

I
Friday, October 1, 1943,
Washington, D.C.

History was all around me. I could smell it in everything from the French Empire clock ticking on the elegant mantelpiece to the bright red wallpaper that gave the Red Room its name. I had experienced it the moment I entered the White House and was ushered into this antechamber to await the president's secretary. The idea that Abraham Lincoln might have stood on the same Savonnerie carpet where I was standing now, staring up at an enormous chandelier, or that Teddy Roosevelt might have sat on one of the room's red-and-gold upholstered chairs took hold of me like the eyes of the beautiful woman whose portrait hung above the white marble fireplace. I wondered why she reminded me of my own Diana, and formed the conclusion that it had something to do with the smile on her alabaster white face. She seemed to say, "You should have cleaned your shoes, Willard. Better still, you should have worn a different pair. Those look like you walked here from Monticello."

Hardly daring to use the ornate-looking sofa for fear of sitting on Dolley Madison's ghost, I sat on a dining chair by the doorway. Being at the White House contrasted sharply with the way I had been intending to spend the evening. I had arranged to take Diana to the Loew's movie theater on Third and F streets, to see Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman in For Whom the Bell Tolls. War, or indeed a movie about a

war, could not have seemed more remote among the richly carved and finished woods of that elegant red mausoleum.

Another minute passed, then one of the room's handsome doors opened to admit a tall, well-groomed woman of a certain age, who flashed me the kind of look that said she thought I might have left a mark on one of the chairs, and then invited me, tonelessly, to follow her.

She was more headmistress than woman, and wore a pencil skirt that made a rustling, sibilant sound, as if it might have bitten the hand that dared to approach its zipper.

Turning left out of the Red Room, we walked over the red carpet of the Cross Hall and then stepped into an elevator where a Negro usher wearing white gloves conducted us up to the second floor. Leaving the elevator, the woman with the noisy skirt led me through the West Sitting Hall and along the Center Hall, before halting in front of the president's study door, where she knocked and then entered without waiting for an answer.

In contrast to the elegance I had just left, the president's study was informal and, with its ziggurats of books, piles of yellowing papers tied with string, and cluttered desk, I thought it resembled the shabby little office I had once occupied at Princeton.

"Mr. President, this is Professor Mayer," she said. And then left, closing the doors behind her.

The president was sitting in a wheelchair, cocktail shaker in hand, facing a small table on which stood several liquor bottles. He was listening to the Symphony Hour on WINX.

"I'm just mixing a jug of martinis," he said. "I hope you'll join me. I'm told that my martinis are too cold, but that's the way I like them. I can't abide warm alcohol. It seems to defeat the whole point of drinking in the first place."

"A martini would be very welcome, Mr. President."

"Good, good. Come on in and sit down." Franklin D. Roosevelt nodded toward the sofa opposite the desk. He turned off the radio and poured the martinis. "Here." He held one up and I came around the table to collect it. "Take the jug as well, in case we need a refill."

"Yes, sir." I took the jug and returned to the sofa.

Roosevelt turned the wheelchair away from the liquor table and pushed himself toward me. The chair was a makeshift affair, not the kind you would see in a hospital or an old people's home, but more like a wooden kitchen chair with the legs cut off, as if whoever built it had meant to conceal its true purpose from the American electorate, who might have balked at voting for a cripple.

"If you don't mind me saying so, you seem young to be a professor."

"I'm thirty-five. Besides, I was only an associate professor when I left Princeton. That's a little like saying you're a company vice-president."

"Thirty-five, I guess that's not so young. Not these days. In the army they'd think you were an old man. They're only boys, most of them. Sometimes it just breaks my heart to think how young our soldiers are." He raised his glass in a silent toast.

I returned it, then sipped the martini. It had way too much gin for my taste, and it was not too cold if you like drinking liquid hydrogen. Still, it wasn't every day the president of the United States mixed you a cocktail, and so I drank it with a proper show of pleasure.

While we drank, I took note of the small things about Roosevelt's appearance that only this kind of proximity could have revealed: the pince-nez that I had always mistaken for spectacles; the man's smallish ears—or maybe his head was just too big; the missing tooth on the lower jaw; the way the metal braces on his legs had been painted black

to blend in with his trousers; the black shoes that looked poignantly unworn on their leather soles; the bow tie and the worn smoking jacket with leather patches on the elbows; and the gas mask that hung off the side of the wheelchair. I noticed a little black Scotch terrier lying in front of the fire and looking more like a small rug. The president watched me slowly sip the liquid hydrogen, and I saw a faint smile pull at the corners of his mouth.

"So you're a philosopher," he said. "I can't say I know very much about philosophy."

"The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful." It sounded pompous, but then, that goes with the territory.

"Philosophers sound a lot like politicians."

"Except that philosophers are accountable to no one. Just logic. If philosophers were obliged to appeal to an electorate, we'd all be out of a job, sir. We're more interesting to ourselves than we are to other people."

"But not on this particular occasion," observed the president. "Else you wouldn't be here now."

"There's not much to tell, sir."

"But you're a famous American philosopher, aren't you?"

"Being an American philosopher is a little like saying you play baseball for Canada."

"What about your family? Isn't your mother one of the Cleveland von Dorffs?"

"Yes, sir. My father, Hans Mayer, is a German Jew who was brought up and educated in the United States and joined the diplomatic corps after college. He met and married my mother in 1905. A year or two later she inherited a family fortune based on rubber tires, which explains why I've always had such a smooth ride in life. I went to Groton. Then to Harvard where I studied philosophy, which was a great disappointment to my father, who's inclined to believe that all philosophers are mad German syphilitics who think that

God is dead. As a matter of fact, my whole family is inclined to the view that I've wasted my life.

"After college I stayed on at Harvard. Got myself a Ph.D. and won the Sheldon Traveling Fellowship. So I went to Vienna, by way of Cambridge, and published a very dull book. I stayed on in Vienna and after a while took up a lectureship at the University of Berlin. After Munich I returned to Harvard and published another very dull book."

"I read your book, Professor. One of them, anyway. On Being Empirical. I don't pretend to understand all of it, but it seems to me that you put an awful lot of faith in science."

"I don't know that I'd call it faith, but I believe that if a philosopher wants to make a contribution toward the growth of human knowledge, he must be more scientific in how that knowledge is grasped. My book argues that we should take less for granted on the basis of guesswork and supposition."

Roosevelt turned toward his desk and collected a book that was lying next to a bronze ship's steering clock. It was one of my own. "It's when you use that method to suggest that morality is pretty much a dead cat that I begin to have a problem." He opened the book, found the sentences he had underlined, and read aloud:

"Aesthetics and morality are coterminous in that neither can be said to possess an objective validity, and it makes no more sense to assert that telling the truth is verifiably a good thing than it does to say that a painting by Rembrandt is verifiably a good painting. Neither statement has any factual meaning."

Roosevelt shook his head. "Quite apart from the dangers that are inherent in arguing such a position at a time when the Nazis are hell-bent on the destruction of all previously held notions of morality, it seems to me that you're missing a trick. An ethical judgment is very often merely the factual classification of an action that verifiably tends to arouse

people in a certain kind of way. In other words, the common objects of moral disapproval are actions or classes of actions that can be tested empirically as a matter of fact."

I smiled back at the president, liking him for taking the trouble to read some of my book and for taking me on. I was about to answer him when he tossed my book aside and said:

"But I didn't ask you here to have a discussion about philosophy."

"No, sir."

"Tell me, how did you get involved with Donovan's outfit?"

"Soon after I returned from Europe I was offered a post at Princeton, where I became an associate professor of philosophy. After Pearl Harbor, I applied for a commission in the Naval Reserve, but before my application could be processed I had lunch with a friend of my dad's, a lawyer named Allen Dulles. He persuaded me to join the Central Office of Information. When our part of the COI became the OSS, I came to Washington. I'm now a German intelligence analyst."

Roosevelt turned in his wheelchair as rain hit the window, his big shoulders and thick neck straining against the collar of his shirt; by contrast, his legs were hardly there at all, as if his maker had attached them to the wrong body. The combination of the chair, the pince-nez, and the six-inch ivory cigarette holder clenched between his teeth gave Roosevelt the look of a Hollywood movie director.

"I didn't know it was raining so hard," he said, removing the cigarette from his holder and fitting another from the packet of Camels that lay on the desk. Roosevelt offered one to me. I took it at the same time as I found the silver Dunhill in my vest pocket and then lit us both.

The president accepted the light, thanked me in German, and then continued the conversation in that language,

mentioning the latest American war casualty toll—115,000—and some pretty savage fighting that was currently taking place at Salerno, in southern Italy. His German wasn't so bad. Then he suddenly switched subjects and reverted to English.

"I've a job for you, Professor Mayer. A sensitive job, as it happens. Too sensitive to give to the State Department. This has to be between you and me, and only you and me. The trouble with those bastards at State is that they can't keep their fucking mouths shut. Worse than that, the whole department is riven with factionalism. I think you might know what I'm talking about."

It was generally well known around Washington that Roosevelt had never really respected his secretary of state. Cordell Hull's grasp of foreign affairs was held to be poor, and, at the age of seventy-two, he tired easily. For a long time after Pearl, FDR had come to rely on the assistant secretary of state, Sumner Welles, to do most of the administration's real foreign-policy work. Then, just the previous week, Sumner Welles had suddenly tendered his resignation, and the scuttlebutt around the better-informed sections of government and the intelligence services was that Welles had been obliged to resign following the commission of an act of grave moral turpitude with a Negro railway porter while aboard the presidential train on its way to Virginia.

"I don't mind telling you that these goddamned snobs at State are in for one hell of a shake-up. Half of them are pro-British and the other half anti-Semitic. Mince them all up and you wouldn't have enough guts to make one decent American." Roosevelt sipped his martini and sighed. "What do you know about a place called Katyn Forest?"

"A few months ago Berlin radio reported the discovery of a mass grave in the Katyn Forest, near Smolensk. The Germans allege it contained the remains of five thousand or so

Polish officers who had surrendered to the Red Army in 1940, following the nonaggression pact between the Germans and the Soviets, only to be murdered on Stalin's orders. Goebbels has been making a lot of political capital out of it. Katyn's been the wind breaking from the tailpipe of the German propaganda machine since the summer."

"For that reason alone, in the beginning I was half-inclined to believe the story was just Nazi propaganda," Roosevelt said. "But there are Polish-American radio stations in Detroit and Buffalo that insist the atrocity occurred. It's even been alleged that this administration has been covering up the facts so as not to endanger our alliance with the Russians. Since the story first broke, I've received a report from our liaison officer to the Polish army in exile, another from our own naval attaché in Istanbul, and one from Prime Minister Churchill. I've even received a report from Germany's own War Crimes Bureau. In August, Churchill wrote to me asking for my thoughts, and I passed all the files over to State and asked them to look into it."

Roosevelt shook his head wearily.

"You can guess what happened. Not a goddamned thing! Hull is blaming everything on Welles, of course, claiming Welles must have been sitting on these files for weeks.

"It's true, I had given the files to Welles and asked him to get someone on the German desk at State to make a report. Then Welles had his heart attack, and cleared his desk, offering me his resignation. Which I refused.

"Meanwhile, Hull told the fellow on the German desk, Thornton Cole, to give the files to Bill Bullitt, to see what our former ambassador to Soviet Russia might make of them. Bullitt fancies himself a Russia expert.

"I don't actually know if Bullitt looked at the files. He'd been after Welles's job for a while and I suspect he was too busy lobbying for it to pay them much attention. When I

asked Hull about Katyn Forest, he and Bullshitt realized that they'd fucked up and decided to quietly return the files to Welles's office and blame him for not having done anything. Of course Hull made sure to have Cole back up his story." Roosevelt shrugged. "That's Welles's best guess about what must have happened. And I think I agree with him."

It was about then that I remembered I had once introduced Welles to Cole, at Washington's Metropolitan Club.

"When Hull returned the files and told me that we weren't in a position to have any kind of view on Katyn Forest," Roosevelt continued, "I used every short word known to a sailor. And the upshot of all this is that nothing has been done." The president pointed at some dusty-looking files stacked on a bookshelf. "Would you mind fetching them down for me? They're up there."

I retrieved the files, laid them on the sofa beside the president, and then inspected my hands. The job did not augur well, given the amount of grime on my fingers.

"It's no great secret that sometime before Christmas I'm going to have a conference with Churchill and Stalin. Not that I've any clue where that will be. Stalin has rejected coming to London, so we could wind up almost anywhere. But wherever we end up meeting I want to have a clear idea on this Katyn Forest situation, because it seems certain to affect the future of Poland. The Russians have already broken off diplomatic relations with the Polish government in London. The British, of course, feel a special loyalty to the Poles. After all, they went to war for Poland. So, as you can see, it's a delicate situation."

The president lit another cigarette and then rested a hand on the bundle of files.

"Which brings me to you, Professor Mayer. I want you to conduct your own investigation into these Katyn Forest claims. Start by making an objective assessment of what the

files contain, but don't feel you have to limit yourself to them. Speak to anyone you think would be of use. Make up your own mind and then write a report for my eyes only. Nothing too long. Just a summary of your findings with some suggested courses of action. I've cleared it with Donovan, so this takes priority over anything else you're doing."

Taking out his own handkerchief, he wiped his hand clean of dust, and didn't touch the files again.

"How long do I have, Mr. President?"

"Two or three weeks. It's not long, I know, for a matter of such gravity, but as you can appreciate, that can't be helped. Not now."

"When you say 'speak to anyone who might be of use,' does that include people in London? Members of the Polish government in exile? People in the British Foreign Office? And how much of a nuisance am I allowed to make of myself?"

"Speak to whomever you like," insisted Roosevelt. "If you do decide to go to London, it will help if you say that you're my special representative. That will open every door to you. My secretary, Grace Tully, will organize the necessary paperwork for you. Only, try not to express any opinions. And avoid saying anything that will make people think you're speaking in my name. As I said, this is a very delicate situation, but whatever happens, I'd very much like to avoid this coming between myself and Stalin. Is that clearly understood?"

Clear enough. I was to be a mutt with no balls and just my master's collar to let people know I had the right to piss on his flowers. But I fixed a smile to my face and, brushing some stars and stripes onto my words, piped, "Yes, sir, I understand you perfectly."

When I got back home, Diana was waiting for me, full of excited questions.

"Well?" she said. "What happened?"

"He makes a terrible martini," I said. "That's what happened."

"You had drinks with him?"

"Just the two of us. As if he was Nick and I was Nora Charles."

"What was it like?"

"Too much gin. And way too cold. Like a country house party in England."

"I meant, what did you talk about?"

"Among other things, philosophy."

"Philosophy?" Diana pulled a face, and sat down. Already she was looking less excited. "That's easier on the stomach than sleeping pills, I guess."

Diana Vandervelden was rich, loud, glamorous, and drily funny in a way that always put me in mind of one of Hollywood's tougher leading ladies, say Bette Davis or Katharine Hepburn. Formidably intelligent, she was easily bored and had given up a place at Bryn Mawr to play women's golf, almost winning the U.S. Women's Amateur title in 1936. The year after that she had quit competition golf to marry a senator. "When I met my husband it was love at first sight," she was fond of saying. "But that's because I was too cheap to buy glasses." Diana was herself not very political, preferring writers and artists to senators, and, despite her many accomplishments in the salon—she was an excellent cook and was famous for giving some of the best dinner parties in Washington—she had quickly tired of being married to her lawyer husband: "I was always cooking for his Republican friends," she later complained to me. "Pearls before swine. And you needed the whole damn oyster farm." When she

left her husband in 1940, Diana had set up her own decorating business, which was how she and I had first met. Soon after I moved to Washington, a mutual friend had suggested I hire her to fix up my home in Kalorama Heights. "A philosopher's house, huh? Let's see, now. How would that look? How about a lot of mirrors, all at navel height?" Our friends expected us to get married, but Diana took a dim view of marriage. So did I.

Right from the beginning my relationship with Diana had been intensely sexual, which suited us both just fine. We were very fond of each other, but neither of us ever talked much about love. "We love each other," I had told Diana the previous Christmas, "in the way people do when they love themselves just a little more."

And I loved it that Diana hated philosophy. The last thing I was looking for was someone who wanted to talk about my subject. I liked women. Especially when they were as intelligent and witty as Diana. I just didn't like it when they wanted to talk about logic. Philosophy can be a stimulating companion in the salon, but it's a dreadful bore in the bedroom.

"What else did Roosevelt talk about?"

"War work. He wants me to write a report on something."

"How very heroic," she said, lighting a cigarette. "What do you get for that? A medal on a typewriter ribbon?"

I grinned, enjoying her show of scorn. Both Diana's brothers had enlisted in the Canadian Air Force in 1939 and, as she never failed to remind me, both of them had been decorated.

"Anyone might think you don't believe that intelligence work is important, darling." I went over to the liquor tray and poured myself a scotch. "Drink?"

"No, thanks. You know, I think I worked out why it's called intelligence. It's because intelligent people like you always manage to stay well out of harm's way."

"Someone has to keep an eye on what the Germans are up to." I swallowed some of the scotch, which tasted good and warmed my insides pleasingly after Roosevelt's embalming fluid. "But if it gives you a kick trying to make me feel yellow, then go ahead. I can take it."

"Maybe that's what bothers me most."

"I'm not bothered that you're bothered."

"So that's how it works. Philosophy." Diana leaned forward in her armchair and stubbed out her cigarette. "What's this report about, anyway? That the president of the United States wants you to write."

"I can't tell you."

"I don't see what there is to be cagey about."

"I'm not being cagey. I'm being secretive. There's a big difference. If I were being cagey, I might let you stroke my fur, fold my ears, and tickle it out of me. Secretive means that I'll swallow my poison pill before I let that happen."

For a moment her nostrils looked pinched. "Never put off what you can do today," she said.

"Thank you, dear. But I can tell you this. I'm going to have to go to London for a week or two."

Her face relaxed a little and a smile played a quiet little duet on her lips.

"London? Haven't you heard, Willy dear? The Germans are bombing the place. It might be dangerous for you." Her voice was gently mocking.

"I did kind of hear that, yes," I said. "Which is why I'm glad to be going. So I can look myself in the eye when I'm shaving in the morning. After fifteen months sitting behind a desk on Twenty-third Street, it strikes me that maybe I should have joined the navy after all."

"Goodness. Such heroism. I think I will have that drink."

I poured her one, the way she preferred it, neat, like the Bryn Mawr way Diana occupied a chair, knees pressed chastely together. As I handed it to her, she took it out of

my fingers and then held my hand, pressing it close to her marble-cool cheek. "You know I don't mean a word of anything I say, don't you?"

"Of course. It's one of the reasons I'm so fond of you."

"Some people fight bulls, ride to hounds, shoot birds. Me, I like to talk. It's one of the two things I do really well."

"Darling, you're the Ladies Grand Champion of talk."

She swallowed her scotch and bit her thumbnail as if to let me know it was just an appetizer and there were parts of me she would like to try her little bite on. Then she stood up and kissed me, her eyelids flickering as she kept on opening and closing them to see if I was ready to climb aboard the pleasure boat she had chartered for us.

"Why don't we go upstairs and I'll show you the other thing I do really well?"

I kissed her again, putting my whole self into it, like some ham who'd understudied John Barrymore.

"You go ahead," I said when, after a while, we came up for air. "I'll be there shortly. I have a little reading to do first. Some papers the president gave me."

Her body stiffened in my arms and she seemed about to make another cutting remark. Then she checked herself.

"Don't get the idea that you can use that excuse more than once," she said. "I'm as patriotic as the next person. But I'm a woman, too."

I nodded and kissed her again. "That's the bit about you I like most of all."

Diana pushed me away gently and grinned. "All right. Just don't be too long. And if I'm asleep, see if you can use that giant brain of yours to figure out a way to wake me up."

"I'll try to think of something, Princess Aurora."

I watched her go upstairs. She was worth watching. Her legs seemed designed to sell tickets at the Corcoran. I watched them to the tops of her stockings and then well beyond. For purely philosophical reasons, of course. All

philosophers, Nietzsche said, have little understanding of women. But, then, he never watched Diana walk up a flight of stairs. I didn't know a way of understanding ultimate reality that came close to observing the lacy, veined phenomenon that was Diana's underwear.

Trying to shake this particular natural knowledge from my mind, I made myself a pot of coffee, found a new packet of cigarettes on the desk in my study, and sat down to look through the files given to me by Roosevelt.

The report compiled by the German War Crimes Bureau contained the most detail. But it was the British report, written by Sir Owen O'Malley, ambassador to the Polish government in exile, and prepared with the help of the Polish army, that detained me the longest. O'Malley's exhaustive report was vividly written and included gruesome descriptions of how officers and men of the Soviet NKVD had shot the 4,500 men—in the back of the head, some with their hands tied, some with sawdust stuffed into their mouths to prevent them from crying out—before burying them in a mass grave.