

THE SABOTEURS

An Isaac Bell Adventure®



CLIVE
GUSSLER
AND
JACK DU BRUL

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PROLOGUE



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Milwaukee, Wisconsin

THEY GAVE HIM THE GUN IN NEW YORK, HE WAS PRETTY CERTAIN, and he thought some money too. That had allowed him to stalk his prey across eight states, often staying in the same hotels and riding the same train. Most importantly, though, they'd helped him hear the ghost once again. And the ghost gave the same command he'd given eleven years earlier, only John hadn't the strength to act then. Today was different.

John Flammang Schrank spent most of the afternoon in a bar across from the Gilpatrick Hotel, where he knew his target would eat dinner before motoring to the Milwaukee Auditorium to deliver a speech to further his unholy quest. A former bar owner himself, the Bavarian-born Schrank downed six schooners of beer but felt nothing but calm as the crowds outside the nearby hotel swelled in anticipation of getting a glimpse of their hero.

Traitor, he thought sullenly, the weight of the gun tugging at his coat pocket. Traitor and murderer.

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He paid the barman and crossed the street. It was close to eight, and light spilled from the hotel's windows. The air was crisp, so people wore long coats and hats pulled down low. Schrank was a portly man, round in the belly, with a friendly enough face dominated by a large, jutting chin. He had little trouble pressing his way through the happy throngs of people.

How could they show such adoration? he wondered. Didn't they know the truth?

That truth had come to him shortly after his target had taken office. It was the ghost's first appearance in a dream, a vivid dream that he'd never been able to shake. And now, with the help of his new benefactors, the dream had returned, only this time his target had been wearing the robes of a priest, but it made no difference. Schrank recognized the usurper at once.

Schrank looked around. People were practically giddy with the thought of seeing their man. The ghost had said their hero had murdered him by placing the Polish anarchist, Leon Czolgosz, at the Pan-American Expo in Buffalo. The two shots he'd fired to the gut were enough to turn the man into the ghost of John Schrank's dreams.

Schrank recognized a face in the crowd. It was the nice one, the one who listened to him. The other, the taciturn man who demanded and cajoled and demeaned, wasn't at his side as he'd been so many times before when he'd tried to carry out the assassination. This was the omen that tonight it would happen. He moved even closer to the front of the crowd, ignoring the sour looks of people who'd waited some time for their coveted positions.

He felt the hard rubber grip of the .38 caliber Colt revolver deep in his overcoat pocket. He was close to the front row of people. The hotel's door was only a few paces away, and the open-top automobile, with its long hood and sweeping running boards, idled at the curb.

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“I can’t believe I’m about to see the hero of San Juan Hill,” a woman said to her husband a little breathlessly.

“I hear he doesn’t like to be called Teddy, but rather TR,” said another voice in the crowd.

Schrank fingered the pistol. He couldn’t allow him to have a third term. No President had ever had one. George Washington himself had refused, fearing it would turn the presidency into a monarchy like the one America had fought to free herself from. John Schrank saw himself as a patriot, like one of the Minutemen, fighting against the tyranny of a man wishing to become King.

The crowd suddenly erupted in a roar of wild cheering. Teddy Roosevelt came down the handful of steps outside the Gilpatrick and waved to the people who’d waited to see him, envious of the nine thousand awaiting his speech a short distance away at the auditorium. Roosevelt gave them a big-toothed smile, his eyes behind his rimless glasses alight with joy. His walrus mustache twitched.

He mounted the car’s running board and lowered himself into the rear seat next to his stenographer, Elbert Martin. Opposite them on the rear-facing seat was another aide, Harry Cochems. The crowd continued to roar and shake the air with their applause. TR gave Harry a knowing smile and got back to his feet, his top hat in hand, to wave once again to the people. They loved him for the gesture, and he loved them for their loyalty and support.

John Flammang Schrank saw his opportunity and lurched a step closer to his target. Without a change in expression, with no real malice at all since he didn’t hate the former President but needed to stop him from retaking the Oval Office, he raised the pistol and took aim at Roosevelt’s head, just a few feet away.

He squeezed the trigger at the same time someone behind him jostled his arm. The gun went off, a single clap of thunder loud

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enough to silence the crowd. The smell of burnt powder turned the air acrid.

Teddy Roosevelt staggered just slightly, bending at the knee, before straightening up once again, his hat still raised. Elbert Martin was the first to react. He'd played collegiate football and had lightning reflexes. He dove out of the car and crashed into Schrank before he could fire again. Both men fell to the sidewalk, Martin using his superior size to pin Schrank to the ground while he clamped his hands around the assassin's wrists. A. O. Girard, a bodyguard from the Van Dorn Detective Agency, and a former member of TR's Rough Riders, moved in and scooped up the pistol while two of Milwaukee's Finest piled onto the scrum.

Harry Cochems jumped to his feet and asked, "Were you hit, Mr. President?"

"He pinked me, Harry," Roosevelt replied.

"Dear God."

The crowd was shouting for blood. Cries of "kill him" and "hang him" rang out.

TR waved his hat and bellowed, "Don't hurt him. Bring him here. I want to see him." The mob could hardly believe their hero was unharmed, and cheers rose up. "I'm all right, I'm all right."

The cops yanked Schrank to his feet.

"Bring him to me," Roosevelt demanded, and the would-be assassin was frog-marched to the side of the idling saloon sedan.

Roosevelt studied the man's face, placing his hands on his head and tried to recall if he'd ever seen the dull-looking creature before. There was no spark of recognition. "What did you do it for?"

Schrank just looked at him, working his jaw but saying nothing.

"Oh, what's the use," Roosevelt said, pain beginning to hone his

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voice. "Officers, take charge of him, and see that there's no violence done to him."

He sat back into his seat as Schrank was led into the hotel and the crowds booed.

The car pulled away from the curb. Once out of sight of his supporters, Roosevelt opened his topcoat and suit jacket. The fine white linen of his shirt was stained crimson over his right side. His aides stared, slack-jawed, at the amount of blood.

"Driver," Harry Cochems practically shouted. "Get us to the nearest hospital."

"Ignore that. Keep true for the auditorium," Roosevelt countered, and accepted a fresh handkerchief from Elbert to press to the wound. Roosevelt held a hand over his mouth and coughed. He showed his white palm to his assistants. "If I were lung-shot, there'd be blood. I'm going to be fine."

He fished two items from the inside pocket of his jacket. One was the fifty-page speech he planned to deliver neatly folded in two. The bullet had torn a ragged hole through the sheaf of papers. The second item was his leather-covered steel glasses case. It too had been pierced. The bullet had lost enough of its momentum that by the time it struck Roosevelt's chest it merely punctured the skin and lodged against his rib cage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know if you fully understand that I've been shot, but it takes more than one bullet to kill a Bull Moose."

1



Buenos Aires

Winter 1913

A VAST ARMADA OF FREIGHTERS LINED THE CITY'S BUSY WATER-front, tucked in bow to stern like a wartime convoy. OVER them stood the massive grain silos, multi-storied wooden structures with movable spouts from which cascades of golden wheat thundered into their holds. Farther down the quay, special refrigerated ships were being loaded with great slabs of pampas-bred beef destined for homes and restaurants across the breadth of Europe. Other ships were being unloaded with goods from Europe and North America, mostly manufactured items that Argentina couldn't produce herself.

Otto Dreissen hadn't been back in BA, as almost everyone called the Argentine capital, in six months, and it seemed the port was even more hectic than before. Steam tugs were at the ready to tow out a laden ship the instant its holds were filled so another waiting vessel could take its place. Stevedores and longshoremen swarmed like an army of ants, trundling bound bundles of native wool up gangways or

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swinging barrels of vegetable oils in cargo nets up to the ships were waiting hands were ready to guide the cargo belowdecks.

His steamship passed what had to have been a mile of busy docks before reaching the passenger pier, its horn finally blaring a welcoming blast. There were only a handful of well-wishers waiting on the dock. Like so many ships arriving in South America, the Hamburg Süd-Amerika Line's venerable *São Paulo* was mostly transporting immigrants hoping to find a better life far from the strict social confines of their home countries. Here in Argentina, most were Spaniards or Italians, while Brazil to the north had always been popular with the Portuguese.

Dreissen hadn't made the full transatlantic crossing himself. He normally based out of Panama and had just concluded some business in Brazil and boarded the ship when it put in for coal at Belém on the Amazon River's southern bank. It had been a short cruise for he and his majordomo/bodyguard, Heinz Kohl.

Kohl stood a step behind Dreissen at the top of the gangplank, with a porter waiting behind him with a large, monogrammed steamer trunk on a wheeled handcart. Down on the dock idled a yellow Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost, courtesy of the Plaza Hotel. It was a beautiful summer day, so the luxury car's leather top was down. The driver stood by the vehicle, in gray livery with his peaked cap under his arm, and remained as motionless as a soldier at attention.

The gangway was soon lashed into place, and the ship's first officer was on hand to wish the first-class passengers well. The immigrants in steerage would be let out through a lower hatchway, but only after the better-heeled passengers had disembarked.

"Good to have you aboard, Herr Dreissen," the blond senior officer said. The gold piping on his tropical white uniform gleamed like jewelry.

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“I haven’t sailed aboard the *São Paulo* since just after the turn of the century. You do her a credit. She’s in great shape.”

“Our government agrees, Herr Dreissen. They’ve agreed to purchase her from the line.”

“Then I am glad to have enjoyed a final trip on the old girl. Good day.”

Dreissen was the first down the gangway and was settled in the Rolls by the time Kohl and the porter had fitted the trunk onto the rack over the rear bumper. It was a short ride to the Plaza Hotel on Calle Florida, but with so much of the streets ripped up for the construction of South America’s first subway, it took far longer than normal. He had to detour all the way around San Martín Square and approach the nine-story, Second Empire–style hotel from the side.

The manager himself waited at the entrance and greeted Dreissen with a warm smile and handshake. Like so much of BA, the Plaza Hotel and its staff wanted to make all their European guests feel right at home. The fact that the Argentines chose to copy the Old World more than the American model was a deliberate snub to their neighbors far to the north. Animosity toward the United States dated back to the founding of the nation and the implementation of the Monroe Doctrine a few years later.

“Welcome back, Herr Dreissen. I have your usual suite waiting for you.”

Dreissen responded in fluent Spanish, “You’re looking prosperous, Raoul.”

The hotelier rubbed his expanding belly with a grin. “These are good times for Argentina, so why shouldn’t I grow with our nation?”

A guest of Otto Dreissen’s status needn’t bother with formalities like check-in. The manager had the suite’s key in his pocket, and porters were already swarming over the rear of the hotel’s limousine to

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secure the trunk. Kohl watched the scene and scanned the bustling sidewalks for potential threats.

“If I may be so bold and to ask what brings you to BA, Herr Dreissen?” Raoul asked.

“The *verdammt* British got the concession to supply subway cars to the first lines being built, but we want to build the carriages and engines for the line the Lacroze Company is planning. I have meetings with their senior staff in two days.”

The Argentinian frowned. “The English have a near monopoly on all things railroad-related here. I wish you luck.”

They took the brass elevator to the top floor, and Raoul opened the suite’s heavy door. The windows looked out over the busy streets, but the view was obscured by smoke belching from a steam shovel chewing away at the street for the new underground. Dreissen noted the bottle of champagne chilling in a silver bucket and a bottle of Napoléon cognac on a tray with a cut-crystal snifter.

“Anything else for you, Herr Dreissen?” the manager asked as Kohl, and the porter maneuvered the large trunk into the suite. Kohl immediately set about unpacking his master’s things.

Dreissen popped the top of the Pol Roger’s and poured some of the frothing wine into a flute. “Might as well send up another bottle of this. The old *São Paulo* isn’t known for her wine cellars.”

“Of course.” With that, the hotelier and porter departed, well tipped by Kohl for his efforts.

Dreissen ate dinner in his suite and was cracking the second bottle of champagne when his expected guest knocked, and Kohl opened the door. The Argentine Foreign Minister wore a black suit but no hat. His name was Matias Guzman. Unlike the ruggedly built Dreissen, Guzman was willow thin, with a wisp of a mustache and the hands of a pianist. Like Dreissen, he had a formidable mind and was a strategic

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thinker. Their occasional games of chess usually left both men exhausted.

Dreissen stood from the dining table and strode over to shake his friend's hand. Guzman clasped the German's shoulder in an extra display of affection. "It is good to see you, Otto. It has been far too long since you've come to Paris of the Americas."

"When you work for my family, you go where they tell you."

They sat, and Dreissen poured some champagne.

"Am I to understand we are celebrating your recent success?" Guzman asked, saluting Dreissen with his flute.

"My success?"

"Rumors out of Manaus say you secured a lucrative contract for all of Don Antônio Oliveira's rubber harvest for this year and next."

"That is true. Essenwerks's new automotive division will now be able to supply all its own tires."

"There was also a rumor that the French representative from Michelin had the inside track for those contracts and that he was found dead, floating in the Amazon River. Rather lucky for you."

Dreissen said, deadpan, "I tend to make my own luck."

That statement, and all its potential meaning, hung in the air for several seconds. Guzman finally said, "What brings you to BA? Your telegram was rather cryptic. And why meet here under a false pretense rather than my office?"

"Does anyone know you're here?"

"Of course they do. My mistress and I had dinner here at the hotel. She's downstairs, sulking in our room, because I left her." Guzman saw a shadow of concern in his host's face. "This is Latin America. Friday nights are for the girlfriend, before you go to the country house to spend the weekend with the wife and kids. Surely you know this."

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“I do, but I’d rather no one can link the two of us being at the same hotel together.”

“You worry too much.” Guzman set his drink aside, then said, “Tell me why all the cloak-and-dagger.”

Dreissen ignored the inquiry. “I noticed the port is even busier now than during my last visit.”

Guzman leaned back, recognizing early on that their conversation may turn out as exhausting as one of their marathon chess matches. “It is. Exports are up three percent over last year. We are seeing a record number of immigrants coming from Europe to try their hand at a better life here.”

“And imports?” Dreissen knew well it was a touchy subject.

“Also up,” Guzman said a little tightly.

“And foreign investments? I see the subway is scheduled to open this year. It was built with English money, yes?”

“You know it was. And to answer your question we receive plenty of foreign capital.”

“Do you, though?” Dreissen asked, an eyebrow cocked over a bright gray eye. “Railroad construction is down dramatically because all the profitable lines have already been laid. You are now forced to offer very generous terms to lure investors to install track to the more remote reaches of the interior. The best lands have already been put under the plow and converted to agriculture. Meanwhile, few European investors are interested in bringing manufacturing to your country. You lack indigenous coal or petroleum, so it makes no sense for anyone to open an energy-intensive factory.”

The Minister’s mouth tightened. “Your point?”

“My point is, your investors have turned Argentina into exactly what they need, a market for their expensive manufactured goods while at the same time a supplier of good-quality but inexpensive beef,

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mutton, and other agricultural goods. You've gained your independence from Spain, certainly, but your nation remains a colonial state wholly dependent on Europe."

A long moment passed as they two men stared each other down. Guzman was the first to look away. "I don't think I would put our situation in quite those terms."

"Harsh, but essentially true. And now the other proverbial shoe is going to drop, and any hope you have of luring manufacturing here will wither on the vine."

Guzman nodded, knowing he'd lost the opening gambit. "The canal."

"The estimate is, it will open a year from this August."

"At that point they will succeed in effectively cutting off South America from international commerce as Africa had been bypassed by the building of the Suez Canal. You were the one to point that out to me, Otto."

"I recall our conversation. Except for South Africa, there is so little investment taking place there that it will remain colonized and impoverished for generations. The Suez Canal is why my family doesn't have a representative in Africa the way we do in America, Argentina, and in the Orient."

"And you're certain the same will happen here?"

"We've talked about it in the past," Dreissen reminded. "The newly discovered oil fields around Maracaibo in Venezuela may prove out, giving them something the states of the northern bloc will want, but for the rest of South America, the economies will contract markedly without outside investment. You'll be in a stranglehold from which there is no escape."

Guzman cursed the Americans in no uncertain terms and stood quickly, clearly agitated, for he knew his host was correct. The canal

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was going to isolate South America as if the entire continent ceased to exist. Clasp his hands behind his back, he paced the suite for a moment. Dreissen clearly saw how much Guzman loved his country, and the Foreign Minister was good enough at his job to see the inevitable failure it would become. He liked that Guzman's passions were so easily inflamed. Such men made an easier mark. He let the Minister pace two full laps across the sitting room carpet before throwing him an unexpected lifeline.

He lit a cheroot and said lazily, "There may be something that can be done to delay the completion of the canal and give you the time you need to attract enough capital to build up a manufacturing base."

Guzman's eyes glittered, and he swept back to the table. "What are you saying? Please don't tease me, old friend."

"At this point, let me just say certain technological breakthroughs have been made that would allow an interested party to severely delay the American construction effort, a matter of years rather than months."

"You can really do it?"

"Not me, but a team of men, trained and determined men. They can prevent the canal from opening long enough for you to strengthen Argentina's economy and ensure a future for your people that's far brighter than it would be otherwise."

"How quickly could this happen?" Guzman asked, knowing the sooner it took place, the better it would be. The canal's construction had been a concern for several potential investors he was currently courting.

"It would take some months to lay the groundwork for the operation," Dreissen admitted. "Security isn't particularly tight, but access is difficult. The Canal Authority is like a nation unto itself."

Guzman took a moment to recharge his glass and calm his nerves.

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Learning that all may not be lost had let his imagination and ambitions run wild. He gathered his wits, knowing that Dreissen had baited a trap with a bishop or rook while his queen lurked someplace on the board ready to pounce.

He said, "I understand why you want to keep it unofficial for now. I also see why you would bring this to me and, say, not the Brazilians. They are in no position to offer you much by way of compensation. I must ask what it is you want from me in return?"

"The rolling stock for the Lacroze line. I want Essenwerks to build the cars and engines and have exclusive contracts for any additional lines constructed below the streets of Buenos Aires."

"Done," Guzman agreed quickly and started to get to his feet, amazed that it was at such a low cost.

"The rest," Dreissen said, freezing Guzman, half standing, and the smile on his lips, "will be determined by members of our respective nation's diplomatic corps."

"This is something your government is behind?"

"It is something we made them aware of. Companies like Essenwerks and Krupp are so large that we need to keep the Kaiser and his Ministers aware of some of our activities. It is so they can manage the economy with the upmost efficiency. It is a partnership of industry and state. I believe the term is *synergy*. What is best for Essenwerks must also be best for the Fatherland, and vice versa."

"I see." Guzman's earlier delight had cooled. The subway contract covered Dreissen's expenses for the operation. The German government would want far more for giving his nation a future beyond that of an agrarian backwater. "Do you have any idea what the Kaiser wants for helping us?"

"It's not as bad as you think, Matias. I am about to tell you something under the strictest of confidence because it will help you at the

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bargaining table. When I first proposed this to the government, the Kaiser himself liked the idea of slowing the American's progress. He doesn't like their rapid ascent on the world stage since they defeated Spain and took Cuba and the Philippines. He would like to see them slowed in their rise. He tried and failed once before to interfere in their internal affairs and likes the opportunity to try again. My government will want much from you, no doubt, but they also want this to happen so the negotiations will succeed."

Guzman recognized the gift he'd just been given. "Thank you for sharing that."

"I will also share that they think so highly of this plan, they're embedding an agent in Panama to monitor our progress."

"You don't seemed so pleased by that."

"It is the price of working with the government, I suppose. They don't understand the motives of a capitalist. I am in the business of selling machines—trains, automobiles, aircraft. The more customers I can keep, the more my factories prosper. Synergy." He drew on his slender cigar and blew a cloud of fragrant smoke toward the ceiling. "If I may offer some advice . . . With the time this operation buys you, I recommend partnering with the Venezuelans and locking in contracts for their oil. If you have the fuels needed for an industrial economy by the time the canal finally opens, its presence won't matter. Argentina will be a destination port for trade with every civilized nation on earth."

2



San Diego, California

April 1914

AS THE CORONADO FERRY NEARED THE HALFWAY POINT ACROSS San Diego Bay, Isaac Bell turned to look back at the burgeoning city. The skyline was still modest, just a few buildings with multiple stories, but he knew the fate of the city—in fact, the entire West Coast—was about to undergo tremendous upheaval. Los Angeles, this town, and even his beloved San Francisco, still recovering from the earthquake and subsequent fire just seven years prior, were all going to experience unprecedented growth in the coming years.

It wasn't so hard to believe, he mused, that the fundamental nature of the entire country was going to change as a result of what was happening in Central America.

He glanced over his other shoulder at the two warships lying at anchor close to a dry dock facility. Already, the Navy was considering a new base along the California coast, and these two battlewagons, plus others, were exploring all the major harbors. The big, armored cruiser, USS *Maryland*, was over five hundred feet in length and had

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the distinct pale hull and khaki upperworks of Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet. Her four funnels were as straight as stovepipes, while her hull and turrets bristled with cannons. With her was a smaller escort destroyer, the USS *Whipple*. Around both ships, men rowed sleek longboats to deploy anti-torpedo netting that hung from hundreds of cork floats and dangled to below the bottom of each fighting ship's keel.

There was no fear of an enemy submarine lurking in these waters but rather a thorough test that there were no bottom obstructions to leave gaps in the ships' protective enclosure.

A short while later, the side-wheeler reached the docks of Coronado. The wood pilings stank of newly applied tar. The passengers disembarked before a horse and wagon loaded with silage was lead off the ferry. A pair of carriages provided by the hotel waited to take those passengers who were also its guests to their destination. The passengers headed for a day trip to Tent City, a family-friendly area of amusements and restaurants that had sprung up on the spit in recent years, and either paid the penny for the trolley or walked.

From the ferry landing on 1st Street it was a straight shot down Orange Avenue to Bell's destination. The Hotel del Coronado, known locally and affectionately as The Del, evoked images of every bride's fantasy wedding cake, with walls of white fondant and a red icing roof. The hotel had the ageless quality of a European castle but was so much brighter because of its whimsical turrets and countless gables and dormers and how it sat happily on sand rather than brooding on some mist-shrouded moor.

Bell couldn't help but smile at seeing the Queen Anne-style resort for the first time. He regretted not sharing this moment with his wife, Marion, who loved whimsy.

Off to the right, along the length of the Silver Strand, the spit of

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land connecting Coronado to the mainland, was Tent City, the nearly year-round entertainment destination, and while there were countless tents, many gaily striped, there were permanent buildings as well—bathhouses, restaurants, and wood-framed boardinghouses. A narrow-gauge electric trolley ran down the middle of the main street, its bell chiming merrily to roust pedestrians from its path.

Bell also noticed a boathouse built on pilings over Glorietta Bay. It looked like a miniature version of the main hotel. The carriage driver noticed his interest in the white and red building. He said, “The architect had the carpenters practice the Queen Anne style building the boathouse before turning them loose on the main hotel.”

“His idea worked,” Bell remarked. He looked back at the sprawling resort. “What an astonishing achievement.”

An army of uniformed bellhops appeared when the carriage reached the entrance, and soon Bell and a couple checking in at the same time as him were whisked into the hotel. The lobby was paneled in dark wood that made it feel intimate despite its vast size and lofty coffered ceiling. Registration was to the left, while a large staircase corkscrewing up around a cage elevator was ahead on the right. The buzz of conversation was constant, as guests mingled or made arrangements for the next day’s activities with the concierge.

While the rooms overlooking the central courtyard, with its jungle-like landscaping, were considered the premier accommodations, Bell requested an outside room so he could sit on the veranda and watch the ever-changing ocean. Not that there would be much time today. Tomorrow was another story. Marion was going to join him for two blissful weeks at The Del, a long-overdue vacation.

A bellhop saw Isaac up to his room, discussing the hotel’s amenities, including the saltwater swimming pool and the fact that each of the hotel’s many guest bathrooms featured hot and cold salt and fresh

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water and that The Del was one of the largest electrified buildings in the country when it was built. He boasted it was also home to the very first Christmas tree outside decorated with electric lights.

After tipping the man and seeing him to the door, Bell pulled a fresh shirt from his leather grip, a towel from the pile of linens, and his dopp kit. He walked down the hall to one of the baths, passing a dark slender man who Bell soon discovered had left the shared washroom a mess. He looked back to see the man enter a room and considered confronting the breach of etiquette but decided it wasn't worth the effort.

At the basin counter, Bell striped to the waist, then cleaned up at the sink, using warm fresh water, then switched to hot saltwater to lather and shave his face. It left his skin feeling tight. He regarded his reflection for just a moment. He was not yet thirty-five but his face looked years younger, with fine features, wide-set blue eyes, and a wave of blond hair he was now wearing slicked back. He worked a dollop of cream into his hair and smoothed it down. He also took a moment to trim his mustache with scissors from his dopp. He checked the Cartier Santos wristwatch that was a gift from Marion. She'd gotten it for him in England following their near-fateful trip aboard the *Titanic*. He quickly donned the fresh shirt.

A tall figure in a tan suit loitered outside his room as he made his way back down the hall. Seeing Bell, the man doffed his boater and held the stiff hat in his hand. He had a lean, eager face, but the suspicious eyes of all Van Dorn detectives.

"Sorry, Mr. Bell, when the bellhop told me you were here, I was at the boathouse."

"Don't worry about it, Renny. Come on in." Bell keyed open his door and held it open for the younger man. "How's everything looking?"

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Bell worked on his tie, without need of a mirror, while his advance man from the Agency's Los Angeles office, Renny Hart, gave his report.

"The hotel has been cooperative and allowed me to speak with any of the guests whose reservations were made after Senator Densmore set up this meeting with Courtney Talbot. They're all legit." Bell opened his mouth to ask a question, but the younger man held up a finger. "To be on the safe side, I also checked guests who made their reservation a week prior to Densmore's summit."

Bell nodded. He expected no less from any of the men working for Joseph Van Dorn, the legendary founder of his namesake agency.

He shrugged into the leather shoulder rig with a holster for his Colt 1911 .45 caliber pistol and a separate case for two spare magazines. A snap loop securing the bottom of the holster to his belt ensured it would fit discretely against his body no matter how he moved. The cream linen jacket he pulled on was tailored so that the weapon's outline was further obscured. Without the shoulder rig, the suit looked ill fitted, but, with it on, only the most sharp-eyed observer would know Bell was armed.

"Where's the Senator now?" Bell asked

"He's out fishing, on a charter from the marina. That's why I was at the boathouse. Waiting for him to return."

"And the Major?"

"Talbot checked in about an hour before you. He's in his room."

"Okay. This meeting should be a routine briefing. Talbot doesn't know I'm here, but it shouldn't matter. I want you to look at this whole thing as a training exercise. Van Dorns are often hired to act as bodyguards and provide security. Your supervisor says you don't have much experience at either, so stay vigilant but discrete."

"You can count on me, Mr. Bell."