat can take it. Thick planking. Strong frame. Heavy keel and skeg."

Without flinching, Higgins ran the *Eureka* boat straight up on the concrete bulwarks of the shore. The boat creaked a bit but held together fine.

"See?" Higgins said as the boat ground to a halt on the step-type concrete seawall of Lake Pontchartrain. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

The young Coastie, mostly white-faced, looked over the side of the boat. Most of the length of the boat was clean out of the water. All he saw beneath the hull was concrete. He was properly impressed.

But Higgins was nonplussed. He had done this maneuver a thousand times before, always with the same result: the boat came away undamaged.

"What now?" the Coast Guard recruit asked. "How do we get out of here? I mean, are we stuck for good? Do all of us have to get out of the boat here and push?"

"No, not at all," Higgins said. "But now it's your turn. Take the wheel. Slam her into reverse. She'll back her own self right off the seawall, sweet as you please."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously." Andrew Higgins was a man of extreme confidence.

The engine controls were a single lever combination throttle and gear, binnacle mount system. The young man grasped the controls gingerly and slammed the throttle hammer into reverse. Instantly the boat jerked backward and, much to his surprise slid easily back into the water. He swung the wheel hard to port as Higgins directed and pushed the boat back out into deeper water.

Though the hour was early, the bugs were already out in full force. Another hot summer's day was getting underway in New Orleans. It was one of the many pleasures of driving a fast boat — the bugs couldn't keep up; they didn't bother a man much when the boat was in motion.

"Now run the boat up to the seaplane ramp at Shushan Airport. It is that way. At this speed, it should take you no more than five minutes to get there." Higgins pointed. "The airport is near Pontchartrain Beach. Adjacent to Industrial Canal. That is where I will be getting out. When you get there, run the boat full speed right up the seaplane ramp. Don't hesitate. Just do it."

Higgins turned now to speak with Captain Richard McDerby. Mac, as McDerby liked to be called, was chief instructor at the Higgins Boat School. Since the school opened a year ago, Mac had already trained more than two thousand servicemen from various branches of the military to pilot and crew various classes of Higgins boats. Mac didn't like it when Higgins interfered with his class, but Mac was a patient man. Higgins was his idol, so he didn't say much.

"Mac, this is what these boys need to know. This is why I set up this school. This is why I pay for its operation out of my own pocket. Rip these boys a new one, if you have to. But teach 'em how to drive our fucking boats. And run them through the obstacle course after you drop me off. That will wake them up and get their attention."

McDerby smiled. The run with the boat through the obstacle course was always a hoot. Bounding over logs as much as three feet in diameter, over fifty-gallon drums floating in the water, across two sandbars, through a thick cluster of water hyacinth, and then up the concrete boat ramp at high speed.

When, two minutes later they had reached the seaplane ramp at Pontchartrain Beach and the coxswain had driven the boat up the ramp, Higgins jumped from the boat and said his goodbyes.

"See you later, Mac, back at the plant."

"Sure you'll be okay?"

"Hell yes. It isn't much of a walk from here to the electric streetcar line. I'll jump on the Spanish Fort Line, switch to the Canal Streetcar Line, then ride back downtown. My sons will be waiting for me. Thanks for the ride!" And then he was off, digging in his pocket for the 7-cent fare.

As Higgins walked the short distance to the streetcar stop, his nose hairs twitched. He could smell the sudden electricity in the air. A storm was moving into the bayou from out in the Gulf of Mexico. It made him remember. He harkened back to his early days as a lumberman in Natchez. It was the first business he owned.

Higgins stood that day, twenty years ago, under the roof of the portico of their small home and winced under the weight of the hot, humid, heavy air. Angele was pregnant with their first child, Edmond. A rumble of thunder rolled into the bay from the Gulf of Mexico only a dozen miles away. He lifted his eyes to the horizon and saw the menacing bank of dark storm clouds make their approach.

This one is going to be bad, he thought. Higgins knew it instinctively. The fury of a gulf coast squall was nearly unmatched on the planet. Violent, straight-line winds. Torrential rainfalls. A sudden down-rush of cold air. Torturous, gale-strength cloudbursts. Fierce twisting winds. Saltwater spray pushed miles inland.

A gulf coast bayou was little more than a series of ugly thumbs of water poking into the land in a hundred ways and in a hundred places. No spot of land was ever dry, only less wet than other spots. Houses had to be built on stilts, sometimes wood, sometimes stacks of cinder blocks, sometimes metal posts badly rusted. Storms could charge onshore with surprising speed and leave behind destruction, a storm surge and a devastating amount of rainwater.

The plant vegetation of the bayou was immune to the onslaught. But, human structures were feeble irrelevancies in the face of a tropical storm. The landscape regenerated itself. Uprooted trees regrew. Rivers changed course. Animals found new shelter. Fish washed ashore, rotted in place, became added fertilizer to an already rich soil.

The wind would rise; the leaves would quiver, shiny side up; the deer would take cover; smaller mammals would scurry away. The bayou was blanketed by a bottomland hardwood forest. The dominant plant species was the bald cypress tree. It grew in wet, marshy areas, which meant pretty much everywhere in the region. The cypress tree's most striking feature was its "knees" — woody, often gnarly protrusions from a tree's root system. The knees projected above the surrounding ground or water.

The trees grew tall. The knees provided the tree with stability and structural support. Sometimes the roots formed a buttressed base, a strong intertwined root system that allowed the tree to resist extremely strong winds, even of hurricane strength.

Higgins felt the first drops of rain on his face. He hurried, now, to the streetcar stop, where there would be a bit of cover. The drenching downpour would start soon enough.