

As Time Goes By

by Michael Walsh

(Adapted book. Intermediate level)

CHAPTER ONE

Goodbye Casablanca

The smoke from the gun" had cleared, but the fog had not. The noise of the police cars disappeared, and the silence between the two men was interrupted only by the sound of the wind.

On that last December night in 1941, Casablanca airport was dark and full of recent memories. Although Louis was in his usual unsure state of mind, the tall, thin, hard-faced American felt a new and strange sense of calm and certainty about what he had just done and what he was going to do. Rick had shot the German officer, Major Strasser, to make sure that Victor and Ilsa boarded the airplane to Portugal. Now he was going to follow them to join the European resistance against the Germans.

Captain Louis Renault, short, sharp as always in his black French Chief of Police uniform, was walking softly;

he always preferred, if possible, to leave no mark on his surroundings. He turned to Rick.

"Well, my friend, Victor Laszlo and Ilsa Lund are on their way to Lisbon. I cannot imagine why you decided to help them. Miss Lund is an unusually beautiful woman!"

Rick had loved just two women in his life and Ilsa was one of them. Louis loved all women, and, of course, money.

Rick looked down at the little man. "Yes, but why didn't you have me arrested? I shot a Gestapo officer."

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I like you. Maybe it's because I didn't like Strasser." Louis looked at him. "You're still in love with her, aren't you?"

"That's not your business."

Their path was taking them deeper into the darkness, and Louis wondered what Rick was planning to do next. But suddenly there it was: the shape of a large car parked at the far end of the airport. As they got closer to it, they could see Sam at the wheel.

"Everything OK, Boss?" Sam asked anxiously from the driver's seat.

"Yes, just fine. Now hurry. We have to be at Port Lyautey before morning light."

The small airfield at Port Lyautey, north of Rabat, was about two hundred kilometers away... two hundred kilometers of very bad road. But Rick's car, Louis noted,

was like a beautiful woman, with the right lines, the curves, and the power.

Sam Waters put his foot down and the car sped into the night. Rick smoked silently. Louis worried. Their three guns were out of sight.

"We're going to need exit visas," Rick said after a time.

"Yes," said Louis. "I believe I'm still responsible for such things in this part of the world. Here we are: two exit visas. They just need a signature, which fortunately is still my responsibility as well."

"We need three."

"Three?"

"One for me, one for you, and one for Sam."

Louis counted them, and signed. Rick took out a bottle, drank, and offered it to Louis.

Sam had many fine qualities. He was loyal, the best black pianist and singer in Casablanca (in fact the best, black or white), an excellent fisherman, a wonderful cook, and not a bad driver. But he did not drink at the Café Américain, he did not drink with Rick, and normally he did not drink alone. Rick didn't offer him the bottle. He put it away and took out a cigarette.

The letter from Ilsa was in the same pocket. Sam had given it to him before he left the club for the airport, before he killed Strasser. Rick couldn't read the letter in the

darkness, but he didn't need to. He lit the cigarette and remembered her words:

My dearest Richard,

If you are reading this letter, it means that I have escaped with Victor... You must believe me... When we met before in Paris,

I thought Victor was dead... I never questioned the fact that I was free to love you... Some women search all their lives for a man to love. I have found two... I cannot be sure that we shall meet again. But unlike last time, I can hope... In Lisbon we shall stay at the Hotel Aviz... Please come if you can. If not for me, then for Victor. We both need you. Ilsa.

"Listen!" Louis had turned the car radio on, and his voice suddenly interrupted Rick's thoughts. Rick's French wasn't good, but even he understood that in far-off Hawaii the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor.

"Boss, we've got trouble," said Sam.

"I know that!" Rick shouted, as he tried to understand the news on the radio.

"I mean," said Sam, looking in his mirror, "that we have company," and he put his foot right down to the floor.

Louis and Rick turned, and through the fog they saw a pair of yellow lights. A bullet hit the back of their car.

Rick reached across the seat for his gun. "Get down, Louis. I've seen a man with his head blown off and it's not a pretty sight." Louis sank down in his seat.

Sam was slowly increasing the distance between the cars.

"Sam, see if you can find a place to turn off the road. Better to be behind them than in front." The progress was slow. "Turn off," shouted Rick again.

When there were about three hundred meters between the cars, Sam showed his real driving ability. He suddenly drove the car off the road and pulled it around in a complete circle. Rick fired at the passing car. The bullet went through the driver's left eye, and they had time to see the shocked face of the German gunman in the back of the big, black Mercedes before it struck a tree. The gunman sent two wild shots into the air, and then the final explosion came. An enormous orange ball of flame shot up into the sky.

"Nice shooting, Boss." But Sam had seen Rick in action before.

Louis hadn't. "Where did you learn to shoot, Rick?" he asked. "And why did you never go back to New York? Did you run away with church money or have a relationship with a senator's wife - or did you kill someone? When are you going to tell me?"

"I told you before, Louis, maybe a bit of all three. Now, forget it. Let's go. We have to catch an airplane."

The cigarettes and the bottle came out again, and Sam drove away from the burning Mercedes. Rick and Louis were left to their thoughts in the back seat.

Louis thought about himself. He had always enjoyed the gambling, the women, and the money. He had also gambled successfully on working with the Nazis in Casablanca, but after Strasser's death, it was time to leave.

Rick's thoughts returned to Ilsa, who had appeared in his life again two days ago. (Was it only two days? A lot had happened in those two days.) Was he following Ilsa now, or was he following Victor's belief in resistance to the Germans? He thought he knew the answer.

They had arrived at Lyautey. Rick could not get Ilsa out of his mind. He thought about Lois, too, before the car stopped at the airfield. Lois had been his first love, but New York seemed a long way away and a long time ago.

CHAPTER TWO

Roses and Guns

Rick had first met Lois ten years earlier, on a summer day in New York, in 1931. He was on a train, riding from his mothers apartment to a downtown store which sold her favorite Jewish food.

Rick lived alone and had a number of jobs. Most of them were not quite legal and didn't pay well. He dreamed of running his own club one day. Everything about nightlife was attractive to him. He came alive at night: he loved the music, the sound of glasses and drinks being poured, the card games, and the money! He didn't speak much. He wanted other people to think he was a hard young man. But he traveled across the city every week to get his mother something special to eat on the weekend.

Opposite him on the train was a very pretty young woman, about eighteen years old. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, with long black hair and smooth white skin. It was even hotter than usual that summer, and, as Rick was looking at her, she fainted and fell to the floor. He jumped up to help her. It was another kilometer before she opened her eyes. They were the most beautiful eyes of pure blue. Rick forgot his stop.

"Are you OK, Miss?" Rick asked.

She turned her head and looked into his face. "Thanks for helping me," she said, and smiled. "My name's Lois."

"I'm Pack Baline."

Suddenly, Lois grasped Rick's arm and said anxiously, "I've missed my stop!"

"Me too," said Rick.

They got out at the next stop and walked back.

"Do you have a job? What do you do?" she asked.

"Oh, this and that," replied Rick.

"So you're unemployed. My father has jobs for people."

"What's his name?"

"Have you ever heard of Solly Horowitz?"

Rick was more than a little surprised. Solly Horowitz was one of the most successful gangsters in all of New York. He owned several night clubs and ran a number of other businesses. It was important that the police looked the other way, and Solly had plenty of experience in helping them. Solly was famous. In fact, Rick wanted to be Solly some day!

They arrived at the Horowitz apartment. It didn't look like a rich man's home, and Solly didn't look like a rich man. He was short and wide, not fat but powerful. He wore an old blue suit, a white shirt with the top button undone, and a tie hanging loosely. It was a big, loud tie with bright flowers. Maybe the little yellow ones were bits of egg from his breakfast. He had taken his shoes off, and Rick noticed two holes in the socks. He supposed the feet were clean,

but certainly Solly didn't look like a successful gangster. That was, of course, exactly how Solly wanted people to see him.

"This is Mr. Baline," Lois told him. "It was so hot in the train that I fainted. He helped me."

Solly looked at Rick and said, "I'll help any man who helps my daughter. Are you married?"

"No."

"Do you like music?"

"If it's good."

"Do you have a good head for business?"

"It depends on the business."

"Can you use a gun?"

"No, but I can learn."

"Do you want to make love to my daughter?"

"No," lied Rick.

"Dad! Stop!" shouted Lois.

"Good," said Solly, "because you can forget that. I'm keeping her for a richer guy than you. Are you looking for a job?"

"Maybe," said Rick.

"Nightclub?"

"I like clubs."

"See me tomorrow. This address." He gave Rick a piece of paper. Rick didn't have enough money to go out and buy expensive roses for Lois, but he was in love.

* * *

The milk trucks came over the hill at six-fifteen in the morning. It was a quiet road, just outside New York. Solly pressed a gun into Rick's hand. One of the other waiting men was Tick-Tock, a cousin of Solly, a big, tall, tough man, very good with a gun. He had once thrown his grandmother downstairs. Tick-Tock also had the best information on the routes of the Irish gangster's alcohol deliveries. Solly had told him to look after Rick.

The milk trucks belonged to Dion O'Hanlon, but they weren't carrying milk. It was whiskey from Canada. O'Hanlon had paid the New York police to let the trucks into New York with whiskey and without problems. It was still the time of Prohibition, and Solly needed plenty of this Canadian alcohol to sell in his clubs.

The trucks were getting closer. Solly whispered to Rick, "Never aim unless you plan to shoot. Never shoot unless you plan to hit someone."

The first truck was getting near now. Rick took out his gun. Tick-Tock pulled his hand down.

"You might hurt someone with that, smart guy," he said. "Let me show you."

He fired, and four tires on the front truck lost a lot of air. The rest of the gang ran to the other trucks, shooting.

The drivers dropped their guns. They preferred not to die for a few thousand liters of whiskey. Tick-Tock wanted to shoot a few of O'Hanlon's men but Solly stopped him.

For several minutes, nobody spoke, and then they walked over to the trucks. Rick was standing beside Solly. He had just put his gun back in his pocket, when out of the corner of his eye he saw something move: an arm, and then a finger, and then part of a gun. He hit Solly's arm and took him to the ground and pulled out his own gun. Two people fired at the same time, but Rick was faster.

Solly turned. "Nice shooting." That's all he said.

"Lois is going to be very proud of you." It was Tick-Tock who spoke next, smiling unpleasantly at Rick. He hadn't acted as quickly as Kick, and Tick-Tock was the man with experience - and now some jealousy as well.

* * *

Six months later, Rick had become one of Solly's most trusted advisers. Only Tick-Tock disliked his new position. The others recognized that Rick was smarter and braver than all of them.

Solly asked Rick to come and talk to him. They had been together, collecting money from some of the lucky people that Solly protected from danger and damage. They had also collected money from Solly's clubs and businesses, and delivered some beer. Tick-Tock had returned with them.

When Solly wanted to talk, it usually meant that he wanted to talk. Others could listen. He talked about the other big gangsters in New York, like O'Hanlon and Salucci.

"I make money, I have clubs, but I don't cheat people, and everybody's equal. O'Hanlon and the others don't allow black people into their clubs. I do business with black people, Irish, Italians. Everyone's the same to me... until they make a mistake." Solly laughed. "Our business is alcohol, clubs, cigarettes, and money: everything, but not girls. Salucci and O'Hanlon and the others use girls to cheat people. I don't."

Rick listened. Later, if Solly gave up work, Tick-Tock wanted to be the new boss. But deep inside, Solly knew and Tick-Tock knew that it wasn't going to be Tick-Tock.

Rick loved the nightclubs, listening to music, drinking, and watching the customers. He was happy listening to Solly's stories and advice, but he also wanted to talk to Solly about Lois. He loved Solly like a father, but he didn't love Lois like a sister, and he knew Solly didn't want his daughter to have boyfriends from the gang.

"And, you remember the rules, Rick?"

Had Solly read Rick's mind? "Which rules?" said Rick.

"The Lois rules. I'm not stupid. You can look, but you can't touch. If you touch, Tick-Tock'll shoot you."

"With pleasure," said Tick-Tock. He smiled, showing several gold teeth, and two or three black ones.

"I have plans for my daughter. I have plans for you too, Rick, and that's what I really want to talk about. You have a good business brain. I want you to look after the Tootsie-Wootsie." It was Solly's newest club. "I'm too old to work until four o'clock in the morning in a smoke-filled club, talking to customers. And remember this, Rick: the customers do business with us; sometimes they sleep with our women; but they don't drink with us. If you're smart, you won't drink with them. Understand?"

"Don't worry. I'll never drink with the customers."

Rick couldn't believe it. He was going to be the boss of the Tootsie-Wootsie Club!

CHAPTER THREE

London Calling

Her last view of Casablanca was of Ricks place. In the sky above Morocco, on that dark December night in 1941, there were tears in Ilsa's eyes.

She touched her husbands arm. "I didn't know Rick was in Casablanca. How could I? Are you upset about Rick and me? In Paris I had nothing, not even hope."

She started to cry again, but she was not sure why. "Then I learned that you were alive, and that you needed me to help you in your fight against the Nazis-your fight for the freedom of Europe. Now I understand why you kept our marriage a secret from our friends. You didn't want the Gestapo to suspect that I was your wife." She managed to look over at Victor, but he was staring straight ahead, lost in thought. "Tell me... tell me you aren't angry with me."

For a time they sat together in silence. Then Victor said, "I choose to live without anger or jealousy. My work is too important. And, my dear, when we get to Lisbon, I want you to do exactly what I tell you. It will be very dangerous. I haven't told you about the plans because I haven't been able to tell anyone. I don't even know all the details myself yet. I'm sure you understand."

"I'm sure I do," said Ilsa quietly. She admired Victor's calm certainty. Would she ever experience that herself?

"This is more dangerous than anything I have ever done before. But I know we're doing the right thing when even a man like Rick can see the difference between us and the Germans." He smiled at her.

"What do you mean?" said Ilsa.

"Rick has taken years to realize that there are more important things in life than his own happiness. He gave us those exit visas instead of keeping them for himself. He knew I had to escape from Casablanca."

Victor said nothing more until they arrived in Lisbon.

When Ilsa woke the next morning, in the Hotel Aviz, Victor wasn't in bed. On the other side of the bedroom door, she could hear whispers: "... British... danger... alive... der Henker... Prague... as soon as possible..."

She heard a door shut softly, and she jumped back into bed when she heard the turn of the key in the lock. "Is that you, Victor?" She pretended to be sleepy.

"Yes, my dear. I went out for a morning walk." Ilsa opened her eyes. "And, there's some wonderful news. The Americans will have to join the war now."

Ilsa sat up. "Why?" she asked.

"Because the Japanese have bombed American ships in Pearl Harbor. Most of the ships were destroyed, and many men were killed. Don't you understand? It will take time, but Germany's finished. Now we can act. We must

pack our clothes immediately." Victor was almost shouting now.

Ilsa got up quickly and began to pack. "I've always wanted to see New York," she said.

"We aren't going to New York now."

"Then where are we going?"

"To London. We're going to plan our flight in London. Lots of Czech people live there. Some were in the government in Prague before the Germans arrived."

Ilsa suddenly remembered Rick. She had asked him to follow her. Now she must tell him where to go. She wrote a message (To London... Der Henker... Danger... Prague... come quickly...) She asked the man at the hotel desk to give it to Mr. Richard Blaine.

In an hour, they were in another airplane.

"Victor," Ilsa whispered, "let me help you this time."

Victor looked straight ahead. His mind was not on the present, but the future.

* * *

Victor arrived in England to a hero's welcome, but a secret one. At the airport they wore their collars up and their hats down. A car took them to a house in a quiet London street. There, two men spoke to Victor, but too softly for Ilsa to hear. After a few minutes, Victor asked Ilsa to go upstairs to rest, but although she was tired, she couldn't sleep. She had been in this situation many times

before (meetings in the middle of the night, strange men with hidden faces), and she was always asked to leave the room. She was proud of Victor, but she wanted to work with him and be a real member of the Resistance group.

She also wondered if Rick had seen her messages, and if he was following. Rick had given her something that she had never had before, a closeness and excitement. She realized for the first time that her feelings for Rick were exactly the same as Victor's feelings for his work. She knew she loved Rick, but her place had to be beside her husband.

At that moment, the door opened and Victor came in.

"Victor, there's something that I need to say to you." She sat up and faced her husband. "I don't know why we're here, or what you're planning..."

"That's for your own safety."

"But I want to be part of the Resistance, part of your work. I want to share it with you. Please," she said.

"That's impossible."

"It isn't. I can do much more. I want the same as you."

"You're certain?" He could see she was serious.

They went downstairs.

"Gentlemen," said Victor, "this is my wife," and he introduced the British Secretary of War and Major Miles to Ilsa. "She has something to say to you."

"Yes," began Ilsa. "I've talked to my husband. I understand all the dangers. I've lived through so much in the last two years, with and without my husband - at one point I thought he was dead. I want to take part in your activities... I mean, our activities."

Major Miles looked at Victor, who smiled. "Well, this is wonderful, Mr. Laszlo. You're a very lucky man."

Victor smiled. "Thank you," he said. "You can see that we're both ready to die for our beliefs, like our two friends here ... My dear, I forgot to introduce you to these two men. This is Jan Kubis and this is Josef Gabcik. They're from Czechoslovakia. They're helping us with plans for the fight against the Germans in their country."

When the meeting finished, Ilsa sat and thought about her past. She thought about her early life in Norway and her student days at the Sorbonne in Paris. She was a star student; she had studied Slavic languages, and was especially good at Russian. In 1939, she had met Victor. She loved to remember his first words to her: "Miss Lund, they told me that you are the most beautiful girl in Paris. They were lying. You are the most beautiful girl in Europe!"

Victor's work had always been dangerous, and when they got married, not even their friends knew about it. Victor continued to work for the Resistance, and then he told Ilsa that he had to return home to Czechoslovakia. Ilsa didn't want him to go. ("Ilsa, I must go. How can I ask others to do what I won't do myself?") In Prague, the

Gestapo were waiting for him. A few days later, his death was reported.

Ilsa continued to study, but she also worked for the Resistance because she felt she was continuing Victor's work. Some months later, she met Rick.

She thought about them, Rick and Victor. Was it possible to love two men at the same time? Victor had taught her about love of her country, for other people, and for freedom. Rick had brought her back to life. When she was with Rick, she felt like a woman. She felt important, and he loved her. And then, Victor came back from the dead.

Ilsa's mind was full of different emotions and impossible decisions. "Victors my husband," she thought. "His work for Czechoslovakia, and for everybody in Europe, is the most important..." But tears came to her eyes. She wondered if Rick was in London.

CHAPTER FOUR

Plans for Prague

Rick realized that they had to change plans immediately. He had gotten Ilsa's message at the hotel in Lisbon. He didn't fully understand it, but he knew that they had to go to London, and not to New York. He arrived in London with Louis and Sam one cold, wet evening, in December 1941.

After a month, they still hadn't found Victor or Ilsa. They were staying in Brown's Hotel, and Rick was pretending that he worked in American theater, with Sam as his servant. Louis had bought some new suits and was telling London women that he was a member of the French government.

Sam liked New York and Paris, but not London. He hated the weather and the buildings, and especially the food. He missed everything back home.

A knock at the door interrupted the silence. Sam went.

"Hello, Sam." It was Louis. "I see you're still having a little London vacation, Rick." Rick looked at him through the cigarette smoke. "I've been working hard, collecting information. I think I've found a way to Victor and Ilsa."

"Yes?" Rick was suddenly excited, but as usual, his face showed nothing.

"A gentleman has recently been seen in a part of London called South Kensington. The description of him sounds like Mr. Victor Laszlo."

"Do you have the address?" asked Rick.

"Not yet," Louis lied. He wasn't quite sure why he lied. Maybe he wanted to make sure of his information. "Oh, look at the time. I must go. I have to meet a friend for tea."

For a long time after Louis had gone, Rick sat in his chair, deep in thought.

"What's the matter, Boss?" asked Sam.

Rick had decided to try, for the thousandth time, to understand Ilsa's note. He understood To London... British Intelligence... come quickly. But Der Henker... danger... Prague? He had asked Sam (Rick expected Sam to know everything), but Sam couldn't help. He got up.

"Where are we going?" said Sam.

"To a place I haven't been to for years: the library."

They went to the British Library, and Rick walked straight up to a guard. He still had his cigarette in his mouth. "Does anyone in this place speak any foreign languages?"

"I'm quite sure many people do," said the guard. "Shall I ring for someone, sir?"

"That would be nice."

Five minutes later, an enthusiastic Mr. Robbins arrived.

"How many languages do you speak?" asked Rick.

"How many would you like?" replied Mr. Robbins. He was getting excited.

"The English," thought Rick, "only get excited when they talk to people they don't know, about a subject that is not personal." He showed Robbins the note.

"Der Henker means 'executioner' in German. The name's used for Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's top man in Prague."

"Right." Rick wanted to ask Robbins more questions, but the man had gone. He returned in a moment with some pages from recent newspapers.

Heydrich was "the Executioner of Prague." He was doing a lot of Hitler's dirty work for him in Eastern Europe. The photographs showed that he was tall, with a thin face and clear, cold eyes. His uniform was perfect, and his shoes were beautifully polished. Rick hated him already.

When Sam and Rick returned to the hotel, someone had searched their room, and their passports were missing. Louis arrived a moment later.

"Come in and make yourself comfortable, Louis. Someone else already has," said Rick.

Louis lit a cigarette. The thieves hadn't touched Rick's whiskey. Sam poured a large drink for the other two.

"Who did it, do you think?" said Rick.

"Victor, or British Intelligence," said Louis.

"Why Victor?"

"What do we really know about him? I don't trust a man like him. Most men have three things that are important to them: power, money, and women. Money and power don't seem to be important to Victor Laszlo. He's only interested in the fight against the Germans. And I'm suspicious. How did he escape before? He's been reported as dead five times, but he's still alive. If he's Czech, why does he have a Hungarian name?"

Rick poured himself another drink. "Louis, I can't prove it, but I think the reason for Victor's visit to London may be connected with a man called Heydrich."

"What? The one who's doing lots of nice things for Mr. Hitler in Czechoslovakia? Well, maybe we can find out more. Actually, I have the address now... the place where Victor may be staying," said Louis.

"Have you been there? Did you see him?"

"No."

"Who did you see?"

"Ilsa."

Rick was on his feet and out of the door before Louis could put out his cigarette. "What's the address?"

"Number 42, Clareville Street."

Louis caught Rick just as he was getting into a taxi. They reached the house in less than fifteen minutes. A little old lady met them at the door.

"Are you looking for rooms? I'm afraid we're already fully booked," she said, and started to close the door.

"But we got the address from friends who are here."

"And what are their names?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Victor Laszlo."

"Well..." she said, and pulled out a gun. "You gentlemen just sit down here a moment, and don't move." She pressed a button in the wall, and a bell sounded somewhere in the house.

Two minutes later, Major Miles came into the room. He looked carefully at Louis and Rick, and then said, "It's all right, Mrs. Bunton. I'll look after them. Thank you."

He took them upstairs and into a large room. People were talking on telephones and looking at maps spread out on a large table. Victor Laszlo was standing in the middle of everything.

"It's a very great pleasure to see you," said Victor.

"The pleasure's all mine," said Rick, lighting a cigarette.

Victor looked out the window and seemed to be speaking to West London. "Sorry," he said. "We had to be sure that the time was right, that our plans could work. We had to know that we could trust you."

"You're here and alive. I think that proves that we can be trusted," said Rick, staring at the back of Victor.

Victor turned around. "Yes, but the British don't trust anybody. They had to find out more about you."

"And that's why they made a little visit to my room? Mr. Laszlo, I've made mistakes in my life, plenty of them, but I can be trusted. I keep my promises. I told you in Casablanca that I wanted to help. I don't like working with people who can't be trusted either."

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry, but we don't have much time. I think we should continue with our main business," said Major Miles. They sat down, and Miles threw some photographs onto the table. "This is the person we want."

It was the same cruel face that Rick had seen in the newspapers at the British Library: Reinhard Heydrich.

"This is the most dangerous of all Nazis, except for Hitler himself," said Miles.

Rick looked up. "He's a real pretty boy, but why don't you aim for Hitler? If you want to kill an animal, it's usually best to cut off the head, not the tail."

"The rules of war don't allow us to do that." Miles paused. "What made you leave New York, Mr. Blaine?"

"I was Mr. Baline then, but it's not your business."

"What were you doing in Addis Ababa, and France? We also know you fought in Spain against Franco."

Rick put out his cigarette. "I'm not going to sit here and repeat all that. You know what I've done. My reasons are my business. If you don't trust me..." He stood up.

"Don't leave, Rick."

It was her! He hadn't heard her come into the room.

Victor spoke. "My wife and I are very serious about wanting your help. Don't blame the British. This is dangerous for all of us, and they want to be sure." He offered his hand to Rick, who didn't immediately move. Everyone's attention was on them. Several seconds passed. Then, finally, Rick shook Victor's hand.

He could hear her ... footsteps coming across the room. He could smell her. He turned, and was lost in her eyes. Moments later, Miles' voice broke into their thoughts.

"This isn't a war between England and Germany. The whole world is in this, Mr. Blaine." Miles pointed to the map. "You can see that Prague isn't far from Munich or Berlin. In fact, it's an especially important city, in the heart of Europe, and it's where Reinhard Heydrich is right now. Mr. Laszlo has formed an excellent plan for getting a bomb into Heydrich's car as he drives through the center of Prague." Miles smiled. "Heydrich has a number of weaknesses. He drinks too much, he spends a lot of time with different beautiful women - and he drives around Prague in an open car."

"Even I've read that!" said Rick.

"Yes," said Victor, "but we need to know his schedule. He has a house outside Prague, but he also spends a lot of time in Hradcany Castle. We need someone to get close to him, and we don't want him to be suspicious. We need a spy in the castle."

"Who?" said Louis. A few seconds passed.

"Me," said Ilsa softly.

"I'm proud to say that my wife has agreed to work in Heydrich's offices."

Rick and Louis said nothing, but one possibility was suddenly clear to them. After Victor's stay in a German prison, was this a personal fight with Heydrich? The worst kind of fight?

Rick spoke. "This is too dangerous. If the smallest thing goes wrong, we'll all be dead immediately. Very soon after that, a large part of the Czech population will be dead too. The Nazis will punish them for Heydrich's death. And this may simply be something personal with Mr. Laszlo."

"I agree," said Louis. "I think emotion is winning over reason here."

"No," Ilsa said softly. "Listen to me. This is for Norway and England and America and France. It's for the world, and not only for Czechoslovakia or for Victor."

"But why you?" asked Rick.

"I'm the best person to get close to Heydrich. They'd be suspicious of a German-speaking Czech. I speak Russian. I'll be a White Russian*. They'll believe me."

"And," added Victor, "my wife is a very beautiful woman, and Heydrich loves beautiful women."

Ilsa turned to Rick again. "We're all in this together now. Aren't we? Please tell me we are."

He wanted to kiss her, right there, in front of her husband, in front of everybody. He wondered why he didn't. "I'll think about it," he said.

* * *

Sam got in late that night. He had found a club where he could play the piano and sing.

"Why are you so late?" asked Rick.

"A couple of policemen wanted to know what I was doing in the middle of the night, in wartime."

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them it wasn't my war."

"Maybe it is now. Let's go downstairs."

They went down. Sam sat at the piano and played softly. Rick smoked, and drank, and listened.

Then Sam started to play "As Time Goes By."

"Stop that, Sam."

"You remember the first time we heard that song, at the Tootsie-Wootsie Club?" said Sam. "I've been playing it since then. It's always been your favorite song."

"And mine," a soft voice whispered. "And mine. You play it beautifully, Sam." Once again, Ilsa had appeared out of the darkness, just as she had done in Casablanca.

This time Rick understood why she had come. "When are you going?" he asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Champagne?" They had drunk champagne on their last night together in Paris.

"Please." Sam went to get the champagne. "And, Rick, please, will you help? This isn't about the problems of you and me and Victor, of three little people. This is much bigger than us. If you can't see that, you're not half the man I fell in love with in Paris..." She was crying now. "... not half the man I'm still in love with..." Rick put his arms around her and kissed her, hard. She didn't pull away. "Rick, don't you see? Victor will succeed, even if it kills him. I'm asking you to help, not for Victor, for me."

She sat back and looked at him. "Tomorrow, I'm going to Prague. They need a secretary, and the Czech Resistance can get me that job in the castle. Heydrichs people will believe that I'm a White Russian. They'll believe that I want to fight against the Communists who killed the rest of my family. I'll be Tamara Toumanova."

"I want another drink," said Rick.

She kissed him. "Not now. Upstairs."

Sam continued to play, as Rick and Ilsa left the room.

Early the next morning, Tamara Toumanova left for Prague.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mixed Messages

"Guess what I have," Rick Baline asked Lois Horowitz one April evening in 1932. His hands were behind his back, hiding something. They were outside the Horowitz family home in New York, and the sun was shining. Rick thought Lois looked beautiful, but he didn't want her father to know about his love for his daughter.

Rick had been successful as the manager of Solly's Tootsie- Wootsie Club, but Solly wanted a rich and famous man, with an education, for his daughter. He didn't normally allow Rick and Lois to go out together. But Rick still had his dream.

"What's behind your back? I can't guess. Tell me."

"I have two tickets for the theater tonight," said Rick. "For Show Stoppers, with Ruby Keeler and Al Jolson." He didn't tell her how he had gotten the tickets.

"You certainly don't give a girl much time to get ready for the biggest show on Broadway."

"The prettiest girl in Harlem doesn't need much time."

They didn't tell Solly about their plans for the evening.

After the theater, Rick took Lois to Rector's, a restaurant famous for its food and for the gangsters who ate there.

"Look, there's Mae West," said Lois, excitedly.

Rick looked, and saw O'Hanlon at another table with the famous actress. He reminded himself that his first gunshot had been aimed at O'Hanlon's men.

Rick turned to a waiter, "Champagne."

He looked over at O'Hanlon again. The gangster was short, well-dressed, and had a chest like a refrigerator. He had confidence in his place at the top of his world. Even here he kept his hat on, wearing it low, over his left eye, but he could see everything that mattered. He made a sign to someone behind him.

Two seconds later, O'Hanlon's man was beside Rick. "Mr. O'Hanlon invites you to join him," he whispered.

They went. O'Hanlon greeted them. "Champagne?"

"We ordered some," replied Lois.

"But we must have special champagne for a beautiful girl like you. You recognize Miss West, I'm sure, and I want you to meet this young man, Robert Meredith. We've all read a lot about him in the newspapers."

Rick knew the name. Meredith was a lawyer from a rich family, and he was rising fast in the world of politics.

Meredith smiled. "Good evening, Miss Horowitz."

"... and this gentleman with Miss Horowitz," continued O'Hanlon, "has a great head for business. Mr. Baline has made one of Miss Horowitz's father's clubs, the Tootsie-Wootsie, nearly as famous as my own. Mr.

Meredith, would you please take Miss Horowitz to that other table for a few minutes. I want a private word with Mr. Baline."

O'Hanlon started straight in. "Please tell the beautiful Miss Horowitz's father that I have no bad feelings about his attacks on my Canadian trucks. I'm a nice, kind man, as you know... and I have a suggestion for him."

Rick was listening but not understanding. O'Hanlon smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile. "This offer is in the shape and form of Mr. Robert Meredith here...," he continued. "Mr. Horowitz would be so happy if his daughter became Mrs. Robert Meredith, wouldn't he?" O'Hanlon looked into Rick's eyes. "Ah, I see you're in love! But Miss Horowitz is not for you. This marriage would be good for me, for Mr. Horowitz, and for you."

Rick looked over at the other table. Meredith was laughing and talking. Lois was sitting very close to him, her hair brushing his face.

"I think maybe I'm not needed over there," Rick said.

"Let me tell you something before you go," said O'Hanlon. "I heard you stopped one of my boys from shooting your boss. That was brave, but also stupid. I'm warning you... don't be too brave. You'll find you live longer that way. Smart men hear warnings, and you seem smart. I'm not so sure about your boss."

At that moment, Rick saw Meredith kiss Lois. He felt like a fool, and left.

Rick drove around angrily for a time. He passed Salucci's place. Salucci was a gangster who liked his clothes, his cars, and his women. The house was well lit, and there were five or six hard boys watching the place for him. He was different from Solly, and younger, and he hit harder.

Maybe he should listen to O'Hanlon's warning? He loved his new life, but he was also ashamed of his part in the world of crime. He stopped the car outside Solly's house and sat thinking. Should he tell Solly about his love for Lois? Should he tell him about O'Hanlon's warning?

He saw the lights of another car. Two people got out. Meredith led Lois to her front door and kissed her on the lips for a long time.

He left. Rick turned down his window and called to her. "It's me. Did you enjoy this evening?"

"I had a wonderful time. Thanks. And Robert said he wanted to see me again, with my father's permission. Listen, Rick, I have to go in now. It's late."

"No. Not yet." He got out of the car. He had never thought that she might not be in love with him. "There's something that I've wanted to say to you for a long time. I love you. I've always been in love with you. Marry me, Lois."

"No, Rick, I can't."

"You can't, or you don't want to?"

"Both," she said, and he knew that he was finished. "Rick, you're sweet, but I couldn't marry you, even if I wanted to. But don't look so sad. I do love you a little, and my dad thinks you're wonderful. You're going to go a long way in his business."

She put her key in the lock, and then she turned back to Rick. She kissed him, slowly, the way he had always wanted her to kiss him. She pulled away, and her lips were the last part of her body to separate from his. "But I must go. It's late and I need my sleep."

* * *

Three months later, Solly and Rick met at the Tootsie-Wootsie. They were sitting in Rick's office, counting money. Solly only trusted two people with his money: himself and Rick. Pick Baline was born for his job. He kept an eye on the customers, but he didn't drink with them. He checked that the waiters and others didn't steal from him. Rick knew where and how to get the best wines and beer. He had learned all the tricks so quickly. He talked to the police in a language that they understood. He gave them a little Tootsie-Wootsie money, and the alcohol trucks arrived without trouble. Also, he had found an excellent black piano player and singer, Sam Waters.

"Solly, there's some business I'd like to discuss. It's about Lois." Rick was afraid of Solly's anger and had delayed delivering O'Hanlon's message. But now was the time.

Solly interrupted. "Isn't it great about her and that lawyer?"

"What lawyer?"

"Don't tell anybody, but Lois is thinking about marrying a big man. Mrs. Robert Meredith. It sounds ..."

Solly was looking like a proud father when the first bullet hit the wall behind his head.

The second one hit the desktop lamp. Solly and Rick were on the floor immediately, and Solly fired two shots before the third bullet hit the desk. Rick put his head around the corner of the desk, very slowly. He could just see two feet beside the open door of the office. He and Solly went to look. The feet belonged to a dead man. Beside him, there was another body. Also dead.

Solly suspected Salucci. Rick knew that O'Hanlon had sent the gunmen. O'Hanlon was reminding Solly of a message that he had never received.

CHAPTER SIX

Ready for Prague

"Rick, if this bomb goes off," said Louis, "and if it kills Heydrich, the results will be terrible for everybody." They were sitting in Brown's Hotel. "A bomb in his car as he comes over the Charles Bridge! Terrible idea! And we have about one chance in a thousand. What happens if it doesn't work? We'll have no chance against Heydrich's guards. We'll be killed immediately."

"If Heydrich is dead, I don't think Victor Laszlo cares if he himself gets out of Prague alive."

"Rick, why are you going?"

Rick blew a smoke ring into the conversation. "Because I have nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. Do I have to draw you a picture, Louis? Let's just say I'm going because I made some terrible mistakes in the past, in America. I lost the people I loved, and it was my fault, and I'm still paying for it. But you? Why are you going?"

"To get back the honor I thought I had lost forever," said Louis, sadly.

"Honor?" said Rick. "I don't think I ever heard you use that word."

"I, too, made a mistake. A young woman was killed many years ago in Paris, killed because I was a coward... I'm not sure about this plan for Heydrich, I don't trust the

English, and I don't like Laszlo, but I need to do something brave. Maybe this is my opportunity."

Rick lit a cigarette. "I guess things are tough everywhere."

When they arrived at the house in South Kensington, Major Miles and Victor were there, and the two men from the Czech Resistance group, Jan Kubis and Josef Gabcik.

Miles started immediately. "We still think that a bomb in Heydrich's car is the best idea. It's a British bomb ..."

"Don't the Czechs know how to make bombs? I thought they were good at things like that," said Rick.

"Not like this one. Not even the Germans have anything like this. It's small, silent, and completely dependable."

On the wall, Miles pointed to a large map of Prague. "We have thought about a number of possible places for the attack, but this is the best one, as he takes his usual route across the Charles Bridge in the morning. We know from Miss Lund that Heydrich leaves his house in the country every morning at the same time, and takes the same route. He arrives at the Charles Bridge at exactly the same time every day. There is a point here..." (The Major showed them on the map.) "... when the car has to turn left onto the bridge. At that point, it moves very slowly. We also know from Miss Lund that Heydrich hates people who are late. He's never late himself. He crosses the bridge at 7:50 and arrives at the castle at 8:00 exactly."

Victor continued. "Yes. We want Jan and Josef to carry guns and to wait at the end of the bridge, near me. I'll have the bomb, and I'll be at the point where the Executioner's car turns slowly onto the bridge. Louis, you'll walk into the road, in front of the car, to make it stop for a moment. I'll go behind the car and drop the bomb into it. Then we'll have ten seconds before the explosion. Immediately after I put the bomb in the car, Rick, you'll drop a smoke bomb on the bridge, in front of the car. That'll give us the chance to escape."

Rick interrupted. "What'll happen if there's a problem? We need a plan."

"Mr. Blaine is right," Miles agreed. "If Heydrich is one second more than five minutes late, you mustn't wait. Leave the bridge immediately. If there's a problem before the big day, Miss Lund will contact you. Any other questions?"

Nobody spoke.

"Then we'll wait for Miss Lund to tell us when to leave for Czechoslovakia. Good luck!" They all shook hands.

* * *

"Rick," said Sam. He was organizing Rick's clothes and packing his bag. "Are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'm ever going to be."

"Are you taking this gun? It's your favorite."

It was the one he had used against Mussolini's men and Franco's. It was also the one he had shot Major Strasser with in Casablanca. "Yes, Sam, but I wish I'd killed the right person with it in the first place, and saved a lot of trouble."

"Forget about that. It wasn't your fault."

"Whose fault was it, then? I didn't see anyone else in my shoes, wearing my clothes, or driving my car."

"I was driving your car, or did you forget?"

"It was a long time ago." Rick finished the bottle. "I hope we meet again after all this is over."

"Don't talk like that. You've been in danger before."

"I know, Sam, but in Spain and Africa I didn't care. Things are different now."

"Because of Miss Ilsa?"

"Mrs. Laszlo, you mean, Sam."

"Miss Ilsa, Rick. She's the reason, isn't she? Don't go, Rick. This isn't your fight."

"She's different. I'm going. She's given me something to live for again. That's why I'm scared."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Executioner

Ilsa often thought about Rick and her last night in London with him. Now, as Miss Toumanova, she had worked in the castle in Prague for two months.

"Fräulein Toumanova!" It was Heydrich's Austrian secretary, Frau Hentgen. She didn't seem to like Ilsa, and Ilsa certainly didn't like her. "Herr* Heydrich would like you to type these reports and deliver them to him personally by four o'clock."

Ilsa took orders from Frau Hentgen, but she wasn't an ordinary secretary now. She was working in Heydrich's office with a few other chosen people.

"And these must be done immediately."

Ilsa didn't need to look at them. She knew they were reports on the activity of Czech Resistance workers. There had been no contact with Victor, but she hoped her messages to London were arriving.

She saw Heydrich every day, and she hated him. She saw his proud face and horrible smile. She saw him putting his signature on hundreds of papers every week, under the words "Immediate Execution."

Everyone in the office was afraid of him. Everybody arrived early at work, by 7:30, because he always arrived at 8:00. His whole day was regular, between 6:30, when he

got up at his house in the country, and 7:30 in the evening, when he had dinner. He almost never ate alone, and he never slept alone. His wife was in Germany.

Ilsa was starting to work on one of the reports when she heard a voice behind her.

"Fräulein Toumanova." It was Heydrich. He had never spoken to her before. She put her papers down. Very quietly he said, "It's so pleasant to see your beautiful face every morning."

Her face went red. "Thank you, Herr Heydrich."

"You do excellent work, Fräulein Toumanova. We are so happy you are working with us against the Communists in your country and in Czechoslovakia. I congratulate you."

"Thank you, Herr Heydrich."

His hand grasped her shoulder more tightly. It felt like ice. "I understand you are a good pianist. I myself play the violin. Would you like to play with me? Tonight maybe?"

"Well, I'm not sure... I'm not... I'm not good enough... I'm only a poor Russian girl..." The moment was here at last. Ilsa was ready, but she needed time to get a message back to London. "Tonight is not possible... I cannot play with a famous person like you without some practice."

"I understand. The day after tomorrow, then."

Ilsa spoke loudly so that the others in the office could hear. "Yes, I will have all your reports ready the day after tomorrow, Herr Heydrich."

Heydrich enjoyed her reply. They had a little secret together. "Excellent. I will see you then."

She wrote a note, and after work she gave it to one of the Resistance workers. He would radio the message to London, and Victor and the others would be on an airplane in an hour.

That evening, she practiced for two hours on the piano, and then went to her bedroom. At midnight, there was a knock at the door. It was a girl who worked in the house. "I have two messages for you," she whispered.

"Tell me."

The first message was that Victor and the others were on their way. "I only received the second one a few minutes ago, from the Czech Resistance. It says 'Operation Executioner. Tell London. Danger.'"

"What? Do they want to stop the operation? Why?"

"I don't know."

Ilsa didn't understand. Were the Czechs afraid? Had someone at the castle become suspicious of her? But it was too late now. "I can't stop them." She thought about Victor. "I mustn't stop them."

Heydrich came for Ilsa in his Mercedes two days later. "You look lovely, Fräulein Toumanova," he said.

"Thank you, Herr Heydrich."

"You may call me Reinhard this evening."

He was tall and handsome in his uniform. His shoes were perfectly polished, and he reminded her of someone... No! Yes, Victor! But Victor was a good man, and Heydrich was an animal. She allowed him to take her arm.

They got into the car.

"A glass of champagne?"

"With pleasure."

Soon, she noticed that they were outside Prague. "Are we going to a country restaurant?"

"No, we're going to my house. The food is excellent. And don't worry. We'll be alone. My wife is away."

"This route is interesting."

"Yes. We came over the Cechuv Most. Soon, I'll take this route every morning, instead of the Charles Bridge."

Her heart was beating so hard that she thought Heydrich must hear it. She pretended to look happy, but she had to make him change his mind! All their plans were for the Charles Bridge.

"Welcome to my home."

A number of servants greeted them. Ilsa saw the fear and hate in their eyes and knew that he did not.

The large dining room was ready for dinner, but Heydrich guided her to a little love seat in the corner. There was another bottle of champagne, and two glasses stood on the table beside them. He kissed her immediately.

"Herr Heydrich!" She had to seem surprised, not angry.

"Forgive me, but you are so beautiful. I could not stop myself. We will play some music. I think you will like my piano." He took his violin. "Beethoven, Tamara?"

"Yes. With pleasure."

He played well. For twenty minutes, Ilsa forgot where she was and who she was with.

"Excellent!" said Heydrich. "I have dreamed of playing with someone like you ..." He looked at her with his ice blue eyes. "Shall we have dinner?"

The food was wonderful. Ilsa noticed that he filled her wineglass too often, and her head began to swim. This was dangerous. She had to stop drinking.

"Reinhard," she said, "that was delicious."

"My cook is the best in Czechoslovakia."

He took her outside into a starry, moonlit night and put his arms around her. "We cannot see the lights of the city here. I do not always want to be reminded of work. I have enemies everywhere."

"But you have done so much for this country."

He laughed. "It is not enough. It will never be enough until we have won. We must kill our enemies, burn their villages, and spread salt on the earth so that they never rise again. For example, those Czechs in London... But let's not talk about that tonight. Let's talk about you. I have watched

you for a long time. Since your first day at the castle, in fact. I have noticed your intelligence, your beauty, of course, your political..."

"Thank you, Reinhard."

"But I have always believed that a man does not really know a woman until he has made love to her. I do not suggest this immediately with you, but I hope that soon... You are beautiful, my dear." His arms were tight around her.

He kissed her gently and took her inside. "I hope you will like your rooms. Good night, Fräulein Toumanova."

Ilsa went to bed, alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Marriage and Love

Two days after the attack on Rick's office, he and Solly looked up and saw O'Hanlon, Tick-Tock, and Salucci in the doorway. Salucci was the biggest gangster in New York, after Solly and O'Hanlon. Rick jumped up, but Solly didn't move.

"Come in. Make yourselves at home," Solly said calmly.

"Good evening, Mr. Horowitz," said O'Hanlon.

Everybody sat, still with their hats on.

Solly started. "Do I send my boys downtown to make trouble for you?"

"That's what we want to talk to you about," O'Hanlon replied. His voice was cool. "Two men died here in your club, and they were relatives of Mr. Salucci here. They came to bring you information about a business possibility. Mr. Salucci doesn't like the way you greeted them. His men speak worse English than he does, but you didn't give them a chance to speak."

"Next time he wants to do business with me, maybe he should send his boys without guns," Solly replied.

Salucci spoke for the first and last time. "It... will... not... happen... again."

"That's right," said O'Hanlon.

"This is an apology?" said Solly.

"Mr. Salucci's English isn't too good. I promise it won't happen again. Now, we must drink, to us, as friends! What do you think?" said O'Hanlon.

Solly reached into the desk drawer where he kept his gun, and took out a bottle of whiskey and glasses. He poured some whiskey into three glasses. "To friends!"

"To friends," said O'Hanlon.

"Yes," said Solly. He rose. "Today is a special day, for two other reasons. First, Rick is my best manager, and I love him like a son. If anything happens to me, Rick will take my place. He will have everything... except for one thing. Rick, please forgive me, but we must drink to something even more important. My daughter. Today, I can tell you that Lois is going to be married to a very important person in our city." Solly looked proud. O'Hanlon looked pleased. Tick-Tock smiled. Rick didn't.

Solly continued. "Yes, to Mr. Robert Meredith."

O'Hanlon said, "That's excellent news. Mr. Meredith and I have done business in the past, and we expect to do more in the future. This will bring us together, Solomon."

A month later, Lois Horowitz and Robert Meredith were married.

When they came out of the church, Lois threw her arms around Rick. "Isn't it great? I'm going places now! We can still be friends, can't we?"

Rick could hear Meredith's voice behind him. "It's a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Horowitz."

Rick didn't see Lois again for three years.

* * *

As suddenly as she had left it, Lois Meredith came back into his life. Rick was in the Tootsie-Wootsie. Business was good, and everyone was talking about Rick Baline's place. It had the best music, the best drinks, and it made a lot of money. Solly didn't work much these days. Rick had stopped reading newspapers. He didn't want to read about the rise of Robert Meredith, now a state senator. Meredith's wife had risen with him, and if the newspapers knew about her gangster father, they didn't write about him.

Then he saw her. Even from a distance, he knew it was her. She was alone.

"Good evening, Mrs. Meredith."

"Hello, Rick."

"Are you meeting someone?"

"You wouldn't let a girl drink alone, would you?"

"Not if I know what's good for me."

"Maybe I'm what's good for you."

"I used to think so," he said, as Sam came in. Rick looked at Lois - her clothes, her diamonds, and, most of all, her smile. "Play us some music, Sam."

Sam started to play "As Time Goes By."

Lois reached under the table and held Rick's hand. "Isn't the music beautiful?" she said. "It reminds me of the old days. I miss those days."

"Are you happy with your husband?"

Her smile went. She didn't look up. "He's a monster."

"He's a politician. Does he have other women?"

Her face gave Rick the answer. "And he cheats all his political friends... I don't love him now."

"Did you ever?"

"My father wanted it to happen. You know that... What can I do?" She was crying.

"Let's go into my office."

They shut the door.

"I can't leave him. It would break my father's heart. Please help me, Rick," she said, as she fell into his arms.

The affair was two months old when Meredith found out. Rick knew it would happen, but he was worried. Lois's marriage with Meredith had been a peace treaty. If the marriage ended, there would be big trouble again between the different gangsters in New York. And what would Solly think?

O'Hanlon, of course, told Meredith about the affair. He also phoned Rick. "Mr. Baline?"

"Who wants to know?" But Rick recognized the voice.

"A word of friendly warning. I'm afraid Robert Meredith is on his way to see you. It won't be a pleasant visit."

"What makes it your business?"

"Nothing. I just don't like to see a young man getting into trouble because of a woman. Even a woman as attractive as Mrs. Meredith."

"How much do you know?"

"Enough."

"Why do you think that Meredith is coming to see me?"

"Because I told him about you and Mrs. Meredith."

"Why?"

"Come to my place, and I'll tell you."

Rick went.

"Why did you tell Meredith," he began again.

"Robert Meredith asked me."

"So, he's coming to see me. What's he going to do? Shoot me?"

"You don't expect a politician like Robert Meredith to shoot people, do you? I think he has friends to do that for him. Salucci, for example. I introduced them, of course. Now listen." O'Hanlon dropped his voice to a whisper. "Your boss is finished. Why? Because he doesn't listen to his friends or his enemies. Salucci is stronger now, and he's even got one of Mr. Horowitz's men working for him. If Mr. H. is finished, then you're finished too. And I've made enough money. I'm going home to Ireland."

"Why are you telling me all of this? You could just let Meredith and Salucci kill me."

"Because I like you. In fact, you remind me of me, and I want to give you a chance. Call my friend Winchell at the New York Mirror, and give him this." He handed some papers to Rick.

Rick looked quickly through the papers. There were letters, notes, and photographs with information about the relationship between Salucci and Meredith. If this appeared in the papers, it would be the end for the politician and the criminal. That would help Solly and Rick.

Rick went straight to the newspaper offices.

CHAPTER NINE

Appointments in Prague

"Nervous?" asked Louis.

"No, why?" replied Victor.

"You should be. A man could be killed doing this."

Rick's parachute opened as planned. He didn't really care if Victor followed or not.

They had all left London on a dark, dirty evening, and here they were, just after midnight, arriving in Czechoslovakia.

He landed safely, and the others hit the ground near him.

"I prefer indoor sports," Louis said.

"Quiet," whispered Victor.

There were no lights. They followed Jan and Josef through the forest, and soon reached a house in the small village of Lidice. The door opened. An old woman, bent with age but bright-eyed, led them to a table, where there was food and some Czech beer. Ten minutes later, everything was cleared from the table, and Victor spread a map out. Louis went to bed. Rick lit a cigarette.

"You still have doubts, don't you, Mr. Blaine," said Victor.

"I said I'd do it, and I'm doing it."

"Why don't you just leave?"

"It's a little late for that now."

"Why did you come? Because of Ilsa?"

"Because of a lot of things. I fell in love with your wife in Paris before I knew that she was your wife. I'm still in love with her. If I didn't love her, I wouldn't be here. But I am. I'm sure we'll both try to work together."

"Your past relationship with my wife is not important to me. The next few days are." He paused. "Mr. Blaine, Reinhard Heydrich killed my father. My father's politics were unacceptable to the Nazis. When they arrived in Prague, I escaped, but my father didn't. Heydrich must be stopped! I will ask you again, for the last time: are you with us or not? I'm asking you in the name of the woman we both love, Ilsa."

Rick looked at him. "I'm with you."

The plan was for Rick to contact Ilsa in Prague. Louis would follow by a different route a few hours later. Victor had to stay in Lidice because his face was too well-known in Prague. Jan and Josef were responsible for keeping in contact with the Czech Resistance.

In the morning, Rick went into Prague and took a room beside the Charles Bridge. Ilsa's address was not far away. He had to see her.

They met in a small bar near his hotel. She looked beautiful. He wanted to kiss her, but he didn't. Eyes seemed

to be everywhere in Prague. Ilsa spoke softly, almost whispering. "The operation may not be possible."

"That's very sudden, isn't it?"

"Yes. We can't talk in here."

They finished their drinks and went out into the sun. They pulled their hats down, and Ilsa put on sunglasses.

"What's happening?" Rick asked.

"I don't know, but the Czech Resistance is asking London to stop the operation. They seem afraid of what could happen if we succeed."

"They may be right." He lit a cigarette and remembered Louis's doubts. "Or maybe they know that the Germans suspect something? Do they suspect you?"

"I don't know. It's possible." Ilsa was worried. "But we have to continue," she said. "Heydrich is the worst kind of monster. He's evil. Things are going to get worse."

"For the Jews?"

"Especially for the Jews. He hates Communists and Jews. He'll kill them all if he can... and there's something else... He wants to make love to me. He tried last night. I didn't let him, but I can't refuse him for long. He's that kind of man."

Rick's anger boiled inside him. He hadn't felt so angry for years. "Then we really have to hurry."

"Yes, but not just for me. For Victor. For everybody in Europe."

They walked in silence. Suddenly, Rick spoke. He had an idea that could save Ilsa and the operation. "We'll inform Heydrich that there's a plan to kill him."

"Victor will never agree to that."

"Don't worry about Victor. Don't you see? This is the oldest trick in the world. You tell someone what's going to happen. So, he trusts you - and then you do it!" He hated lying to her, but Louis was right. The Czech people would pay a terrible price for Heydrich's death.

"But he'll send his men looking for us."

"It seems they're already looking for us."

"Are you sure it will work?"

"Trust me. Heydrich thinks he's tough. People like him never believe it can happen to them."

"How do you know?"

"I know," he said quietly. "It happened to me once."

In the end, Ilsa agreed. "I'll tell him," she said. "I'll tell him there's a plan to bomb his car tomorrow. I'll ask him to be careful and to take another route."

"Why you?"

"Because I'm the one closest to him. There's a party tonight at the castle, and he's asked me to be his partner. I'll be with him. He trusts me."

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CHAPTER TEN

Eight Dead in New York

Rick picked up the paper. Winchell's story was there:

NEW YORK POLITICIAN AND ITALIAN GANGSTER HAVE QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

What does the face of evil look like? If you go to the movies, you may think that you already know: a tough man with a big hat, a long dark coat, and a gun. But it could be the man next door.

This newspaper has learned that a famous politician and a well-known gangster are suspected of working together for their own personal rewards.

Documents have been sent to this newspaper. They tell us that Lorenzo Salucci, who organizes most of the "working girls" in this city, has helped Senator Robert Meredith to become the famous politician that he is today. So, what kind of corruption is behind the Senators success? And who is Senator Meredith's lovely wife? She is the only daughter of another famous gangster, Solomon Horowitz. We also understand that she is spending a lot of time with Rick Baline, the manager of the Tootsie-Wootsie Club.

Rick put his gun in his pocket and sat in his office, waiting. The door opened. It was Meredith.

"Come in, Senator. I was expecting you."

Meredith threw another copy of the Mirror on the desk. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Ask Mr. Winchell."

"I don't want to talk to a newspaperman. I want to talk to you."

"You want to know what I know about you and Salucci. I know a lot. He supplies you with girls. He helps you cheat the tax office... I know everything... and O'Hanlon knows everything else."

"You think you're such a smart guy."

"I am," answered Rick. "You're not. You're finished, and Salucci is too."

"Not yet. And if I were you, I'd start worrying about Horowitz."

"Solly and Tick-Tock will have no problems with Salucci's boys."

"Don't be so sure about Tick-Tock's loyalties at the moment... Where's my wife?"

"She was my girl before she was your wife. But why don't we let the lady decide for herself? Lois!" he called.

"I'm right here, Rick." She came in, smiled at Meredith, and then threw her arms around Rick and kissed him.

"Do you want to go back to him, Lois? Although it may not matter, as he'll soon be in prison."

Lois looked at her husband. "I hate you, Robert. I thought I loved you. I tried to love you, for my father, but I soon learned about all the corruption. You cheated the government and you paid the police. You did business with people like my father while you pretended you were better than them. You're not a man. You're nothing!"

Meredith stood up. He had a gun in his right hand. "I'll show you who's nothing," he said.

"Put that gun away, Senator, before you hurt somebody," said Rick.

"You aren't brave enough to use that thing," said Lois.

Rick had his gun out too, but not before Meredith had shot Lois in the chest. Rick's bullet killed Meredith.

One of Solly's men ran in. He saw Robert Meredith dead on the carpet and Lois Horowitz Meredith dead in Rick's arms. "Go and see if Solly's OK," said Rick. "And where's Tick-Tock?"

"I don't know."

Rick stood up. Lois's body fell from his arms for the last time. He had to kill Salucci, and worry about the future later.

There was a huge amount of money locked away in the office, half a million dollars, maybe more. Solly had kept it for Lois, but now Rick was stealing it. He put it in a suitcase, and ran. In the street, he looked back. There was a notice outside the club:

Tonight. Lunceford and Hupfield, performing your Favorite Songs, including "As Time Goes By," with Sam Waters at the Piano.

Rick drove to Solly's house.

The front door was open. Inside, things were in a terrible mess, and in the middle of the floor lay a dead man with a bullet hole in the back of his head.

Not Solly. One of Salucci's men? But where was Solly now? With Tick-Tock, looking for Salucci? Rick had a good idea where Solly was. Tick-Tock was probably with him, waiting for the arrival of Salucci. He had to get there before it was too late. He raced back over the river to Harlem.

The front door was open as he passed, and a large Chrysler was parked outside. The driver didn't see Rick. Rick shot him in the head as he ran through the door after Salucci's men. This is what he saw:

Solly at a table, reaching for his gun. No Tick-Tock.

Solly shooting the first of the three men as they ran in.

The second one shooting Solly in the neck.

Tick-Tock appearing from another room.

Solly, bleeding, shooting the second man in the leg.

Rick fired too, but missed. Tick-Tock had a gun, but he was pointing it at Solly! The third man shot Solly in the arm, just before Rick shot him. Tick-Tock fired at Solly, hitting him. Rick shot Tick-Tock's brains onto the wall behind him, half a second too late. Solly was still alive, but not for long.

There was a noise behind Rick. The second man was on the floor, but not dead. Rick kicked him. "Where's Salucci?" he shouted. There was no reply. "Where is he? I'll give you one more chance. Where's Lorenzo Salucci?" No answer. Rick fired his gun, and left the back way

As he reached the street, Sam arrived. Rick got in.

"Get your head down, Rick. They aren't looking for a black man. Where to?"

"As far away from here as possible."

"Good. I've always wanted to go there."

Rick said, "But let's start with Salucci's club."

"No," said Sam. "You're crazy. No, Rick, this isn't the movies. Sometimes the good guys don't win."

"Maybe you're right, Sam, but I want to go to my mother's place before we leave town."

Outside his mother's apartment, Rick opened his suitcase and put a large handful of money into each of his pockets. He shut the case and rang the bell. When his mother opened the door, he kissed her and gave her the suitcase.

"Goodbye," he said. "I'm sorry. I have to go."

"Rick..."

But Rick had gone.

They drove all day, reaching Boston in the late evening.

The next morning, on the way to buy tickets for the ship to France, they bought a copy of the Boston American. Winchell's piece was there:

EIGHT DEAD IN GANGSTER SHOOTINGS Senator Robert Meredith, his wife, and six gangsters died yesterday in the Tootsie-Wootsie Club and in the home of gangster, Lorenzo Salucci. One of the dead gangsters is Solomon Horowitz, father of Mrs. Meredith.

Yesterday's newspaper described criminal activities of Mr. Meredith and Mr. Salucci, but today we can report that the documents were false. They were produced by Mr. Rick Baline, manager of the club, who wanted to steal Robert Meredith's wife and Mr. Horowitz's business. Mr. Baline is also suspected of killing the Meredith's and Mr. Horowitz, and of stealing a huge amount of money from the club.

Rick threw the paper away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Walls Have Ears

There was a soft knock on Louis Renault's door.

It was Rick. "Don't say anything, Louis. Just listen. We have to move quickly." Rick turned the radio up. "Walls have ears in this city. Something's wrong. The Czech Resistance want us to stop the operation. Ilsa's in trouble."

"What are we going to do?" Renault asked.

"We're going to do what you wanted to do. We're going to stop the operation ourselves." He told Louis the plan for Ilsa to tell Heydrich about the bomb. "We'll still go to the bridge with our bomb and guns ready."

"But they'll shoot us when we arrive."

"No. They don't know us. They won't know what they're looking for, and we'll expect them. When we see them, we can leave, and we'll look like heroes."

"But do we tell Laszlo?"

"No, it's our little secret."

Louis felt happier after talking to Rick, but something else had happened earlier in the day. He had gone to a bar, had a few drinks, and met a girl. He drank more and talked a lot. Then he told her about an important event. He talked carelessly. She listened carefully.

That evening, she met her boyfriend, Karel. Karel's brother, Josef, was in the Czech Resistance.

She wasted no time. "Karel, something big is going to happen." She dropped her voice. "A bomb."

"Who told you this?"

"A Frenchman."

"Did you go to bed with him?"

"Yes... Sorry."

Karel was sorry too, but he needed to tell Josef. Was the Frenchman talking about Operation Executioner?

He went straight to the farmhouse in Lidice. "Mr. Laszlo!"

"What is it?"

Breathlessly, Karel told him what he had heard.

Victor calmly thanked him for the information, though his stomach was turning. "Don't tell anybody, and tell your girlfriend the same! Understand?"

"It had to be Louis. Stupid Frenchman! Couldn't he leave women alone at a time like this?" Victor thought quickly. The operation must continue. He was ready to go in the morning. He had received the message from Rick. Josef and Jan were ready. "Tomorrow Heydrich will be dead!"

Ilsa looked beautiful. Her dress was cut low at the back, and Heydrich moved his hands over her smooth white skin. A flame burned in him. He wanted her. Ilsa smiled as she moved away.

Heydrich looked at her. Tamara Toumanova was not like other women. She didn't seem to be afraid of him. He was pleased she was with him on this important evening.

The party was a great success. All the main guests had come, the food was excellent, the ladies were beautiful, and Miss Toumanova was the most beautiful.

Across the river, Rick Blaine saw the lights in the castle.

"Enjoy tonight, Nazis!"

"Don't be so jealous, Rick," said Louis, lighting a cigarette. "There are probably some very beautiful women up there. The thought of those German hands on their lovely..." He saw that Pack wasn't really listening. "Goodnight, Rick. Sleep well. We both need to sleep well tonight. Tomorrow's going to be a very busy day."

Rick continued to stare at the castle until the last light had gone out.

* * *

Ilsa returned to Heydrich's house with him that night. She had no choice. He ordered champagne. Ilsa didn't want any, but she couldn't refuse. Earlier in the evening, at the

castle, she had poured most of her wine into the large flower pots. She needed a clear head.

They drank. "Another?" said Heydrich.

"No thanks." She smiled. She had to pretend to be happy.

He sat down and looked at her. He was drunk and very dangerous.

"Go and stand beside the window. I want to enjoy your beauty in the moonlight." He turned to the servant. "Tell everyone to go to bed."

They were alone. Heydrich rose from his chair and went to Ilsa. He put his arms around her. The window was open, and it was cold. She was shaking.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "There is nothing to fear."

This was her chance, and suddenly she knew what she wanted to say. "But, Reinhard, there is everything to fear. They are going to kill you!"

He laughed. "Who is going to kill me?"

"The Czech Resistance and their friends. They're going to put a bomb in your car tomorrow morning on the Cechuv Most."

"The Cechuv Most? How do they know that I have changed my route? Who told them?"

This was the most dangerous moment. Ilsa hoped he had told others. If she was the only person, she was dead.

He took her arm violently. His smile had gone. "How do you know this?" he demanded.

"Someone in your office is a traitor... Frau Hentgen..."

"Impossible!" he said confidently, but she could see that he wasn't sure. "She has worked for me for years."

"She's jealous of us-of you, of me, of us. Oh, Reinhard, I didn't know how to tell you before. I was afraid that you wouldn't believe me, but now I'm sure." Ilsa gave him a piece of paper. It was the message from the Czech Resistance:

"... Operation Executioner. Tell London. Danger."

"It was on her desk. Operation Executioner has been organized in London, with help from people in Prague. I've checked. They want to kill you."

"I have suspected this for some time." He hurried to the telephone and returned to her a minute later. "I have ordered the arrest of Frau Hentgen," he told her. "I will question her in the morning."

Ilsa rushed to put her arms around him. "Excellent."

To her surprise, he put up his arms to stop her. "No!" he said. "Maybe I should order your arrest too?"

"What?" She could see that he was suspicious of her, but at the same time he wanted her. She looked in his eye, and gave him one of her warmest smiles.

Suddenly, he reached out and pulled at her dress. He kissed her, violently.

She hit him on the side of his face. "Stop!" she cried. "I'm not that kind of girl. If I was, do you think Frau Hentgen would hate me like that?"

He let her go and sat down heavily on the floor.

She tried to control her hate as she touched his hair.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

"I'm trying to save your life," she replied. She paused, and then said, "I know who's responsible. It's a man called Victor Laszlo..."

"Laszlo!" Heydrich shouted. "I will kill him with my own hands!"

"Laszlo is a dangerous man, Reinhard. You must send your best men to the Cechuv Most, but you and I should go to the Charles Bridge tomorrow morning."

"I will not run away! I am not afraid of Laszlo."

"You're not running away. You're saving people from unpleasantness. People who love you."

He looked at her. "Make love to me."

"No," she said. "Not tonight. This is a time for hate, not for love."

"You are right," he agreed. "But you will stay here tonight and cross the Charles Bridge with me tomorrow. Everybody in Prague will see us together. But if there is no problem at the other bridge and if something happens on the Charles Bridge, I will kill you myself. Sleep well, Miss Toumanova."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Goodbye Prague

At 5:00 in the morning, there were no cars in the streets and no people. New York was never like this. Rick suddenly felt homesick.

But at last, he had something to die for. This time, though, he did not plan to die.

* * *

Ilsa was woken by one of Heydrich's servants. The clock showed 7:00. Heydrich was never late, and so she had to move quickly. Downstairs, he was walking nervously around the house. His boots were polished and his uniform was spotless. He looked like a perfect Nazi officer.

"You are late, Miss Toumanova. You Russians are all the same. You are like children."

"I wanted to look my best, Reinhard," she replied.

It was 7:31, and they were six minutes late. They got into the car. Her heart nearly stopped beating when she heard Heydrich's order to the driver. "The Cechuv Most."

The Cechuv Most? No! Victor and the others were waiting at the Charles Bridge. She had to change his route. But how?

"I thought you would like to see what I do to traitors," he said, as the car moved forward.

* * *

"Well, Rick, how are you this morning?" It was Louis.

"OK, I suppose."

Around them, people were beginning to arrive in the center of Prague for a normal day at work. Jan and Josef arrived, dressed as telephone workers. They walked to the end of the bridge. Where Was Victor? He should be here by now. Had he been caught on his way from the village?

"Goodbye, Louis. See you later."

"I hope so, Rick."

Rick walked to the other end of the bridge, with a basket on his arm. The smoke bomb was inside it, covered by two fresh loaves of bread. He could see Jan and Josef and Louis in the distance. Then he noticed Victor, who had stopped beside Louis and was talking to him. Rick looked at his watch. It was 7:39. Fifteen minutes from now, it would all be over. He looked up. Victor and Louis had disappeared. That wasn't part of the plan.

"Good morning, Victor," said Louis, as Victor arrived.

* * *

"Good morning, Captain Renault." There was something strange about Victor's voice.

"Is anything wrong?"

"What could be wrong?" asked Victor. "Today I will kill the man who is destroying my country and the people I love. It's the most beautiful day of my life."

"I think I know how you feel." Louis checked his watch. It was 7:42.

"How can you know how I feel? Until a few months ago, you were employed by my enemy."

"This isn't the time to talk about that," Louis told him. "With luck, we will succeed. With God's help, we will escape. We can discuss all that back in London."

"I hope so," said Victor.

* * *

Ilsa tried to control the fear in her voice. "The Cechuv Most?" she said softly. "Last night you said..."

"Last night I said a lot of things. Today is a new day." Heydrich looked at his watch. "Now my men are in position in the Jewish area of Prague, near the bridge. You want to see the execution of Victor Laszlo, I'm sure?"

"Yes, Herr Heydrich."

* * *

Rick stood on the Charles Bridge, smoking a cigarette. He hoped he was waiting for nothing. He hoped he could wait there for five minutes and then run, and send a message back to London that the operation had failed. It

was 7:45... Traffic moved slowly across the bridge. He could see the city churches, and the castle, but no black Mercedes. Heydrich was always on time... 7:46... 7:47... Rick lit another cigarette... 7:48... 7:49. Rick couldn't see Louis. Where had he gone?

Then he saw Louis. Ten seconds before 7:50. He started to breathe more easily. Louis looked sharp, as usual. Victor was saying something to Louis. Louis was disagreeing violently. 7:51... 7:52... No Heydrich. 7:53... 7:54... Still no Heydrich. One more minute and they could leave. Rick had just decided to have another cigarette when, suddenly, he heard the sound of music across the water.

* * *

Victor whispered to Louis. "He's late. What's happened?"

"I don't have the slightest idea."

Louis was waiting, at a sign from Jan, to step into the road in front of Heydrich's car. No German had ever been five minutes late for anything. So Rick's warning had been successful, and Heydrich had taken the other bridge. "I think it's time to leave."

"No, we can't. Not now."

"I think we agreed on five minutes."

"He's coming. I know he is. You seem very anxious to leave, Captain Renault. Maybe you know something that I

don't?" He held Victor's hand tightly "You're a traitor. I know about that girl, you stupid... That's why Heydrich hasn't come. You told her because you wanted Heydrich to know." Victor pressed his gun into Louis's chest.

7:56. As Louis lay bleeding on the ground, he heard the music. It was the same music that was played for important German visitors in Casablanca.

Heydrich was standing up in the car, listening to the music.

"Look, Miss Toumanova, my people love me."

"Not more than I do. And if you love me, please go the other way, to the Charles Bridge. I don't want to see the death of Victor Laszlo. I'm not used to the sight of blood, and I don't want anything to happen to you." She made her voice as warm and loving as possible. "Then we can enjoy tonight together. I was a fool last night. Kill the people at the other bridge if you want, but not in front of me. Please." She paused. They were still six minutes late.

Heydrich looked at her. "I cannot refuse a beautiful woman." He spoke to the driver.

"Thank you, Reinhard." If it was time to die, she was ready. She hoped it would be quick.

* * *

Even before he heard the shot, Rick saw Louis falling to the ground. He knew immediately that his friend was dead. He ran as fast as he could along the bridge.

Heydrich's Mercedes was in sight now. What was the matter with the man? Couldn't he listen to a warning? The car was turning the corner onto the bridge. Victor stepped into the street, behind the car, with the bomb in his hand.

And then Rick saw something else. Ilsa was in the car! Victor must see her. But Victor didn't stop. If he was surprised, his face didn't show it.

"No!" Rick shouted, running toward him.

Then he heard Ilsa's voice. "Hurry, Victor!"

Heydrich had a gun in his hand. She pulled his arm.

Rick thought that Heydrich was going to shoot Victor. Instead, the Nazi pointed the gun at Ilsa.

Rick jumped into the car. He hit Heydrich just as Heydrich fired at Ilsa. The bullet missed her.

At the same moment, Victor threw the bomb into the car.

Ten seconds! Rick tried to pick up the bomb, which was on the floor of the car. He heard two more shots. The driver and the guard in the front seat were dead. Jan and Josef were doing their job.

Seven seconds. Heydrich hit Rick on the head with his gun. Victor caught Heydrich's arm before Heydrich could hit Rick again. Rick was still trying to find the bomb. His hand found Ilsa instead of the bomb.

Four seconds. "Come on!" Rick shouted, pulling Ilsa up.

Victor had one hand around Heydrich's throat and the other was holding a gun to Heydrich's stomach. Heydrich pulled out a knife.

Two seconds. "Victor!" cried Ilsa.

"Jump!" Rick screamed.

Victor shot Heydrich in the stomach. Heydrich pushed the knife into Victor's heart.

Ilsa and Rick were out of the car and running.

Zero. The explosion was huge. It lifted the Mercedes off its wheels and into the air, and glass and metal rained from the sky.

As Rick's head hit the road, he saw Ilsa lying against the wall at the edge of the bridge. He couldn't reach her. Jan picked him up. Three steps, and he lifted Ilsa to her feet.

"Victor!" she screamed, and tried to run to the car. "Where are you?" Rick pulled her back. "He's dead."

"You tried to stop him. Why? You killed my husband!" She fought to get away from Rick, but he could hear the police shouting. There was no time for explaining.

He hit Ilsa hard, and she fell into his arms. He and Jan picked her up, and ran. Nobody tried to stop him. The Czechs on the bridge were not sure exactly what had happened yet.

He passed Louis's body. "Goodbye, Louis," Rick thought. "You were a true friend. I'm sorry it's ended."

The doors of a church were open to receive him, as planned.

He carried Ilsa downstairs, through another door and into a tunnel. Then Ilsa woke up.

"Are you OK?" Rick asked.

"I hate you," she said.

Two hours later, they were back in Lidice.

* * *

Jan and Josef had not been so lucky. The Germans caught them, shot them, cut off their heads and placed them on the walls of the Charles Bridge. Victor Laszlo's body was never seen again.

After Heydrich's death, the Nazi leaders in Berlin sent out new orders. Three thousand Jews were put in trains and trucks, and taken to Auschwitz. Five hundred others were arrested in Berlin, and one hundred and fifty-two of these were executed a day later. Nobody gave any reasons for their deaths.

Rick and Ilsa stayed in the farmhouse in Lidice, waiting for the British airplane. Every day, Rick knocked on Ilsa's door, but she refused to speak to him. They hadn't seen each other since the day they arrived.

On the ninth day, Rick was still trying to speak to Ilsa. He was losing hope.

On the tenth day, late at night, he knocked again. To his surprise, the door opened.

"What do you want?"

He couldn't see her face, only one red eye and hair covering her tears. "I want to explain."

"I will never believe anything you say."

Rick had to keep talking. He didn't want her to close the door again. "Some day, I hope you'll believe me. But why were you in the car? What did you expect me to do when I saw you? Let Victor kill you? I was ready to do a lot of things, but I wasn't ready to see you die."

Slowly, she opened the door a little wider.

"When I told Victor I'd help him, I meant it," Rick continued. "I wanted to do it, if only for you. But Louis never trusted the British, and he was right. They didn't care about Heydrich. They wanted to make the Czechs angry. They wanted people to be killed, to remind the world about the Germans and the terror they're causing. They think the Czechs weren't fighting hard enough. I think Louis was right. The English are selfish."

The door opened all the way.

"Victor died for his beliefs," said Ilsa.

"Yes, and he was happy for you to die too. That's the difference between him and me." Rick put his arms around her. "Can I come in?" She let him in and closed the door. "For a long time, I wanted to die because of something that I did years ago. Then I met you. You gave me back my life.

I can't live without you. I tried, but I couldn't. Not after Paris. Not after Casablanca. Not now. Not ever."

"Oh, Rick, I love you so much."

They held each other. "I thought you hated me."

"No," she said softly. "The time for hate is over." Her lips met his.

That night, a message came. A small airplane would land at eight o'clock the next morning, just outside the village.

They woke to the sounds of German shouts and gunfire. Karel Gabcik ran into the house and hurried them into a waiting car. "Tell the world," he called, as the car moved forward. "Tell everybody what is happening here."

The car raced away, followed by a German truck.

"Run," Rick told Ilsa, as they reached the airplane. "And when you're inside, tell them to take off. Understand?"

"I won't leave you."

"Run!"

Ilsa ran. Rick jumped out and fired at the truck. He wanted them to shoot at him, and not at the airplane.

He was ten meters away, and the airplane was starting to move. He was almost there, when a bullet hit his left leg.

He reached forward. There were fingers touching his.

Someone shot at the Germans from inside the airplane.

Another bullet hit him on the shoulder... and then... he was inside, in someone's arms. The door shut.

He lay on the floor, wondering which parts of his body still worked. He looked up. The fear in Ilsa's face had turned to worry, and then happiness.

"Good morning, Mr. Blaine," said Major Miles, as the plane left the ground. "And congratulations."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hello Casablanca

Seven months later, Rick and Ilsa stepped onto another airplane. This one was going to Casablanca. The reservations were in the names of Mr. and Mrs. Richard Blaine. Sam Waters was with them.

"Are you sure you want to, Sam?" Rick asked him.

"How many times are you going to ask me, Rick? Of course, I'm coming with you."

Although Rick's arm was better, he still walked with difficulty. His dancing days had ended, but he had married Ilsa, in the presence of Sam and Major Miles.

It was nearly the end for the Germans in North Africa. Three days after Casablanca had become safe, Rick said to Ilsa, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

She was.

When the airplane started to circle Casablanca, Ilsa looked out. "Rick! Sam! Look!"

They looked. The sign was still there: RICK'S CAFÉ AMERICAIN.

They went there immediately. It wasn't far. The place was closed, but the door was open. Sam's piano was in the corner, dusty but unharmed.

"Sam, play us some of the old songs," said Ilsa.

"You know what she means, Sam," said Rick, as Ilsa smiled that beautiful smile. "You still remember it, don't you? Play 'As Time Goes By.'"

He played it.

Now, at last, it was a story with an ending.

Ilsa threw her arms around Rick's neck and kissed him until she couldn't breathe.

- THE END -

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