PROLOGUE

A Smoke-filled Room

1912


The Marmon Speedster Parked in a Shadow

THE MARMON 32 SPEEDSTER PARKED ON WALL STREET IN A shadow between two lampposts.

Roundsman O'Riordan took notice. It was the dead of night. Orders said let no one bother the bigwig politicians and office-holders who were horse-trading upstairs in the Congdon Building. And the auto had a clear shot at the limousines waiting for them at the curb.

Its side curtains were fogged by the damp rolling off the harbor. O'Riordan had to get close to see inside. The driver was a pleasant surprise, a beautiful lady with straw-blond hair, and the cop relaxed a little. But all he could see of the gent beside her were steely contours. Still, you couldn't rap your stick on a Marmon 32 and tell the swells to move along like they were bums on the sidewalk, so with his right hand by his pistol, he tapped the side curtain lightly, like touching his glass to the mahogany to signal the bartender of a classy joint he was ready for another but didn't mean to be rushing him.

A big hand with long, nimble fingers slid the curtain open. O'Riordan glimpsed a snow-white cuff, diamond links, and the black sleeve of a dress coat. The hand seized his in a strong grip.

"Paddy O'Riordan. Fancy meeting you here."

Raked by searching blue eyes, the roundsman recognized the gold mane, the thick flaxen mustache, and the no-nonsense expression that could only belong to Isaac Bell—chief investigator of the Van Dorn Detective Agency.

He touched his stick to his helmet. "Good evening, Mr. Bell. I didn't recognize you in the shadows."

"What are you doing out so late?" Bell asked.

O'Riordan started to answer before Bell's grin told him it was a joke. Policemen were supposed to be out late.

The detective nodded at the limousines. "Big doings."

"Judge Congdon's got a special waiting at Grand Central. Tracks cleared to Chicago. And I'm sorry to tell you I have me orders to clear the street. Straight from the captain."

Bell did not seem to hear. "Paddy, I want you to meet my wife— Marion, may I present Roundsman O'Riordan, former scourge of Staten Island pirates back when he was in the Harbor Squad. There wasn't a wharf rat in New York who didn't buy drinks for the house the night Paddy came ashore."

She reached across her husband with an ungloved hand that seemed to glow like ivory. O'Riordan took it carefully in his enormous fist and bowed low.

"A privilege to meet you, marm. I've known your good husband many years in the line of duty. And may I say, marm, that Mrs. O'Riordan and I have greatly enjoyed your moving picture shows."

She thanked him in a musical voice that would sing in his mind for days.

Chief Inspector Bell said, "Well, we better not keep you from your rounds."

O'Riordan touched his stick to his helmet again. If a crack private detective chose to canoodle with his own wife in a dark auto on Wall Street in the middle of the night—orders be damned.

"I'll tell the boys not to disturb you."

But Bell motioned him closer and whispered, "I wouldn't mind if they kept an eye out if I have to leave her alone a moment."

"They'll be drawin' straws for the privilege."

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BACKSLAPPING POLITICIANS burst from the building and converged on the smaller of the limousines, a seven-passenger Rambler Knickerbocker.

Isaac Bell opened the curtain to hear them.

"Driver! Straight to Grand Central."

"Don't love handing the vice presidency to a louse like Congdon, but that's politics."

"Money talks."

The Rambler Knickerbocker drove off. Senior men emerged next. Moving more slowly, they climbed into the second limousine, an enormous Cunningham Model J, hand-built at great expense to Judge James Congdon's own design. To Bell's ear they sounded less reconciled than resigned.

"Congdon has most of the delegates he needs, and those he doesn't, he'll buy."

"If only our candidate hadn't died."

"Always the wrong man."

Isaac Bell waited for the Cunningham to turn the corner. A police motorcycle escort stationed on Broadway clattered after it. "If James Congdon captures vice president," Bell said, "the president's life won't be worth a plugged nickel."

He kissed Marion's lips. "Thank you for making me look harmless to the cops. Are you sure you won't go home?"

"Not this time," she said firmly, and Bell knew there was no dissuading her. This time was different.

Although he was dressed for the theater, he left his silk topper on the backseat and donned a broad-brimmed hat with a low crown instead.

Marion straightened his tie.

Bell said, "I've always wondered why you never ask me to be careful."

"I wouldn't want to slow you down."

Bell winked. "Not likely."

He left his wife with a smile. But as he crossed Wall Street, his expression hardened, and the warmth seeped from his eyes.

Joseph Van Dorn, the large, bearded founder of the agency, was waiting, deep in shadow and still as ice. He stood watch as Bell picked open the lock on the outside door, and followed him in, where Bell picked another lock on a steel door marked *Mechanical Room*. Inside it was warm and damp. An orderly maze of thick pipes passed through rows of steam-conditioning valves. Van Dorn compared the control wheels to an engineer's sketch he unfolded from his inside pocket.

Isaac Bell climbed back up to the street and went around to the front of the building. His evening clothes elicited a respect-

ful nod from the doorman. As the politicians said, Money talked.

"Top floor," he told the yawning elevator runner.

"I thought they were all done up there."

"Not quite."

BOOK ONE

COAL

Gleason Mine No. 1,
Gleasonburg,
West Virginia

1902


Gleason Mine No. 1

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HE WAS A FRESH-FACED YOUTH WITH GOLDEN HAIR. BUT something about him looked suspicious. A coal cop watching the miners troop down the rails into the mouth of Gleason Mine No. 1 pointed him out to his boss, a Pinkerton detective.

The young miner towered over the foreigners the company imported from Italy and Slovenia, and was even taller than the homegrown West Virginia boys. But it was not his height that looked out of place. Nor was his whipcord frame unusual. The work was hard, and it cost plenty to ship food to remote coalfields. There was no free lunch in the saloons that lined the muddy Main Street.

A miner clomping along on a wooden peg tripped on a crosstie and stumbled into another miner on crutches. The golden-haired youth glided to steady both, moving so effortlessly he seemed to float. Many were maimed digging coal. He stood straight on both legs and still possessed all his fingers.

"Don't look like no poor worker to me," the coal cop ventured with a contemptuous smirk.

"Watching like a cat, anything that moves," said the Pinkerton, who wore a bowler hat, a six-gun in his coat, and a blackjack strapped to his wrist.

"You reckon he's a striker?"

"He'll wish he ain't."

"Gangway!"

An electric winch jerked the slack out of a wire between the rails. Miners, laborers, and doorboys jumped aside. The wire dragged a train of coal cars out of the mine and up a steep slope to the tipple, where the coal was sorted and dumped into river barges that towboats pushed down the Monongahela to Pittsburgh.

The tall young miner exchanged greetings with the derailer-switch operator. If the wire, which was shackled to a chain bridle on the front car, broke, Jim Higgins was supposed to throw the switch to make the train jump the tracks before the hundred-ton runaway plummeted back down into the works.

"The cops are watching you," Higgins warned.

"I'm no striker."

"All we're asking," Higgins answered mildly, "is to live like human beings, feed our families, and send our kids to school."

"They'll fire you."

"They can't fire us all. The coal business is booming and labor is scarce."

Higgins was a brave man. He had to be to ignore the fact that the mineowners would stop at nothing to keep the union out of West Virginia. Men fired for talking up the union—much less calling a strike—saw their wives and children kicked out of the shanties they rented from the Gleason Consolidated Coal & Coke Company. And when Gleason smoked out labor organiz-

ers, the Pinkertons rousted them back to Pennsylvania, beaten bloody.

"Higgins!" shouted a foreman. "I told you to oil that winch."

"I'm supposed to watch the derailer when the cars are coming up."

"Do like I tell you. Oil that winch every hour."

"Who's going to stop a runaway if the wire breaks?"

"Get up there and oil that winch, damn you!"

Jim Higgins abandoned his post and ran two hundred yards up the steep incline to the winch engine, past the cars of coal climbing heavily to the tipple.

The tall young miner ducked his head to enter the mouth of the mine—a timber-braced portal in the side of the mountain—and descended down a sloping tunnel. He had boned up on mine engineering to prepare for the job. Strictly speaking, this tracked haulageway was not a *tunnel*, which by definition had to pass completely through a mountain, but an *adit*. *Aditus*, he recalled from his boarding school Latin, meant "access." Once in, there was no way out but to turn around and go back.

Where he entered a gallery that intersected and split off from the haulageway, he hailed the small boy, who opened a wooden door to channel the air from the ventilators.

"Hey, Sammy. Feller from the telegraph office told me your Pirates beat Brooklyn yesterday. Eight-to-five."

"Wow! Thanks for telling me, mister."

Sammy had never been near a major-league ballpark—never been farther than ten miles from this hollow where the Gleason Company struck a rich bed of the Pittsburgh Seam that underlay Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. But his father had been a brakeman on the B & O, until he died in a wreck, and

used to bring home stories of big-city games that he would illustrate with cigarette baseball cards of famous players.

The young man slipped Sammy a colorful chromolithograph of Rochester first baseman Harry O'Hagan. In August, O'Hagan had accomplished a miracle, still on the lips of every man and boy in America—a one-man triple play.

"Bet New York's kicking themselves for trading Harry," he said, then asked in a lower voice, "Have you seen Roscoe?"

Roscoe was a Gleason spy disguised as a laborer.

The boy nodded in the same direction the young man was headed.

He followed the gallery, which sloped deeper into the mountain for hundreds of yards, until it stopped at the face of the seam. There he went to work as a helper, shoveling the chunks of coal picked, drilled, and dynamited from the seam by the skilled miners. He was paid forty cents for every five-ton car he loaded during twelve-hour shifts six days a week.

The air was thick with coal dust. Swirling black clouds of it dimmed the light cast by electric bulbs. The low ceiling was timbered by props and crosspieces every few feet to support the mountain of rock and soil that pressed down on the coal. The seam creaked ominously, squeezed above and below by pressure from roof and floor.

Here in the side tunnel, off the main rail track, the coal cars were pulled by mules that wore leather bonnets to protect their heads. One of the mules, a mare with the small feet and long ears that the miners believed indicated a stronger animal, suddenly stopped. Eustace McCoy, a big West Virginian who had been groaning about his red-eye hangover, cursed her and jerked her bridle. But she planted her legs and refused to budge, ears flickering at the creaking sound.

Eustace whipped off his belt and swung it to beat her with the buckle end.

The tall blond youth caught it before it traveled six inches.

"Sonny, get out of my way!" Eustace warned him.

"I'll get her moving. It's just something spooked her."

Eustace, who was nearly as tall and considerably broader, balled his fist and threw a haymaker at the young man's face.

The blow was blocked before it could connect. Eustace cursed and swung again. Two punches sprang back at him. They landed in elegant combination, too quick to follow with the eye and packed with concentrated power. Eustace fell down on the rails, the fight and anger knocked out of him.

The miners exchanged astonished glances.

"Did you see that?"

"Nope."

"Neither did Eustace McCoy."

The young man spoke gently to the mule and she pulled the car away. Then he helped the fallen laborer to his feet and offered his hand when Eustace acknowledged with a lopsided grin, "Ain't been hit that hard since I borrowed my old man's bottle. Whar'd you larn to throw that one-two?"

"Oregon," the young man lied.

His name was Isaac Bell.

Bell was a Van Dorn Agency private detective under orders to ferret out union saboteurs. This was his first solo case, and he was supposed to be operating in deep disguise. To ensure secrecy, the mineowner hadn't even told the company cops about his investigation. But the awe on the miners' faces told Bell he had just made a bad mistake.

The year was 1902. Van Dorn detectives were earning a reputation as valuable men who knew their business, and the agency

motto—We never give up! Never!—had begun to be muttered, remorsefully, inside the nation's penitentiaries. Which meant that young Isaac Bell had to admit that he was very likely the only Van Dorn in the entire outfit so puddingheaded that he would ruin his disguise by showing off fancy boxing tricks.

Roscoe, the Gleason spy, was eyeing him thoughtfully. That might not matter too much. Bell reckoned he could fix that somehow. But any saboteur who caught wind of him championing a poor, dumb mule with a Yale man's mastery of the manly art of self-defense would not stay fooled for long.

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"GANGWAY!"

The exhausted men climbing out of the mine at the end of their shift shuffled off the tracks. The winch jerked the slack out of the wire, and twenty coal cars emerged behind them and trundled up the steep incline to the tipple. The train was almost to the top when the chain bridle that attached the wire to the front car broke with a bang as loud and sharp as a gunshot.

The train stopped abruptly.

One hundred tons of coal hung motionless for a heartbeat.

Then it started rolling backwards toward the mouth of the mine.

Jim Higgins, who was hurrying from the winch engine to his post at the derailer switch, dropped his oilcan and ran as fast as he could. But the train was gathering speed. It rolled ahead of him, and before he could reach the switch, twenty cars hurtled through it straight down the main line.

Isaac Bell charged after it. He spotted a brake lever on the last

car and forged alongside, looking for handholds to jump to. The coal train accelerated and pulled ahead of him. As the last car whipped past, he leaped onto its rear coupler and caught his balance by clapping both hands around the brake lever. He threw his weight against the steel bar, slamming curved brake shoes against the spinning wheels.

Metal screeched. The lever bucked in his hands. Sparks fountained skyward. Bell pushed the brake with every sinew in his body. Swift and purposeful action and determined muscle and bone appeared to slow the runaway. Several more quick-thinking men ran alongside in hopes of leaping on the brakes of the other cars.

But the weight of the coal was too great, the momentum too strong.

Suddenly, with a bang almost as explosive as the parting bridle chain, the iron pin connecting the lever to the brake shoes snapped. The lever swung freely. Bell, shoving it with all his might, lost his balance. The rails and crossties blurred under him as the train accelerated. Only lightning reflexes and a powerful grip on the top rim of the coal car saved him from falling.

The car swayed violently as it gained speed. Being the last car, unanchored by any behind it, the same lateral forces that cracked a whip slammed it sideways against the ventilator house that stood close by the tracks. The impact sheared its pillars, and the building collapsed on the giant fan that drove fresh air into the mine. A shattered roof beam jammed its blades.

"Jump!" miners yelled.

Before Bell could choose a direction in which there was room to land, the train stormed through the mouth and into the narrow confines of the haulageway, where to jump would be to

smash flesh and blood against timber, stone, steel, and coal. Bell swung his feet onto the coupler and attempted to brace for what was going to be a very sudden stop when they hit bottom.

The coal train swayed in wider and wider arcs with the ever-increasing speed of its descent. The rear car to which Bell clung slammed against shoring timbers, splintering them, and crumbled pillars of coal the miners had left standing to support the ceiling. The front end, nineteen cars ahead of Bell, bore down on a wooden air door that Sammy the doorboy had shut behind it moments earlier as it ascended.

Sammy was addled by twelve hours of work in near darkness and terrified by the roar of the juggernaut hurtling toward him. But he stood at his post, desperately trying to open the door to let it pass. Like a tycoon brushing a beggar out of his way with a haughty hand, the train flung him against the wall, smashed the air door to flinders, and gained speed.