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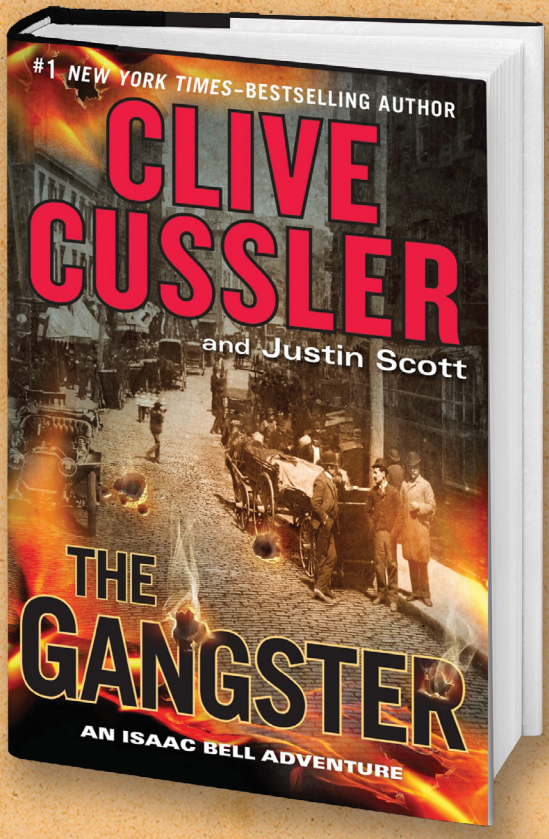

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PROLOGUE
Murder and High Jinks

New Haven, 1895

Chest-deep in a ditch, an Italian pick and shovel man looked up at a rush of custom-made shoes and broadcloth trousers inches from his face. Rich American students were scooping handfuls from the earth pile and sifting the sandy red soil through their fingers.

The Irish foreman, seated in the shade of an umbrella, shook a fist at him.

"Back to work, you lazy dago!"

The students took no notice. Set loose from geology class for impromptu field study, they were examining the fresh-dug outwash for traces of Triassic rock that glaciers had ground from the highlands above the New Haven valley. They were happy to be out of doors this first warm day of spring, and Italians digging holes in the ground were as ordinary a sight as red-faced Irish foremen in derby bowler hats.

But the Italians' padrone, the labor contractor the immigrants paid a stiff commission for the day's work, did notice. The pa-

drone was an extravagantly clad and perfumed Neopolitan with a sharp eye for profit. He beckoned the laborer who had stopped work to gape at his betters—a young Sicilian who called himself Antonio Branco.

Antonio Branco vaulted effortlessly up onto the grass. His clothes reeked of sweat, and little distinguished him from the others toiling in the ditch. Just another peasant in a dirty cap, a little finer-featured than most, taller, and bigger in the shoulders. And yet, something about this one seemed off. He was too sure of himself, the padrone concluded.

"You make me look bad in front of the foreman."

"What do you care about a mick?"

"I'm docking half your pay. Get back to work."

Branco's face hardened. But when he did nothing but jump back in the ditch and pick up his shovel, the padrone knew he had read his man correctly. Back in Italy, the Carabinieri kept a tight rein on criminals. A fugitive who had escaped to free and easy America, Antonio Branco could not protest being robbed of half his pay.

Five freshmen closed the door, muffling the uproar of pianos, banjos, and horseplay shouts and crashes elsewhere in Vanderbilt Hall. Then they gathered around a tall, rail-thin classmate and listened spellbound to his scheme to visit the girls at Miss Porter's School in Farmington, forty miles across the state. Tonight.

They knew little about him. He was from Boston, his family

bankers and Harvard men. The fact that he had come down to Yale indicated a rebellious streak. He had a quick grin and a steady gaze, and he seemed to have thought of everything—a map, a Waltham train conductor's watch, accurate to thirty seconds in a day, and a special employees' timetable that contained schedules and running directions for every train on the line, both passenger and freight.

"What if the girls won't see us?" asked Jack, always a doubting Thomas.

"How could they resist Yale men on a special train?" asked Andy.

"A stolen special," said Ron.

"A *borrowed* special," Larry corrected him. "It's not like we're keeping it. Besides, it's not a whole train, only a locomotive."

Doug asked the big question on every mind. "Are you sure you know how to operate a locomotive, Isaac?"

"One way to find out!"

Isaac Bell stuffed his map, watch, and timetable into a satchel that held several pairs of heavy gloves, a bull's eye lantern, and a fat copy of Grimshaw's *Locomotive Catechism*. Doug, Ron, Andy, Jack, and Larry crowded after him when he bounded out the door.

New Haven's Little Italy had sprung up close to the rail yards. Locomotive whistles and switch engine bells were moaning and

clanging their nightly serenade, and coal smoke sweetened the stench that the rubber factory wafted over the neighborhood, when the padrone stepped out of his favorite restaurant.

Belly full, head singing with wine, he stood a moment, cleaning his teeth with a gold pick. He strolled homeward along Wooster Street, acknowledging people's deferential *Buena sera, Padrone* with haughty nods. He was almost to his rooming house when he saw Antonio Branco in the shadows of a burned-out lamppost. The Sicilian was sharpening a pencil with a pocket knife.

The padrone laughed. "What does a peasant who can't read need with a pencil?"

"I learn."

"Stupidaggine!"

Branco's eyes glittered left and right. There was a cop. To give him time to pass, he drew an American newspaper from his coat and read a headline aloud: "Water Tunnel Accident. Foreman Killed."

The padrone snickered. "Read the fine print."

Branco made a show of tracing the lines with his pencil. He pretended to struggle with long words and skipped the short ones. "Foreman Jake . . . Stratton . . . injured fatal when Bridgeport water tunnel caved. He leaves wife Katherine and children Paul and Abigail. Four Italians also died."

The cop disappeared around the corner. The earlier crowds had thinned, and the few people hurrying home would mind their own business. Branco drove the pencil through the padrone's cheek.

The padrone's hands flew to his face, exposing his ribs.

Branco thrust. His pocket knife had a short blade, well under the four inches allowed by law. But the handle from which it hinged was almost as thin as the blade itself. As steel slid between bones, Branco shifted his palm behind the knife and pushed hard. The thin handle forced the blade into the wound and shoved the needle-sharp sliver as deep in the padrone's heart as a stiletto.

Branco took the padrone's money purse, his rings, and his toothpick and ran to the trains.

Locomotive 106 sighed and snorted like a sleeping mastiff. It was an American Standard 4-4-0 with four pilot wheels in front and four tall drive wheels as high as Isaac Bell's shoulder. Looming above the gravel embankment where the college boys huddled, silhouetted against a smoky sky set aglow by city lights, it looked enormous.

Bell had watched every night this week. Every night, it was trundled to the coal pocket and water tank to replenish its tender. Then the railroad workers removed ash from its furnace, banked the fire to raise steam quickly in the morning, and parked it on a siding at the extreme north end of the yard. Tonight, as usual, 106 was pointed in the right direction, north toward the Canal Line, which ran straight to Farmington.

Bell told Doug to run ahead of the engine and throw the switch. Doug was a football player, strong, levelheaded, and quick on his feet, the best candidate to switch the siding tracks to the main line. "Soon as we're through, open the switch again."

"Why?"

"So if they notice it missing, they won't know which way we went."

"You'd make fine a criminal, Isaac."

"Beats getting caught. Soon as you open it, run like heck to catch up . . . Andy, you're lighting the lights . . . O.K., guys. On the jump!"

Bell led the way, loping long-leggedly over rails, crossties, and gravel. The other boys followed, ducking their heads. The railroad police were famously brutal, yet not likely to beat up the sons of American magnates. But if they got caught at this stunt, the Yale Chaplin would have them "rusticated," which meant kicked out of school and sent home to their parents.

Doug sprinted ahead of the locomotive and crouched with his hands on the switch rod. Andy, whose father had put him to work backstage operating lights in his vaudeville theaters, climbed on the cowcatcher and ignited the acetylene headlamp, which cast a dull glow on the rails. Then he jumped down, ran to the back of the tender, and lighted a red lantern.

Isaac Bell vaulted up the ladder into the cab. He pulled on gloves from his satchel, passed a second pair to Ron, and pointed at the furnace door. "Open that and shovel on some coal."

Heat blasted out.

"Scatter it so you don't smother the fire."

By the orange glare of the furnace, Bell compared the controls to illustrations he had memorized. Then he counted heads. All had crowded into the cab except Doug at the switch.

Bell pushed the Johnson bar forward, released the air brakes, and opened the throttle to feed steam to the cylinders. The steel

behemoth shuddered alive in his hands. He remembered just in time to ease off on the throttle so it wouldn't jump like a jackrabbit.

The guys cheered and slapped him on the back. It was rolling.

"Stop!"

The railroad cop was a mountain of a man with a bull's-eye lantern on his belt and a yard-long billy club in his fist. He moved with startling speed to pin Antonio Branco against the boxcar he had been climbing under when the cinder dick surprised him. Branco squinted one eye to a slit and shut the other completely against the blinding light.

"How many wop arms do I got to bust before youse get the message?" the cinder dick roared. "No stealing rides. Get out of my yard, and here's something to remember me by."

The club flew down at his arm with a force intended to shatter bone.

Branco twisted inside the arc of the attack and ducked, saving his arm at the expense of an agonizing blow to his left knee. Doubled over, he pulled his pocket knife, opened the blade with the speed of ceaseless practice, and whipped it high, slashing the rail cop from chin to hairline.

The man screamed as blood poured into his eyes, dropped his club, and clutched his ruined face. Branco stumbled into the dark. His knee burned, as if plunged in molten lead. Battling for every step, he limped toward the empty north end of the yard, away from the lights and the cops that the screams would draw.

He saw an engine moving. Not a switch engine, but a big locomotive with a red signal lantern on the back of its tender. It was rolling toward the main line. It didn't matter where it was going—Hartford, Springfield, Boston—it was leaving New Haven. Retching with pain, he staggered after it as fast as he could, caught up, and threw himself onto the coupler on the back of the tender. He felt the wheels rumble through a switch, and the locomotive began to pick up speed.

In America, Branco had learned, freight trains erased boundaries. The country was huge—thirty times bigger than Italy—but thousands of miles of interlacing railroads melted distance. A man who rode the rails could vanish in "Little Italy" city slums and "Shantyville" labor camps. The police never noticed. Unlike the Carabinieri, who were national police, American cops knew what happened only in their own territory.

Suddenly, brakes hissed. The wheels shrieked and the engine stopped.

Branco heard someone running in the dark. He dropped to the crossties, slithered under the tender, and drew his knife. A man ran past and climbed up to the cab, shoes ringing on iron rungs. The brakes hissed release and the locomotive lurched to motion again. By then, Antonio Branco had wedged himself into a niche in the undercarriage, and New Haven was falling behind.

"More coal, Ron! Doug, pass Ron coal from the tender. Larry, Jack, help Doug."

"There aren't any more shovels, Isaac."

"Use your hands."

Speed was all. If Isaac Bell was reading the night timetable correctly, all trains had stopped running for the night after ten thirty. But the timetable warned of maintenance trains and gravel trains that might be on the tracks. The shorter time he was on the single track line, the better. Sixty miles per hour would get him to Farmington in thirty minutes. He checked his watch. He had lost five full minutes stopping the train for Doug. The speed indicator read forty.

"More coal!"

The boys passed coal. Ron scooped it onto the fire. It seemed to take forever, but slowly, gradually, the steam pressure increased and the speed indicator crept up and up and up until finally she was rumbling along at sixty miles per hour. Once the train was up to sixty, and running light with no cars to haul, Bell was able to pull the Johnson bar back to an easy cruising position and let his weary, blistered, black and greasy firemen take a break.

"What's that ahead?"

Andy had stuck his head out the side window to watch the tracks. Bell leaned out with him and saw a single dim light. He checked his watch and his map. "Mount Carmel Station." Eight and a half miles from New Haven. Twenty-two to go. Best of all, the station house was dark. The dispatcher, who would have telegraphed that an engine was running "wild," was asleep in his bed.

Andy begged permission to blow the whistle. Bell vetoed it. Screaming like banshees was not in the interest of crossing Connecticut as stealthily as a ghost.

His luck held as 106 highballed past small-town stations at Cheshire, Plantsville, and Southington—all three lights-out and fast asleep. But the next station was Plainville. Boldface print in the timetable indicated it was a big depot, and, indeed, as 106 rounded a curve into the town, Bell saw the station house and platform ablaze in light.

Trainmen were on the platform, and he feared there would be workmen on the tracks. He reached for the air brakes. Then he saw that the signal post showed a clear white light—the proceed signal, according to the *Locomotive Catechism*.

"Pull the whistle, Andy."

Andy yanked the cord looped from the roof of the cab. Steam coursed through the whistle with a deafening shriek. Men on the platform jumped back and watched, slack-jawed, as 106 tore into and out of Plainville at sixty miles an hour.

Bell raised his voice so all could hear above the roar.

"The jig is up."

The boys groaned. "What are we going to do, Isaac?"

"We'll turn off into the Farmington yards and head for Miss Porter's cross-country."

Bell showed them the way on his map. Then he handed out train tickets, one-ways from Plainville to New Haven. "Head back to school in the morning."

"Lights ahead!" called Andy, who was watching from the window. Bell eased back on the throttle, the speeding locomotive lost way, and he braked it to a smooth stop.

"Doug, there's your switch. On the jump, they know we're coming. Andy, douse our lights."

Andy extinguished the headlamp, and Doug ran to the switch and shunted them into the yard, which stretched toward the lights of Farmington. Quiet descended, the silence eerie after the thunder of the pistons.

"Wait," Bell whispered. He had heard the rustle of boots on gravel. Now he sensed motion in the starlight.

"Someone's coming!" Ron and Larry chorused.

"Wait," Bell repeated, listening hard. "He's going the other way." He glimpsed a figure running away from the locomotive. "Only some poor hobo."

"Cops!" A lantern was bobbing toward them.

Bell saw a single cop stumbling through a pool of lamplight. A nightshirt was half tucked into his trousers, and he was struggling to tug his suspenders over his shoulders while he ran. "Stop! Halt!"

A figure ran through the same pool of light where Bell had seen the rail cop.

The bobbing lantern veered in pursuit.

"He's chasing the hobo."

"Run, guys, now's our chance."

The boys bolted for the dark. Bell looked back. The hobo had an odd running gait. His right foot flew out with each step at a sideways angle, reminding Bell of how a trotting horse with a flawed gait would "wing."

A second watchman ran from the station house, blowing a whistle, and charged after Bell's classmates. With a sinking heart, Bell knew that it was his fault they were here. He ran after them as fast as he could, got between them and the watchman, and

when the watchman saw him, bolted in the opposite direction. The trick worked. The cop galloped after him, and the rest of the boys disappeared toward the town.

Bell headed toward a cluster of freight houses and coal pockets, timing his pace to gradually pull ahead, veered through the buildings, and used them for cover to sprint into a clump of trees. There, he hid and waited. This early in spring, branches hadn't yet leafed out and the stars penetrated so brightly they gleamed on his hands. He dropped the satchel at his feet, pulled his collar around his face, and hid his hands in his pockets.

He heard footsteps. Then labored breathing. The hobo limped into the trees. He saw Bell, plunged a hand into his coat, and whipped out a knife in a blur of starlight on steel. Run? thought Bell. Not and turn his back on the knife. He grabbed the heavy satchel to block the knife and formed a fist.

Ten feet apart, the two eyed each other silently. The hobo's face was dark, barely visible under the brim of his cap. His eyes glittered like a hunted animal's. His arms and legs and entire body were coiled to spring. Isaac Bell grew aware of his own body; every muscle was cocked.

The watchmen blew their whistles. They had teamed up, far in the distance, hunting in the wrong direction. The hobo was breathing hard, eyes flickering between him and the whistles.

Bell lowered the satchel and opened his fist. The instinct was correct. The hobo returned the knife to his coat and sagged against a tree.

Bell whispered, "Me first."

He slipped silently from the trees.

When he looked back at the rail yard from the shelter of a

farm wall, he saw a shadow pass under a light. The hobo was wing-footing the other way.

Doubting Thomas had called it wrong.

When Bell's classmates tossed pebbles at the Old Girls' house on Main Street, the girls flung open their windows and leaned out, whispering and giggling. Who are you boys? Where did you come from? How did you get here in the middle of the night?

They had decided, while stumbling across the countryside, that it would be best for everyone's future not to admit that they had stolen a train. They stuck to a story that they had chartered a special, and Miss Porter's girls seemed impressed. "Just to see us?"

"Worth every penny," chorused Larry and Doug.

Suddenly, from around the corner, a pretty blond girl appeared on the grass in a flowing white robe.

"You boys better run. The housemother telephoned Miller."

"Who's Miller?"

"The constable."

The Yale men scattered, all but Isaac Bell, who stepped into a shaft of light and swept off his hat. "Good evening, Mary Clark. I'm awfully glad to see you again."

"Isaac!"

They had met last month at a chaperoned tea.

"What are you doing here?"

"You are even blonder and more beautiful than I remember."

"Here comes Miller. Run, you idiot!"

Isaac Bell bowed over her hand and ran for the dark. The unforgettable Miss Mary Clark called after him, "I'll tell Miller you came from Harvard."

Two days later, he marched into the New Haven yard master's office and announced, "I'm Isaac Bell. I'm a first year student at Yale. There's a rumor on campus that detectives are inquiring about Locomotive 106."

"What about it?"

"I'm the guy who borrowed it."

"Sit there! Don't move. Wait for the police."

The yard master snatched up a telephone and reported Bell's confession.

An hour passed. A prematurely white-haired detective in a pin-striped suit arrived. He was leading an enormous man whose head was swathed in bandages that covered his entire face but for one glaring eye. The eye fixed on Isaac Bell.

"That's no wop," he mumbled through the bandage. "I told youse he was a wop."

"He says he stole 106."

"I don't care if he stole a whole damned train. He ain't the dago Eye-talian wop guinea what sliced me."

The white-haired detective walked the big man out. He returned in twenty minutes. He sat with Bell and introduced himself as Detective Eddie Edwards. Then he took out a memo book and wrote in a neat hand as he listened to Bell's story. Three

times, he asked Bell to repeat it. Finally, he asked, "Did you happen to see the wop who slashed that yard bull's face?"

"Not at New Haven, but there was someone at the Farmington yards." Bell told him about encountering the hobo with the wing-footed gait. "He could have ridden under the tender."

"I'll pass it on to the railroad dicks. But he'll have worked his way to Boston by now." Edwards made another note and closed his book.

Bell said, "I hate to think I helped a criminal escape."

"Any man who could whip that yard bull didn't need your help escaping. Come on, kid. I'll walk you back to school."

"You're letting me go?"

"By a miracle, your harebrained stunt did not lead to death, injury, or destruction of property. Therefore, it is not in the interest of the New Haven Railroad to prosecute the son of a Boston banker from whom they one day might want to borrow money."

"How did you know my father is a banker?"

"Wired a fellow in Boston."

They walked up Chapel Street, with Bell answering Detective Eddie Edwards' questions about landmarks they passed. At the Green, Edwards said, "Say, just between us, how many pals did you need to pull it off?"

"I did it alone," said Bell.

Eddie Edwards looked the young student over speculatively.

Bell returned the speculative look. Edwards fascinated him. The detective was a snappy dresser compared to the poor railroad detective who'd had his face slashed. And he was a chameleon, with an easygoing manner that disguised a sharp gaze and

a sharper mind. He was considerably younger than his shock of white hair made him look. Bell wondered where he carried his gun. A shoulder holster, he guessed. But nothing showed.

"Tall order, all by yourself," Edwards mused. "Frankly, I admire a man who stands up for his friends."

"Frankly," said Bell, "even if friends had come along, it would still have been entirely my idea." He showed the detective his maps, Waltham, and timetable. "Are you familiar with Grimshaw's *Locomotive Catechism*?"

"Good answer, kid. Backed by evidence. While changing the subject with a question. You have the makings of a savvy crook."

"Or a savvy detective?"

A smile tugged Edwards' mouth even as he said, firmly, "Detectives help people, they don't steal their property."

"Mr. Edwards, did you imply, earlier, that you don't work for the railroad?"

"The roads bring us in when a job calls for finessing."

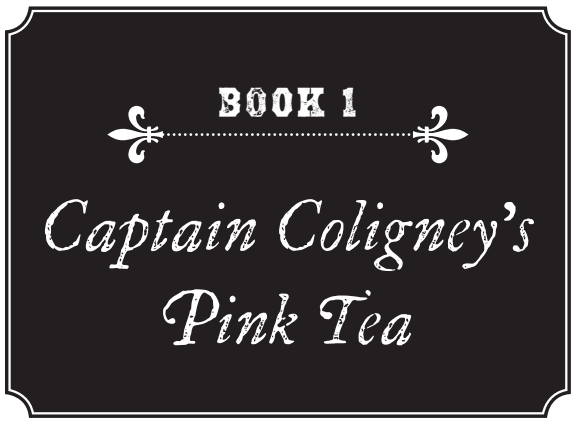
"Who do you work for?"

Edwards squared his shoulders and stood a little taller.

"I'm a Van Dorn detective."

Eleven Years Later

1906



ART TK

1

Little Sicily, New York City
Elizabeth Street, between Prince and Houston,
the "Black Hand block"

The Black Hand locked twelve-year-old Maria Vella in a pigeon coop on the roof of an Elizabeth Street tenement. They untied the gag so she wouldn't suffocate. Not even a building contractor as rich as her father would ransom a dead girl, they laughed. But if she screamed, they said, they would beat her. A vicious jerk of one of her glossy braids brought tears to her eyes.

She tried to slow her pounding heart by concentrating on the calmness of the birds. The pigeons murmured softly among themselves, oblivious to the racket from the slum, undisturbed by a thousand shouts, a piping street organ, and the thump and whirr of sewing machines. She could see through a wall of wooden slats admitting light and air that the coop stood beside the high parapet that rimmed the roof. Was there someone who would help her on the other side? She whispered Hail Marys to build her courage.

". . . Santa Maria, Madre di Dio,
prega per noi peccatori,
adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte . . ."

Coaxing a bird out of the way, she climbed up on its nesting box, and up onto another, until she glimpsed a tenement across the street draped with laundry. Climbing higher, pressing her head to the ceiling, she could see all the way down to a stretch of sidewalk four stories below. It was jammed with immigrants. Peddlers, street urchins, women shopping—not one of them could help her. They were Sicilians, transplanted workers and peasants, poor as dirt, and as frightened of the authorities as she was of her kidnappers.

She clung to the comforting sight of people going about their lives, a housewife carrying a chicken from the butcher, workmen drinking wine and beer on the steps of the Kips Bay Saloon. A Branco's Grocery wagon clattered by, painted gleaming red and green enamel with the owner's name in gold leaf. Antonio Branco had hired her father's business to excavate a cellar for his warehouse on Prince Street. So near, so far, the wagon squeezed past the pushcarts and out of sight.

Suddenly, the people scattered. A helmeted, blue-coated, brass-buttoned Irish policeman lumbered into view. He was gripping a baton, and Maria's hopes soared. But if she screamed through the wooden slats, would anyone hear before the kidnappers burst in and beat her? She lost her courage. The policeman passed. The immigrants pressed back into the space he had filled.

A tall man glided from the Kips Bay Saloon.

Lean as a whip, he wore workman's garb, a shabby coat, and

a flat cap. He glanced across the street and up the tenement. His gaze fixed on the parapet. For a second, she thought he was looking at her, straight into her eyes. But how could he know she was locked inside the coop? He swept his hat off his head as if signaling someone. At that moment, the sun cleared a rooftop, and a shaft of light struck his crown of golden hair.

He stepped into the street and disappeared from view.

The thick-necked Sicilian stationed just inside the front door blocked the tenement hall. A blackjack flew at his face. He sidestepped it, straight into the path of a fist in his gut that doubled him over in silent anguish. The blackjack—a leather sack of lead shot—smacked the bone behind his ear, and he dropped to the floor.

At the top of four flights of dark, narrow stairs, another Sicilian guarded the ladder to the roof. He pawed a pistol from his belt. A blade flickered. He froze in openmouthed pain and astonishment, gaping at the throwing knife that split his hand. The blackjack finished the job before he could yell.

The kidnapper on the roof heard the ladder creak. He was already flinging open the pigeon coop door when the blackjack flew with the speed and power of a strikeout pitcher's best ball and smashed into the back of his head. Strong and hard as a wild boar, he shrugged off the blow, pushed into the coop, and grabbed the little girl. His stiletto glittered. He shoved the needle tip against her throat. "I kill."

The tall, golden-haired man stood stock-still with empty

hands. Terrified, all Maria could think was that he had a thick mustache that she had not seen when he glided out of the saloon. It was trimmed as wonderfully as if he had just stepped from the barbershop.

He spoke her name in a deep baritone voice.

Then he said, "Close your eyes very tight."

She trusted him and squeezed them shut. She heard the man who was crushing her shout again, "I kill." She felt the knife sting her skin. A gun boomed. Hot liquid splashed her face. The kidnapper fell away. She was scooped inside a strong arm and carried out of the pigeon coop.

"You were very brave to keep your eyes closed, little lady. You can open them now." She could feel the man's heart pounding, thundering, as if he had run very far or had been as frightened as she. "You can open them," he repeated softly. "Everything's O.K."

They were standing on the open roof. He was wiping her face with a handkerchief, and the pigeons were soaring into a sky that would never, ever be as blue as his eyes.

"Who are you?"

"Isaac Bell. Van Dorn Detective Agency."

2

"Greatest engineering feat in history. Any idea what it's going to cost, Branco?"

"I read in-a newspaper one hundred million doll-a, Mr. Davidson."

Davidson, the Contractors' Protective Association superintendent of labor camps, laughed. "The Water Supply Board'll spend *one hundred seventy-five* million, before it's done. Twenty million more than the Panama Canal."

A cold wind and a crisp sky promised an early winter in the Catskill Mountains. But the morning sun was strong, and the city men stood with coats open, side by side, on a scaffold atop the first stage of a gigantic dam high above a creek. Laborers swarmed the site, but roaring steam shovels and power hoists guaranteed that no one would overhear their private bargains.

The superintendent stuck his thumbs in his vest. "Wholesome water for seven million people." He puffed his chest and belly and beamed in the direction of far-off New York City as if he were tunneling a hundred miles of Catskill Aqueduct with his own hands. "Catskills water will shoot out a tap in a fifth floor kitchen—just by gravity."

"A mighty enterprise," said Branco.

"We gotta build it before the water famine. Immigrants are packing the city, drinking dry the Croton."

The valley behind them was a swirling dust bowl, mile after mile of flattened farms and villages, churches, barns, houses, and uprooted trees that when dammed and filled would become the Ashokan Reservoir, the biggest in the world. Below, Esopus Creek rushed through eight-foot conduits, allowed to run free until the dam was finished. Ahead lay the route of the Catskill Aqueduct—one hundred miles of tunnels bigger around than train tunnels—that they would bury in trenches, drive under rivers, and blast though mountains.

"Twice as long as the great aqueducts of the Roman Empire."

Antonio Branco had mastered English as a child. But he could pretend to be imperfect when it served him. "Big-a hole in ground," he answered in the vaudeville-comic Italian accent the American expected from a stupid immigrant to be fleeced.

He had already paid a hefty bribe for the privilege of traveling up here to meet the superintendent. Having paid, again, in dignity, he pictured slitting the cloth half an inch above the man's watch chain. Glide in, glide out. The body falls sixty feet and is tumbled in rapids, too mangled for a country undertaker to notice a microscopic puncture. Heart attack.

But not this morning. The stakes were high, the opportunity not to be wasted. Slaves had built Rome's aqueducts. New Yorkers used steam shovels, dynamite, and compressed air—and thousands of Italian laborers. Thousands of bellies to feed.

"You gotta understand, Branco, you bid too late. The contracts to provision the company stores were already awarded."

"I hear there was difficulty, last minute."

"Difficulty? I'll say there was difficulty! Damned fool got his throat slit in a whorehouse."

Branco made the sign of the cross. "I offer my services, again, to feed Italian laborers their kinda food."

"If you was to land the contract, how would you deliver? New York's a long way off."

"I ship-a by Hudson River. Albany Night Line steamer to Kingston. Ulster & Delaware Railroad at Kingston to Brown's Station labor camp."

"Hmm . . . Yup, I suppose that's a way you could try. But why not ship it on a freighter direct from New York straight to the Ulster & Delaware dock?"

"A freighter is possible," Branco said noncommittally.

"That's how the guy who got killed was going to do it. He figured a freighter could stop at Storm King on the way and drop macaroni for the siphon squads. Plenty Eye-talian pick and shovel men digging under the river. Plenty more digging the siphon on the other side. At night, you can hear 'em playing their mandolins and accordions."

"Stop-a, too, for Breakneck Mountain," said Branco. "Is-a good idea."

"I know a fellow with a freighter," Davidson said casually.

Antonio Branco's pulse quickened. Their negotiation to provision the biggest construction job in America had begun.

A cobblestone crashed through the window and scattered glass on Maria Vella's bedspread. Her mother burst into her room, screaming. Her father was right behind her, whisking her out of the bed and trying to calm her mother. Maria joined eyes with him. Then she pointed, mute and trembling, at the stone on the carpet wrapped in a piece of paper tied with string. Giuseppe Vella untied it and smoothed the paper. On it was a crude drawing of a dagger in a skull and the silhouette of a black hand.

He read it, trembling as much with anger as fear. The pigs dared address his poor child:

> *"Dear you will tell father ransom must be paid. You are home safe like promised. Tell father be man of honor."*

The rest of the threat was aimed at him:

> *"Beware Father of Dear. Do not think we are dead. We mean business. Under Brooklyn Bridge by South Street. Ten thousand. PLUS extra one thousand for trouble you make us suffer. Keep your mouth shut. Your Dear is home safe. If you fail to bring money we ruin work you build."*

"They still want the ransom," he told his wife.
"Pay it," she sobbed. "Pay or they will never stop."
"No!"

His wife became hysterical. Giuseppe Vella looked helplessly at his daughter.

The girl said, "Go back to Signore Bell."

"*Mr.* Bell," he shouted. He felt powerless and it made him angry. He wanted to hire the Van Dorn Detective Agency for protection. But there was risk in turning to outsiders. "You're American. Speak American. *Mr.* Bell. Not *Signore*."

The child flinched at his tone. He recalled his own father, a tyrant in the house, and he hung his head. He was too modern, too American, to frighten a child. "I'm sorry, Maria. Don't worry. I will go to Mr. Bell."

3

The Knickerbocker Hotel was a hit from the day John Jacob Astor IV opened the fifteen-story Beaux Arts building on the corner of 42rd and Broadway. The great Caruso took up permanent residence, three short blocks from the Metropolitan Opera House, as did coloratura soprano Luisa Tetrazzini, the "Florentine Nightingale," who inspired the Knickerbocker's chef to invent a new macaroni dish, *Pollo Tetrazzini*.

Ahead of both events, months before the official opening, Joseph Van Dorn had moved his private detective agency's New York field office into a sumptuous second floor suite at the top of the grand staircase. He negotiated a break on the rent by furnishing house detectives. Van Dorn had a theory, played out successfully at his national headquarters in Chicago's Palmer House and at his Washington, D.C., field office in the New Willard Hotel, that lavish surroundings paid for themselves by persuading his clientele that high fees meant quality work. A rear entrance, accessible by a kitchen alley and back stairs, was available for clients loathe to traverse the most popular hotel lobby in the city to discuss private affairs, for informants shopping information, and for investigators in disguise.

Isaac Bell directed Giuseppe Vella to that entrance.

The tall detective greeted the Italian contractor warmly in the reception room. He inquired about Maria and her mother, and refused, again, an offer of a monetary reward beyond the Van Dorn fee, saying, good-naturedly but firmly, "You've already paid your bill on time, a sterling quality in a client."

Bell led the Italian into the working heart of the office, the detectives' bull pen, which resembled a modern Wall Street operation, with candlestick telephones, voice tubes, clattering typewriters, a commercial graphophone, and a stenographer's transcribing device. A rapid-fire telegraph key linked the outfit by private wire to Chicago, to field offices across the continent, and to Washington, where the Boss spent much of his time wrangling government contracts.

Bell commandeered an empty desk and a chair for Vella and examined the Black Hand extortion letter. Half-literate threats were illustrated with crude drawings on a sheet of top quality stationery.

Vella said, "It was tied with string around the stone they threw in the window."

"Do you have the string?"

Vella pulled a strand of butcher's twine from his pocket.

Bell said, "I'll look into this, immediately, and discuss it with Mr. Van Dorn."

"I am afraid for my family."

"When you telephoned, I sent men to 13th Street to guard your home."

Bell promised to call on Vella that afternoon at Vella's current construction site, an excavation for the new Church of the An-

nunciation at 128th Street in Harlem. "By the way, if you notice you are being followed, it will only be that detective . . . there." He directed Vella's gaze across the bull pen. "Archie Abbott will look out for you."

The elegantly dressed, redheaded Detective Abbott looked to Vella like a Fifth Avenue dandy until he slid automatic pistols into twin shoulder holsters, stuffed his pockets with extra bullet clips, sheathed a blackjack, and loaded a shotgun shell into his gold-headed walking stick.

Isaac Bell took the Black Hand letter to Joseph Van Dorn's private office. It was a corner room with an Art Nouveau rosewood desk, comfortable leather armchairs, views of the sidewalks leading to the hotel entrances, and a spy hole for inspecting visitors in the reception room.

Van Dorn was a balding Irishman in his forties, full in the chest and fuller in the belly, with a thick beard of bright red whiskers and the gruffly amiable charm of a wealthy business man who had prospered early in life. Enormously ambitious, he possessed the ability, rare in Bell's experience, to enjoy his good fortune. He also had a gift for making friends, which worked to the great advantage of his detective agency. His cordial manner concealed a bear-trap-swift brain and a prodigious memory for the faces and habits of criminals, whose existence he took as a personal affront.

"I'm glad for any business," said Van Dorn. "But why doesn't Mr. Vella take his troubles to Joe Petrosino's Italian Squad?"

New York Police Detective Joseph Petrosino, a tough, twenty-year veteran with an arrest and conviction record that was the envy of the department, had recently received the go-ahead from Commissioner Bingham to form a special squad of Italian-speaking investigators to fight crime in the Sicilian, Neopolitan, and Calabrese neighborhoods.

"Maybe Mr. Vella knows there are only fifteen Italians in the entire New York Police Department."

"Petrosino's got his work cut out for him," Van Dorn agreed. "This 'Black Hand' plague is getting out of control." He gestured at a heap of newspaper clippings that Isaac Bell had asked Research to gather for the Boss. "Bombing fruit stands and burning pushcarts, terrorizing poor ignorant immigrants, is the least of it. Now they're tackling Italian bankers and business men. We'll never know how many wealthy parents quietly ransomed their children, but I'll bet enough to make it a booming business."

Bell passed Van Dorn the Black Hand letter.

Van Dorn's cheeks reddened with anger. "They actually address the little girl! What scum would frighten a child like this?"

"Feel the paper."

"Top quality. Rag, not pulp."

"Remind you of anything?"

"Same as the original ransom note, if I recall."

"Anything else?"

"First class stationery." He held it to the light. "Wonder where they got it. Why don't you look into the watermark?"

"I already put Research on it."

"So now they're threatening his business."

"It's easy to make an 'accident' at a construction site."

"Unless it's a feint while they take another shot at his daughter."

"If they do," said Bell, "they'll run head on into Harry Warren's Gang Squad. Harry's blanketed 13th Street."

Van Dorn showed his teeth in a semblance of a smile. "Good . . . But how long can I afford to take Harry's boys off the gangs? 'Gophers' and 'Wallopers' are running riot, and the Italians are getting bolder every day."

"A dedicated Van Dorn Black Hand Squad," said Bell, "would free your top gang investigators to concentrate on the street gangs."

"I'll think about it," said Van Dorn.

"We would be better fixed to attack the Black Hand."

"I said I'd think about it."

Isaac Bell strode uptown from the 125th Street subway station through a neighborhood rapidly urbanizing as new-built sanitariums, apartment blocks, tenements, theaters, schools, and parish houses uprooted Harlem's barnyards and shanties. He was a block from 128th Street, nearing a jagged hill of rock that Giuseppe Vella was excavating for the Church of the Annunciation, when the ground shook beneath his feet.

He heard a tremendous explosion. The sidewalk rippled. A parish steeple swayed. Panicked nuns ran from the building, and Convent Avenue, which was surfaced with vitrified brick, started to roll like the ocean.

Bell had survived the Great Earthquake in San Francisco only

last spring, awakening suddenly in the middle of the night to see his fiancée's living room and piano fall into the street. Now, here in Manhattan, he felt his second earthquake in four months. A hundred feet of the avenue disintegrated in front of him. Then bricks flew, propelled to the building tops by gigantic jets of water.

It was no earthquake, but a flood.

A river filled Convent Avenue in an instant.

There could be only one source of the raging water. The Croton Reservoir system up north in Westchester supplied New York City's Central Park Reservoir via underground mains. The explosion in Giuseppe Vella's excavation—an enormous dynamite "overcharge," whether by miscalculation or sabotage—had smashed them open. In an instant, the "water famine" predicted by Catskill Aqueduct champions seemed unbelievable.

A liquid wall reared out of Convent Ave and raced down it, tearing at first-story windows and sweeping men, women, and horses around the corners and into the side streets. Its speed was startling, faster than a crack passenger train. One second, Isaac Bell was pulling the driver from a wagon caught in the ice-cold torrent; the next, he himself was picked up and flung into 127th Street. He battled to the surface and swam on a foaming crest that swept away shanties the full block to Amsterdam Avenue.

There the water careened downhill, following the slope of the land south. Bell fought out of the stream and dragged himself upright on a lamppost. Firemen from a nearby station were wading in to pull people out.

Bell shouted, "Where are the water gates?"

"Up Amsterdam at 135th."

Bell charged up Amsterdam Avenue at a dead run.

A third of a mile north of the water main break, he found a sturdy Romanesque Revival brick and granite castle. The lintel above its iron doors was engraved WATER DEPARTMENT. A structure this big had to be the main distributing point for the Westchester reservoirs. He pushed inside. Tons and tons of Croton water were surging up from a deep receiving chamber into four-foot-diameter cast-iron pipes. The pipes were fitted with huge valve wheels to control the outflow to the mains breached seven blocks away by the explosion.

Bell spotted a man struggling with them. He hurtled down a steel ladder and found an exhausted middle-aged engineer desperately trying to close all four valves at once. He was gasping for breath and looked on the verge of a heart attack. "I don't know what happened to my helper. He's never late, never misses a day."

"Show me how to help!"

"I can't budge the gates alone. It's a two-man job."

With the dynamite explosion no accident, thought Bell, but a coordinated Black Hand attack to blame Giuseppe Vella for flooding an entire neighborhood, the extortionists must have left the helper bloodied in an alley.

"This one's frozen."

Isaac Bell threw his weight and muscle against the wheel and pulled with all his might. The old engineer clapped hands on it, too, and they fought it together, quarter inch by quarter inch, until the gate wheel finally began to turn with a metallic screech.

"Godforsaken Italians. I warned them again and again not to use too much dynamite. I knew this would happen."

As soon as they closed the last gate, Isaac Bell raced back to Vella's excavation.

The streets were littered with the corpses of drowned dogs and chickens. A dead horse was still tied in a wrecked stable. Trolleys had stalled on their tracks, shorted out by the water. The cellars of houses and businesses were flooded. A hillside had washed away and fallen into a brewery, and the people who had lived in the upended shacks were poking in the mud for the remains of their possessions.

An angry crowd was gathering at the excavation site.

Bell shouldered through it and found Giuseppe Vella barricaded in the board shack that housed his field office.

"Russo ran away."

"Who is Russo?"

"Sante Russo. My foreman. The blaster. He was afraid those people would blame him." Bell exchanged a quick glance with Archie Abbott, the Van Dorn shadow he had assigned to protect Vella. Abbott had managed to station himself near the door, but he was only one man and the crowd was growing loud.

"But it wasn't Russo's fault."

"How do you know?"

"Russo ran to me a second after the explosion. He said he found extra dynamite in the charge. He disconnected the detonator. But while he was coming to tell me, it exploded. The Black Hand reconnected the wires."

Policemen pushed through the crowd.

Bell said, "Soon as the cops calm them down, I'll escort you home."

The cops pounded on the door. Bell let them in.

They had come for Vella. Accompanying them was an angry official from the city's Combustibles Department. He revoked Vella's explosives license for the job on the spot and swore that Vella would be fined thousands by the city. "Not only that, you reckless wop, you'll lose the bond you had posted in case of damage. Look what you did to the neighborhood! 125th Street is almost washed away and you flooded every cellar from here to 110th!"

Isaac Bell issued quick orders to Archie Abbott before he accompanied Giuseppe Vella downtown. When they got to 13th Street, he confirmed that Harry Warren's detectives were keeping an eye on the man's home. Then he went to his room at the Yale Club, where he changed into dry clothes and oiled his firearms. He was retrieving the soaked contents of his pockets and smoothing a damp two-dollar bill, which would dry no worse for wear, when it occurred to him what the high quality paper that the Black Hand letter had been written on reminded him of.

"Mr. Bell," the hall porter called though his door. "Message from your office."

Bell slit the envelop and read a one-word sentence written in the Boss's hand.

"Report."

Bell got there just as New York Police Department Captain Coligney was leaving Van Dorn's office. They shook hands hello and Coligney said, "Take care in Washington, Joe. Good seeing you again."

"Always a pleasure," said Van Dorn. "I'll walk you out."

Back in sixty seconds, he said, "Good man, Coligney. The only captain Bingham didn't transfer when he took over—presumably recalling that President Roosevelt boomed his career back when he was Police Commissioner."

Van Dorn threw papers in a satchel and cast over his shoulder, "A flood, Isaac. Set off by an overcharge explosion of dynamite on the premises of our client Mr. Vella, who hired the Van Dorn Detective Agency to protect him. By any chance could we call it a horribly timed coincidental accident?"

"Sabotage," said Bell.

"Are you sure?"

"If a Water Department assistant engineer had not failed to show up for work at the main distribution gates, they could have stopped the water almost immediately. Archie Abbott found the poor devil in the hospital, beaten half dead. That makes two 'horribly timed' coincidences."

"Then how do we convince clients that the Van Dorn Detective Agency can protect them from the Black Hand?"

"Same way you had Eddie Edwards drive gangs from the rail yards. Form a special squad and hit 'em hard."

"We've already discussed your Black Hand Squad. I'm not about to commit the manpower, and, frankly, I don't see the profit in it."

"Very little profit," Bell agreed freely. The fact was, ambition

aside, Joseph Van Dorn cared far more about protecting the innocent than making a profit. All Bell had to do was remind him of it. "The Black Hand terrorize only their own countrymen. The poor folk can't speak English, much less read it. Who can they turn to? The Irish cop who calls every man 'Pasquale'?"

"Forgetting," growled Van Dorn, 'that it wasn't that long ago Yankee cops called us Irish Paddy . . . But Mr. Vella and his fellow business men speak near-perfect English and read just fine."

"Those are the Italians we have to persuade not to forever link the Van Dorn Detective Agency to the Great Harlem Flood of 1906."

"I am not in a joking mood, Isaac."

"Neither am I, sir. Giuseppe Vella's a decent man. He deserves better. So do his countrymen."

"We'll talk next week." Van Dorn started out the door. "Oh, one more thing. How would you feel about taking over the New York field office? Lampack's getting old."

"I would not like that one bit, sir."

"Why not?"

"I'm a field detective, not a manager."

"The heck you're not. You've ramrodded plenty of squads."

"Squads in the field. Frankly, sir, if you won't give me a Black Hand Squad, I would rather you appoint me Chief Investigator."

"*I'm* Chief Investigator," said Van Dorn. "And I intend to remain Chief Investigator until I can appoint a valuable man who is sufficiently seasoned to take over . . . Have you made any headway with that paper?"

"I have an agent on Park Row, canvassing the printers, stationers, and ink shops."

CLIVE CUSSLER

THE GANGSTER

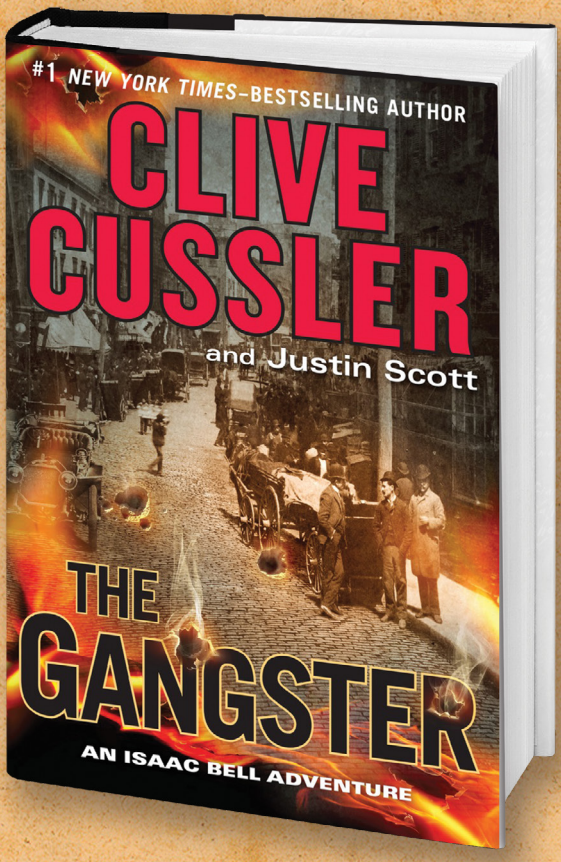
AMAZON

B&N

BAM

iBOOKS

INDIEBOUND



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