

"A helpful wind."

"You fought in the Philippines – Las Pinas, San Fernando, Guagua, Bacolor, and Malolos. All with distinction against a very determined enemy. A man of backbone."

Cecile looked at him.

"So they used to say," said Barratt, quietly.

She continued, "By June 1900 you reached the rank of Major. That's a meteoric rise."

Barratt shifted in his chair. "My father was a friend of William McKinley, he supported the Republican Party, and there was an election coming..." Barratt shrugged.

"Well, McKinley's dead," said Cecile, "...Then in June 1900 you were sent to the Boxer Rebellion in China". Cecile put down the paper and leaned forward, elbows on the desk, hands clasped, "What happened in China, Major?"

Barratt looked at the floor and took a heavy breath, "I can't tell you."

For a moment, the fury left Cecile's face, "Won't tell me?"

Barratt shook his head, "I can't tell you, I don't know. Only what I'm told. Rolly knew what happened, he was there, but we didn't see each other after China and there was no court of inquiry, my father saw to that."

"It was said that you panicked during the assault on Tsientsin and ran from the front. Does that strike a chord?"

Barratt shrugged, "If that's what they say. I was unconscious for five days."

Cecile tucked away the sheet of paper. "You haven't seen your father since you mustered out."

He stiffened, "That's really none of your business."

Barratt hadn't meant to be rude and he immediately regretted the outburst, but Mrs. Leversham didn't appear to be disturbed at all.

"You're quite right. It is *your* business. My son's death is my business."

"It was a bad way to go. I'm sorry. He was a good man."

Rolly HAD been a good man, and a good friend. Not a natural-born warrior yet he'd taken the soft clay of childhood and molded it into the duty and courage of a soldier by determination and will.

Even so, something niggled at the back of Barratt's mind. What he did know, and what no one had yet mentioned, in the memorial service or the dead man's biography or the newspaper reports was that Rolly Leversham had run away from home to join the army.

He realized that Cecile was talking again, a bundle of opened envelopes in her hand: "From his letters, he thought you were a good man, too"

Barratt shrugged.

Suddenly, the woman was animated, her hands moving in short, sharp gestures. A rage was building: "Our government policy in the Philippines would have shamed our forefathers. And they've treated you men atrociously and the public treats you like pariahs."

"The yellow press..."

"Damn the yellow press. William Randolph Hearst doesn't make policy, the President does." Said Cecile sharply.

"If the President gets his way..."

Mrs. Leversham's voice softened, as if talking to a child in a way that Barratt found irritating: "Roosevelt will do nothing for you. He's is a wonderful man in private, but he will sell his former comrades-in-arms down the Potomac if it means one vote in Nantucket. He's a ruthless and treacherous little... bar-room brawler."

Barratt raised his voice slightly and interrupted her. "Mrs. Leversham. You spent a lot of money to find me. You paid a lot of money to get me here. I think it's time to tell me why."

She sat back in her chair again and nodded. "Very well. The stories the War Department have given about the affair in Samar aren't satisfactory."

Barratt leaned forward: "In what way?"

"It's not just me, Barratt. There are thousands of mothers grieving for their sons all across America. A hundred dead sons every month. How many tears is that? And none of us are being told the truth..."

Cecile pushed the pile of papers towards Barratt. "I've had enough. And I'm lucky enough to have the money and influence so many other mothers don't have. These are my son's letters. Read them. Go to Samar. I want to know what happened. And I want it fully. There are stories of our men doing dreadful, awful things on that island. I want to know if my son was one of them"

Barratt thought for a moment. Stories of Samar surfaced in the press every few days, tales of men slaughtering innocents on a whim, woman and children whose only fault was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. President Roosevelt and his Secretary of War, Elihu Root tried to pooh-pooh the whole issue but Barratt did not. He had seen what a frightened man could do in a moment of panic. He'd seen for himself the ghastly inhuman performance hatred inspires in men no longer bound by law or conscience. But the numbers being talked about in Samar were enormous, and the atrocities unthinkable. Had Rolly been one of those men?

"Is that really wise? You may discover something you don't want to know. If Rolly..."

Now Cecile shrugged, almost matter-of-factly: "Then I will find it possible to forgive the men who murdered him, but I *will* curse the men who sent him there to die."

It wouldn't be an easy task: "They won't let a civilian in there and the army won't have me back"

Cecile waved away his objection, "You forget who I am. You will report to the Adjutant General's office. You are now attached on special assignment. You will be a civilian but you will be required to wear a uniform. It is arranged"

Barratt laughed, "Adjutant General's office? I don't know a thing about law!"

Mrs. Leversham's eyes were level and steely: "This isn't about law, it's about justice. You will be paid five hundred dollars a month for your expenses; you can hire anyone you need. I'd suggest Genady Prickel; he's reliable and resourceful. Well?"

Samar. Bloody Samar. "That island is a war zone, and a nasty one. Bad territory. I loved Rolly like a brother and they say he saved my life in China, but no amount of money is enough to get me go there right now."

Cecile heaved a sigh: "You misunderstand, Major Barratt. The money is purely for your expenses and if more is needed, simply wire."

With a small golden key she opened a desk drawer and slid out an envelope, placing it on the table between them.

It was an ordinary envelope, except for a red wax seal holding the flap and Rolly's signature, and another signature that Barratt didn't recognize, across the flap. The seal itself was impressed with what appeared to be a design of two arms and a cross. It meant nothing to Barratt.

Cecile was speaking: "Every now and then, Rolly took a boat from Matigan to Tacloban on the next island to send and collect the men's mail and the company supplies. It was a round trip of a day and a half. On the 16th of the month, Rolly went to Tacloban and sent some family letters. On the 18th he was killed in the massacre. This was sent inside another envelope on the 21st. We don't know who sent it. I had one copy, which Rolly asked me to burn. It is about you and about China. You will want to read it."

Barratt knew enough to recognize a rock and a hard place when he saw one. He put the elegant Mrs. Leversham in the same pigeonhole as Lady Luck. He now knew the price of his redemption.

"When I've found it what happened to Rolly."

Cecile put the sealed envelope back in its drawer and locked it away with the golden key.

"I'm delighted we fully understand each other."

## Chapter Five

### *One of Mrs. Leversham's Concerns*

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**S**unset was long gone by the time Barratt climbed aboard the 7.45 Quincy-Brentwood train. He made just one stop in Quincy itself, to buy a half-dozen cheroots, before boarding and settling himself in a plush seat with the comforting thought that he was probably the richest man on the train, with a draft for \$1,500 against a San Francisco bank folded and nestled safely in his shoe and the best part of the \$1,000 delivered by Genady Prickel.

Fifteen minutes into the journey he made his way out to the small oil-lit platform at the tail end of the carriage, where he found a couple of cane chairs, sat down, and lit one of the cheroots. He breathed deeply, mixing the pungent Havana perfume with the heavy, ashy, sulfur of the train's smoke as it rattled and rocked through the darkened New England countryside.

The silver smoke rose in a curl, caught the slipstream and vanished like a magician's dove. It occurred to him that he needed a drink and gave a mild curse that he'd overlooked buying a fifth at the station. Maybe there was some on the train. Surely it wouldn't, couldn't be dry.

A little cluster of sparks loosened themselves from the tip of his cheroot and swirled skywards to the kohl-black sky above and disappeared among the stars

"Scary, isn't she?" said a familiar voice as Genady Prickel emerged from the car behind him. "Very scary".

Prickel, still in his tan coat and nodded towards the vacant chair. "May I?"

"Go ahead."

The detective settled himself as Barratt offered a cheroot and a tin of windproof matches. Prickel took one of long, thin cylinders of tobacco, struck a match and puffed his cheroot in its blaze.

"Don't you find Mrs. Leversham daunting?" asked Prickel, easing himself back in the chair.

"Charming, but daunting."

"She's your client, you're paid to be daunted," said Barratt, relaxed, enjoying the cool air, soaking up its memory and putting it into a corner of his mind to be remembered far away.

"Quite attractive, though, don't you think?"

"She's a tigress. Someone's killed one of her cubs and she wants blood."

Prickel sucked in his cheroot a little too and suppressed a cough that nearly choked his words

"You think its revenge she's after?"

"She wants to feel settled that her son died honorably, that's all. What any parent wants. But with all the stuff in the newspapers, and the Anti-Imperialist League..."

"The League" huffed Prickel, "What a bunch of traitors. They should be strung up."

"Mark Twain, too?"

Prickel silently gazed up at the stars until he finally broke a soft silence. "Do the stars look the same there, in the islands?"

"You'll find out."

"And what will you find out? You've made up your mind, of course."

Barratt looked at him with surprise.

"You'll spend a few weeks pottering around, maybe talk to some star-showered general or two, then you'll come home and tell her what she wants to hear. All you have to do is read a few newspapers, take it from there."

Barratt's eyes were even and cold. "Rolly Leversham was my friend. If he'd turned into some blood-crazed lunatic, stringing human ears around his neck, she wants a friend to tell her straight."

Prickel gave a sceptical laugh: "A necklace of human ears?"

There was no answer.

"Human ears?"